

Introduction

Police officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical personnel are recognized for their hard work as on-scene responders, however the role of emergency dispatch is easily overlooked. The stressors that are seen in emergency responder work are also experienced by emergency dispatchers. While they are not experiencing these emergencies directly, this presents unique struggles for them.

A 2017 study by Golding and colleagues was conducted in order to investigate the existing literature available relating to the psychological health of Emergency Dispatch Centre (EDC) operatives, and to identify their key stressors. They examined 16 articles to be used in their review and found that organizational and operational factors' as well as, interactions with others, were the two most common overarching themes. Stressors identified included being exposed to traumatic calls, lacking control over high workload, and working in under-resourced and pressured environments. Lack of support from management was also indicated as a stressor. Peer support and social support from friends and family were helpful in managing work related stress (Golding et al., 2017).

The goal of this research is to use a rigorous qualitative design to investigate the lived experiences of emergency dispatchers in order to further understand their experiences in this role and to explore strategies to best promote mental health and wellbeing in this population. Additionally, this research seeks to identify factors that may mediate the psychological and emotional demands of this work.

There are currently few stress management options provided to emergency dispatchers regarding the negative emotional, physical, and mental symptoms of stress that come with the job. Similarly, there is a lack of information about how these professionals experience this role and manage to cope with the challenges associated. The purpose of this research was to gather data from a convenience sample of emergency 911 dispatchers and solicit their responses related to:

1. recent situations that were particularly stressful
2. types of call that tend to produce the most stressful reactions
3. coping mechanisms utilized to mitigate stress response
4. descriptions of workplace environments
5. Support service availability
6. Employer strategies to mitigate stress responses

The research question to be explored in this study includes:

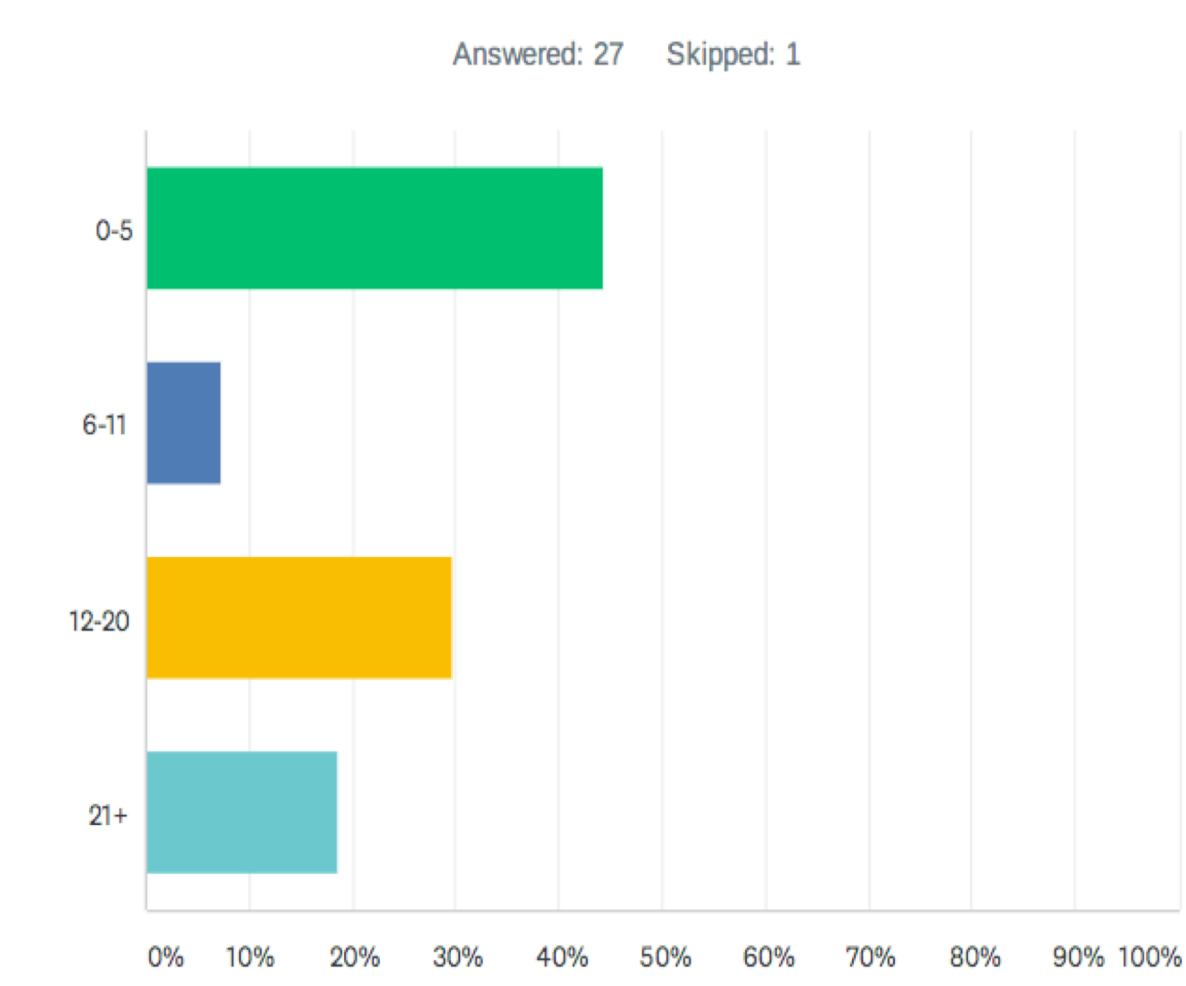
- What are the sources of work stress according to emergency dispatchers lived experiences?
- How do emergency dispatchers describe their sources of support related to their work-related stress?

Participant Demographics

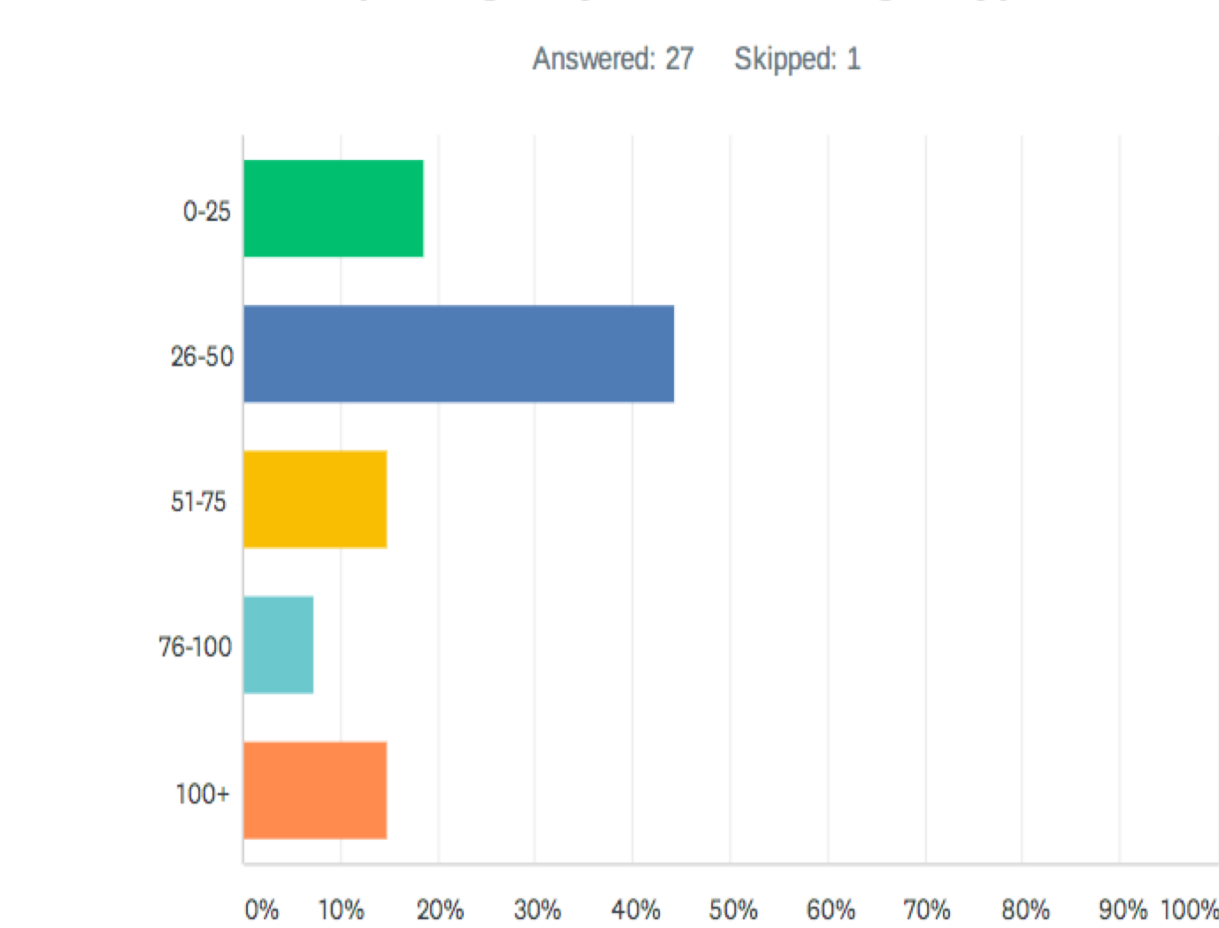
- 88 participants
- Majority identified as female (69%)
- Participants in this study all identified as White or Caucasian
- Majority ages 30-39 (44%)
- Majority worked as Emergency Dispatchers for 0-5 years (44%)
- Majority identified obtaining an undergraduate degree (48%)
- Center settings:
 - Urban- 18% of participants
 - Suburban- 51% of participants
 - Rural- 29% of participants
- Majority identified working first shift(37%) or second shift(29%)
- Majority identified receiving average of 26-50 calls per shift (44%)

Figure 1: Examples of the demographic questions respondents answered from the Emergency Dispatcher Survey that was used to gather data on stress and wellbeing in emergency dispatchers.

Q13 Years of experience as an emergency dispatcher



Q18 Average number of calls you receive (individually) per shift (emergency & non-emergency)



Methods

A consensual qualitative research approach (CQR) (Hill, 2012) was used for this study. A set of 9 questions were sent to participants electronically and open-ended survey responses were obtained and analyzed. The research team consisted of 2 counselor educators and 2 graduate students. Domains for this study were developed individually and 88 responses were received. These responses were individually reviewed by research team members and then cross analyzed to arrive at a consensus on codes assigned to responses. The responses were coded using NVIVO software. Conclusions were then revisited by research members as well as auditors, and revisions based on the audit were made.

- Q1 Please describe a recent situation/instance in your role as an emergency dispatcher that was particularly stressful for you.
- Q2 What types of calls tend to produce the most stressful reactions for you?
- Q3 When you have experienced a particularly stressful call, is there anything you do in the moment or before the end of your shift to cope?
- Q4 What other ways do you deal with work-related stress?
- Q5 How do you recognize when stress is becoming an issue for you?
- Q6 How would you describe your work environment or atmosphere?
- Q7 What services are available to you if you need support during or immediately after a shift?
- Q8 What services are available to you for long term support?
- Q9 What could your employer do better to help you manage work-related stress?

Results

Some common themes were identified in the responses from the survey in this study. The following themes present in Q1 were identified as most commonly stressful: attending to a call involving a sensitive population, calls involving assault/weapons, and calls with communication barriers present. Themes from Q2 most commonly mentioned included: officer safety and sensitive populations. Q3 produced common themes such as talking with another person/employee and physically removing themselves from the situation as ways to cope when dealing with a stressful call. Q4 had common themes such as hobbies/leisure, exercise, and talking or engaging in interpersonal skills with someone else. For Q5, individuals identified mood changes, impact on work, and presence of anxiety, as the most prevalent. Q6 had more negative themes than positive when discussing their workplace environment. Many individuals classified their workplace to be toxic, and stressful. Participants noted on dissatisfaction with administration/scheduling, coworkers within their center and had issues with individuals in leadership roles. Q7 displayed the following common themes: none or unsure, EAPs, CISM/D, and coworkers. Q8 had the following common themes present: unsure/nothing, CISM/D, and EAPs. Q9 displayed the following most common themes: listen to feedback, treat everyone equally, and hire more competent staff.

Results Continued

- Q1 “I handled a call where a young girl was reporting that her stepfather had been touching her.”
- Q2 “Child calls, Officer/Responder Injury calls, Elderly people calls, Suicidal callers.”
- Q3 “Once the call is handled if staffing allows I may take a break and get out of the room for 15 minor so. Maybe go for a walk or grab a coffee, call a trusted friend/family member.”
- Q4 “Walking, jogging, and exercise in general is a good stress reliever. Sometimes working 80+hours a week, it is hard to find time to relieve stress”
- Q5 “When I become short tempered with friends, family, and coworkers. I can lose motivation at work.”
- Q6 “Shift wise, supportive; we all have each others back and crack jokes. Overall, gossipy, toxic and not a great place to be yourself.”
- Q7 “EAP, coworkers, CISM”
- Q8 “Not sure, there’s prob something out there, but they aren’t very open about it.”
- Q9 “LISTEN to what we have to really say”

Discussion

Despite the limited literature that is available on the moral distress of emergency dispatchers, Coxon et. Al (2016) provides information about areas of stress commonly found within the profession. These include feeling overlooked, misunderstood, and marginalized by other first responder roles and family members. Additionally, lack of resources when dispatching and interpersonal issues between dispatchers and other teams are sources of stress. Similarly, Tracy and Tracy (1998) has done research that introduces areas of stress and ways of coping with the stress that comes from emergency dispatching. Stressors include inappropriate calls, not knowing the outcome of calls, and feelings of responsibility for outcome of call.

The purpose of the current study was to identify areas of stress seen from the survey responses of emergency dispatchers. The results suggest that we need to work to fix the issues in these workplaces to help lessen the amount of stress produced by the areas mentioned. With these results we can start to suggest ways to reduce stress. This will allow policy makers and organizations to start to create new ideas and thoughts about how to reduce stress for future research.

Implications can be found in the current study when it comes to dispatchers, supervisors and the organizations themselves. For dispatchers, some implications include reducing work related stress, avoid burnout, methods to cope, recognize stress in the workplace and self, the importance of peer-to-peer support and gain an awareness of resources. Supervisors can use this research to improve training, continue their education, gain a new perspective and learn how to problem solve when in the workplace. Organizations can use this literature to help establish better workplace policies, increase access to EAPs, hire competent staff, be fair and treat employees equally and maintain open communication with employees.

Future research on this topic will be sure to include in person, in depth, semi-structured interviews with multiple emergency dispatchers. It is our hopes that we can contribute to the limited existing literature after more analysis with a larger sample size.

References

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