



I14 Are There Similarities Between Forensic Technician and Sworn Peace Officer Stress?

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the physical, psycho-social stress and traumatic experiences endured by forensic technicians and sworn peace officers. Moreover, this survey examined the levels of perceived job-related stress and mental health concerns in forensic technicians and sworn peace officers, both on duty and off duty.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by promoting stress and mental health awareness for forensic technicians who investigate crime scenes and encouraging research into this relatively unexplored area.

The results of occupational stress, especially in forensic technicians, has not yet been fully appreciated by law enforcement agencies or human resources departments involved in recruiting and training these professionals. Understanding the lasting impact of occupational stress on forensic technicians will enable law enforcement agencies and their families to proactively train, recognize, and help forensic technicians cope with many job-related stressors.

This study hypothesized that sworn peace officers and forensic technicians would report similar levels of overall job stress while on duty and that both occupations would report significant physical and psychological impacts as a result of their crime scene-related occupations. Forensic technicians provide field services at every possible type of crime scene with varying levels of direction and support from sworn peace officers. The primary field services assigned to forensic technicians includes identifying, documenting, collecting, preserving, and conducting preliminary analysis of physical evidence in relation to criminal investigations. They are constantly exposed to the stressful world of violent crime. As a result, forensic technicians can also experience physical and psychological stress, violence, and security vulnerability similar to other law enforcement first responders; however, unlike the latter, there is a lack of research regarding the impact of the stress and danger experienced by forensic technicians on their mental and physical health.

This has now been addressed in this study through the development and administration of an anonymous survey that gathered scaled, yes/no, and fill-in-the-blank type choices to 25 basic questions regarding perceived stress, physical danger on and off duty, physical and psychological life impact of job-related duties, preferred stress management networks, and coping strategies. Participants included forensic technicians and sworn peace officers employed at California law enforcement agencies with one or more years of experience processing major crime scenes.

Forensic technicians ($N=37$) and sworn peace officers ($N=36$) submitted qualifying surveys. The results indicated that perceived on-duty stress was significantly higher ($P \leq 0.05$) for the forensic technicians ($M=3.50$, *Standard Deviation* (SD)= $.99$) compared to the sworn peace officers ($M=2.99$, $SD=.97$) based on the scaled (1-5) responses. The off-duty stress rating was higher for forensic technicians than sworn peace officers, but was not statistically significant. It was noted that of the 54 pre-selected stressors common to law enforcement, forensic technicians and sworn peace officers shared 10 of the top 20 ranked stressors. Two-thirds of all stressors were ranked statistically similar between the two occupations. Forensic technicians reported negative job-related impact responses in 14 out of 17 physical and psychological impact categories, whereas sworn peace officers reported negative job-related impacts in only 8 of the categories. Furthermore, forensic technicians and sworn peace officers exhibited statistically similar career-related impacts in 10 of the 17 physical and psychological categories. Perceived danger was experienced less frequently by forensic technicians compared to sworn peace officers, but was not statistically different. Last, both forensic technicians and sworn peace officers reported using friends and family for stress management more frequently, followed by peer support, and, last, mental health resources. When compared to sworn peace officers, forensic technicians reported lower availability, awareness, and utilization of agency mental health support services, something this study suggests needs to be addressed.

The survey responses from this study suggested a similarity of work-related stressors that are shared by both forensic technicians and sworn peace officers; however, it appears that the perceived effects of stress for forensic technicians exceeded that of sworn peace officers. These findings indicate that the initial hypothesis, in part, can be rejected.

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