

Peculiarities of future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for professional stress in war conditions

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To investigate the peculiarities of future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for professional activities under the influence of wartime stressors.

Materials and Methods: During 2023–2025, the research was conducted among cadets of the 3rd training years (2023–2024, Group A, n = 114) and (2024–2025, Group B, n = 112) aged 18–22 years who undertook their utilization tours in practical police units (for 3 months): Group A without prior professional and psychological training, Group B – after preliminary correctional and psychological work.

Results: It has been established that the specifics of the professional activities of law enforcement officers under martial law have a negative impact on the indicators of their psycho-emotional state and stress resilience. At the same time, targeted correctional and psychological work with cadets reduces the magnitude of negative changes in all diagnostic indicators: in Group A, the indicators of well-being, activity and mood significantly ($p \leq 0.05$ – 0.01) deteriorated by 0.6, 0.7 and 1.2 points, and in Group B – by 0.4, 0.4 and 0.5 points, respectively ($p > 0.05$); the indicators of psychological stress, stress resilience, predisposition to develop stress, endurance under stress in Group A deteriorated significantly ($p \leq 0.05$ – 0.01) by 6.2, 3.9, 4.9, 5.1 points, and in Group B – unreliably ($p > 0.05$) by 4.3, 2.6, 3.4 and 2.9 points, respectively.

Conclusions: It has been proven that a well-organized professional and psychological training contributes to improving the level of future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for professional activities under the influence of wartime stress factors.

KEY WORDS: psychological readiness, professional stress, future law enforcement officers, professional activities, war

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction of martial law in the country has significantly increased social instability, significantly worsened the economic situation, and changed the political situation and the nature of the activities of all levels of government. Unfortunately, all citizens face difficult situations of physical survival and moral and psychological challenges related to the war. The society has moved to new realities of functioning, and all employees of state institutions continue to work in dangerous and stressful conditions [1, 2]. Law enforcement officers are no exception, being at the forefront of the fight against both internal and external threats, they are constantly faced with the problem of overcoming the effects of professional stress [3, 4]. Numerous studies [5–7] demonstrate that the problem of law enforcement officers' stress resilience is extremely acute due to the specifics of their professional activities:

real danger, various factors of threats to life and health, risk, injury, aggressive communication environment, intensity of work, constant time pressure, increased personal responsibility for work results, etc. As rightly noted by scholars [8, 9], the professional activities of law enforcement officers often lead to an increase in negative emotions, anxiety, irritability, emotional burnout, loss of positive professional motivation, manifestation of various neurotic reactions and mental states, sleep disturbances, depression, various mental health disorders, etc. According to the observations of some researchers [10–12], in some cases, physical illnesses may develop or existing chronic diseases may be exacerbated. In general, the lack of proper psycho-emotional preparedness of police officers to overcome stress leads to poor performance of service tasks, miscalculations in professional activities, injuries and wounds, or even death.

It should be noted that the vast majority of stress studies, its impact on the personality of law enforcement officers, and the peculiarities of stress management were conducted in normal peacetime conditions [13-15]. As of today, the situation has become much more complicated due to the ongoing hostilities in the country, when a significant number of law enforcement officers are involved in performing uncharacteristic service tasks: ensuring access control at checkpoints, evacuating the population from dangerous regions, conducting stabilization measures in the de-occupied territories, etc. Hence, it can be argued that new functional responsibilities have been added, which means that new stressors and risks of professional activities have emerged that should be considered when training the current generation of law enforcement officers. Therefore, an in-depth study of the essence and peculiarities of future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for professional activities in stressful conditions of war is of great theoretical and applied importance.

AIM

The aim is to investigate the peculiarities of future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for professional activities under the influence of wartime stressors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

To study the peculiarities of future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for martial law stressful situations, we conducted diagnostic and correctional pedagogical work during the academic years 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 at Lviv State University of Internal Affairs (LSUIA, Lviv, Ukraine) among the 3rd training year cadets (males) of 2023-2024 (Group A, $n = 114$) and 2024-2025 (Group B, $n = 112$) aged 20-22 years, who underwent their utilization tours in practical units (3 months): Group A without prior professional psychological training, Group B – after preliminary correctional pedagogical work. The criteria for inclusion of cadets in the study groups were their specialty – Law Enforcement, period of study in the 3rd training year, participation in a utilization tour in a practical unit for 3 months, and written voluntary consent to participate in the research.

To achieve the research aim, a set of interrelated methods was used: bibliosemantic, psycho-diagnostic, and statistical. The bibliosemantic method was used to

conduct an analytical review of scientific sources on the outlined range of issues (22 sources from PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Index Copernicus and other databases were analyzed).

The psycho-diagnostic method involved conducting research with cadets as future law enforcement officers. For this purpose, 5 methods were used: "Well-being-Activity-Mood" (WAM), PSM-25 (Lemyre-Tessier-Fillion) Psychological Stress Measure, Stress Resilience Self-Assessment Test (S. Cohen and G. Williamson), Assessment of Predisposition to Stress Development (T. A. Nemchin, J. Taylor), Endurance Under Stress (F. Gotvald, V. Hovald) [16-18]. The use of the Well-being-Activity-Mood method involved a quick assessment of such functional states of future law enforcement officers as well-being, activity, and mood. The respondents were asked to compare their current state with a list of signs on a specific scale. The scale comprises indices (3 2 1 0 1 2 3). It is located between thirty pairs of words (ten for each state) of opposite meanings, which reflect mobility, speed, and pace of functions (activity), strength, health, fatigue (well-being), as well as characteristics of the emotional state (mood). When processing the data, the respondents' scores were recoded as follows: index 3, which corresponds to poor well-being, low activity, and low mood, is taken as 1 point; the next index 2 is taken as 2 points; index 1 is taken as 3 points, and so on until index 3 on the opposite side of the scale, which is taken as 7 points. For each functional state, arithmetic averages were calculated and evaluated as follows: if the average score was from 1 to 3 points, the law enforcement officer's state was considered low; 4, 5 – average; 6, 7 – high. The PSM-25 Psychological Stress Measure is designed to measure the structure of stress experiences. It contains 25 statements, answering which the respondents chose the frequency of their manifestation and rated in points from 1 to 8, where 1 is never, 8 is always. After that, the sum of points for all statements was determined. If the sum was 99 or less, the stress level was considered low; 100-124 points – average; 125 and more – high. Stress was assessed as follows: if the sum of coincidences was 15 or less, there was no stress; 16-24 – moderate level of predisposition to stress; 25-39 – average; 40 and more – high. The Stress Resilience Self-Assessment Test contains 10 questions, answering which the cadet had to choose one of the proposed answers, which for questions 1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 10 were evaluated as follows: never – 0, almost never – 1, sometimes – 2, quite often – 3, often – 4; for questions 4, 5, 6, 8 – never – 4, almost never – 3, sometimes – 2, quite often – 1, often – 0. If the sum was 6.8 points or less, the level of stress resilience was considered excellent; 6.9-14.2 – good; 14.3-24.2 – satisfactory; 24.3-34.2 – poor; 34.3 and more – very poor. The method for determining

predisposition to stress development contains 50 statements and allows for assessing the cadets' predisposition to develop stress, anxiety level. It also allows for talking about their level of stress resilience. The respondents were offered a form with statements with "No" or "Yes" answers opposite them. It was necessary to put "+" if the proposed answer coincided with the respondent's opinion, or "-" if it did not. The Endurance Under Stress Method contains 33 statements with suggested answer options (often/strongly, rarely/sometimes, no/never). Each answer option was rated 0, 1, or 2 points. The data was processed by summing the points: 28 and more points – low stress resilience level; 13-27 – average; 12 and less – high. The choice of tools was based on the specifics of the professional activities of cadets – future law enforcement officers.

The above methods were used before and after the utilization tours of the 3rd training year cadets in practical police units (for 3 months).

ORGANIZATION OF THE RESEARCH

The research was conducted in three stages. The first stage provided the analytical review of the literature on the peculiarities of law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for crisis conditions of professional activities, and identification of diagnostic and methodological tools for conducting empirical research. The second stage included the diagnostic work with the help of the selected tools. For the experiment, electronic forms with the tasks of the methods were created, which contained brief instructions for completing the tasks. The respondents were not provided with keys to interpret the results. The third stage involved processing, systematization, generalization of indicators, and logical and semantic interpretation of the data. The organization of the research and collection of empirical material was carried out at LSUIA.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The methods of mathematical statistics were used to process the data obtained. The reliability of the difference between the indicators was determined using the Student's t-test. The reliability of the difference was set at $p < 0.05$. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software, version 10.0, adapted for medical and biological research.

The procedure for organizing the study and the topic of the article were previously agreed with the Committee on compliance with Academic Integrity and Ethics of the LSUIA. Also this study followed the regulations of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent was received from all participants who took part in this study.

RESULTS

The cadets' utilization tour in practical police units lasted for 3 months. It included: performing service duties involving public safety and order, carrying out access control at checkpoints at the entrance to settlements and sectors of the state border, participation in search and prevention activities, etc. This process occurred in the real conditions of future professional activities and was intensified by crisis and extreme martial law situations. The initial study of the components of the psychophysical state of cadets by Well-being-Activity-Mood method led to the conclusion that all three states in the study group of the 3rd training year cadets of the academic year 2023-2024 (Group A, $n = 114$) significantly ($p \leq 0.05-0.001$) deteriorated during their stay in real conditions of professional activities (Table 1). Thus, according to the component Well-being, which was assessed by such characteristics as a sense of strength, working capacity, health, freshness, fatigue level, endurance, cheerfulness, etc., the cadets' performance after the utilization tour deteriorated by 0.6 points.

Such features characterize the Activity component as mobility, activity, speed, enthusiasm, excitement, attentiveness, etc. Thus, the value of deterioration in this component was 0.7 points. In the Mood component, which is characterized by happiness, cheerfulness, optimism, calmness, hope, and satisfaction, the indicators significantly deteriorated by 1.2 points. The deterioration of the indicators is due to the relative exhaustion of future law enforcement officers, which affects their well-being and the body's reaction to the negative factors of service activities under martial law.

A similar trend of results was found during the diagnosis of the 3rd training year cadets of the academic year 2023-2024 in terms of their psychological stress, stress resilience, and assessment of endurance under stress (Table 2).

During the research period, the stress level in the 3rd training year cadets of the academic year 2023-2024 significantly increased by 6.2 points ($p \leq 0.05$). It is stated that at the end of the research, the cadets who undertook their utilization tours in practical units showed an average level of psychological stress, which emphasizes the negative impact of stressors of professional activities under martial law on their mental health. Assessment of the stress resilience level shows that, as a result of the utilization tours, there was a statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$) deterioration in the cadets' stress resilience level by 3.9 points. The study of the indicators

Table 1. Dynamics of the components of psychophysical state of the 3rd training year cadets of the academic year 2023-2024 by Well-being-Activity-Mood method before and after their utilization tours, in points

Components	Group A	Stages of the research		Δ	t; p
		Before the utilization tour	After the utilization tour		
Well-being	n=114	5.8±0.15	5.2±0.16	0.6	2.74; ≤0.05
Activity		6.1±0.17	5.4±0.18	0.7	2.83; ≤0.05
Mood		4.1±0.16	2.9±0.18	1.2	4.98; ≤0.001

Note: n – sample size; Δ – difference between indicators; t – Student's t-test value; p – p-value

Source: compiled by the authors of this study

Table 2. Dynamics of the indicators of psychological stress, stress resilience, predisposition to stress development, endurance under stress in the 3rd training year cadets of the academic year 2023-2024 before and after their utilization tours, in points

Diagnostic methods	Group A	Stages of the research		Δ	t; p
		Before the utilization tour	After the utilization tour		
PSM-25 Psychological Stress Measure	n=114	102.4±1.86	108.6±1.95	6.2	2.30; ≤0.05
Stress Resilience Self-Assessment Test		17.2±0.88	22.1±0.92	3.9	3.06; ≤0.01
Assessment of Predisposition to Stress Development Method		20.2±1.17	25.1±1.20	4.9	2.92; ≤0.05
Endurance Under Stress Method		16.2±1.11	21.3±1.15	5.1	3.19; ≤0.01

Note: n – sample size; Δ – difference between indicators; t – Student's t-test value; p – p-value

Source: compiled by the authors of this study

of predisposition to stress development shows that during the utilization tours period, the cadets had a significant ($p \leq 0.05$) deterioration in stress level by 4.9 points. The analysis of endurance under stress showed that during the utilization tours, the level of endurance under stress in the cadets also significantly ($p \leq 0.01$) deteriorated by 5.1 points.

To improve the situation and provide proper psychological support to the cadets of the next training years, before they were sent for their utilization tours, we developed the academic subject area referred to as "Professional and Psychological Training of Police Officers", which was introduced into the educational process and provided for the mastery of the theoretical and applied block named "Stress Resilience in Police Activities". This block is 40 hours long and includes classes and training sessions on the following modules: 1. Professional Stress: Concept, Signs, Types; 2. Psychological Determinants of Professional Stress in Police Activities; 3. Methods and Techniques of Stress Resilience Formation; 4. Development of Police Officers' Mental Self-Regulation Skills: Forms, Means, Techniques. The practical component was based mainly on the use of training technologies. To this end, trainings were implemented to increase the effectiveness of personnel training in mastering constructive strategies for overcoming professional stress: 1) communication training,

which involves mastering the skills of establishing psychological contact and trusting relationships, and exerting psychological influence; 2) role-playing training, which includes the development of role-playing skills and the ability to improvise through role-playing exercises; 3) psychotechnical games, which involve performing certain roles and actions, as well as simulating complex and real-life law enforcement situations. At the same time, staff psychologists were involved in this process, focusing on the following techniques to reduce stress and increase the stress resilience in future law enforcement officers: anti-stress breathing (slowing down one's breathing and calming down); autogenic training (psychological relief by frequent repetition of special optimistic mobilizing formulas and words, which eventually leads to a reboot of information at all levels of the body); relaxation (releasing the body and mind from excessive stress by reducing the tone of the person's muscles, accompanied by an internal state of calm). In turn, systematic work was carried out to develop skills and techniques of mental self-regulation.

The next stage of our research was the diagnosis of the 3rd training year cadets in the academic year 2024-2025 (using the same methods) after the correctional and pedagogical work carried out in advance, which made it possible to improve the situation compared to the previous academic year (Table 3, Table 4).

Table 3. Dynamics of the components of psychophysical state of the 4th training year cadets of the academic year 2024-2025 by Well-being-Activity-Mood method before and after their utilization tours, in points

Components	Group B	Stages of the research		Δ	t; p
		Before the utilization tour	After the utilization tour		
Well-being	n=112	5.9±0.14	5.5±0.16	0.4	1.88; >0.05
Activity		6.0±0.17	5.6±0.18	0.4	1.62; >0.05
Mood		4.2±0.15	3.7±0.16	0.5	2.28; ≤0.05

Note: n – sample size; Δ – difference between indicators; t – Student’s t-test value; p – p-value
Source: compiled by the authors of this study

Table 4. Dynamics of the indicators of psychological stress, stress resilience, predisposition to stress development, endurance under stress in the 4th training year cadets of the academic year 2024-2025 before and after their utilization tours, in points

Diagnostic methods	Group B	Stages of the research		Δ	t; p
		Before the utilization tour	After the utilization tour		
PSM-25 Psychological Stress Measure	n=112	100.2±2.03	104.5±2.11	4.3	1.45; >0.05
Stress Resilience Self-Assessment Test		17.1±0.93	19.7±0.97	2.6	1.93; >0.05
Assessment of Predisposition to Stress Development Method		19.9±1.21	23.3±1.25	3.4	1.95; >0.05
Endurance Under Stress Method		15.6±1.14	18.5±1.17	2.9	1.17; >0.05

Note: n – sample size; Δ – difference between indicators; t – Student’s t-test value; p – p-value.
The results indicate that a well-organized professional psychological training improves future law enforcement officers’ psychological readiness for professional activities under the influence of wartime stressors
Source: compiled by the authors of this study

As we can see, the specifics of law enforcement officers’ service activities under martial law adjust their personal potential, even with prior professional psychological training. All components of the cadets’ psychophysical state and stress resilience have deteriorated. However, well-organized correctional and pedagogical work with cadets reduces the degree of negative changes in all diagnostic indicators. In particular, according to the Well-being-Activity-Mood method, the value of deterioration of the components Well-being and Activity is 0.4 points and is unreliable ($p > 0.05$); in the component Mood, there was a significant deterioration by 0.5 points. Still, compared to Group A, these changes are less pronounced by 0.7 points. Even taking into account the general fatigue of the cadets, which affects their state and behavior, with favorable training, they are more psychologically prepared for future professional activities under martial law.

Regarding the dynamics of the indicators of psychological stress, stress resilience, predisposition to develop stress, and endurance under stress in Group B cadets, the changes in indicators are less pronounced compared to Group A. During utilization tours in practical units, the stress level in Group B cadets worsened by 4.3 points (compared to 6.2 points in Group A). Assessment of the stress resilience level showed a lesser deterioration in the stress resilience level in Group B cadets (by 2.6 points) compared to Group A (3.9 points).

The study of the indicators of predisposition to stress development also showed less pronounced changes in Group B (by 3.4 points) than in Group A (by 4.9 points). The analysis of endurance under stress showed that during the utilization tours, the level of endurance under stress in Group B cadets deteriorated by 2.9 points. Still, these changes were less pronounced than in Group A (by 5.1 points). It is important to note that in Group B, all changes are not significant ($p > 0.05$), while in Group A, all the studied indicators deteriorated significantly ($p \leq 0.05-0.01$).

DISCUSSION

The specificity of law enforcement officers’ service activities is the need to perform professional duties in conditions complicated by the influence of emotional and physical stress factors. In general, the law enforcement profession is characterized by extremity, stressfulness, risk, danger, non-standardization, diversity of service tasks, personal responsibility for decisions, a high level of workload on the individual, etc. This specificity can affect the quality of life and psychological state of law enforcement officers and their general psychophysical well-being. In this context, studying the possibilities of overcoming the stressful phenomena of service activities is particularly important.

B. Qi, Y. K. Wu, I. Okhrimenko, and their colleagues, in their scientific developments, pay attention to the peculiarities of determining the development of professional stress in law enforcement officers, noting many factors as stressors [3, 4, 9]. In some ways, a similar standpoint is taken by H. Yoo and W. D. Franke [10], pointing out that boredom, shift work, dangerous situations, etc., accompany the most typical stressors in law enforcement activities. The authors note that stress is also a factor of negative influence in the work of law enforcement officers, which affects the course and results of the performance of service duties. The data we obtained confirms these positions, because working under systematic stress first affects personal potential, leading to negative changes, and only then, as a consequence, the results of the professional activities of the specialist.

According to P. Galanis, D. Fragkou, and T. A. Katsoulas, timely identification of stress progression factors is the first step towards creating a system of preventive and corrective measures to overcome it by law enforcement officers. The academic subject area referred to as "Professional and Psychological Training of Police Officers" and related correctional and pedagogical measures developed by us aimed to improve the practice of combating stressful events among cadets at the stage of their professional formation. The results revealed positive dynamics and a better attitude of cadets to future professional activities, including at the level of the individual's regulatory focus. This confirms the standpoint of some researchers on this issue [21].

As noted by R. N. Carleton, S. Korol, J. E. Mason, et al. [22], the psychological readiness of a law enforcement officer's personality directly follows from their motivation to work, individual stress resilience, knowledge of mental health, and stigmatization. At the same time, the internal organization of the law enforcement officer in the performance of service tasks, combining all possible personal mechanisms, adds significant weight. Therefore, according to the results of our research, targeted correctional and preventive work with law enforcement officers at different stages of their professional development should be regularly conducted. Moreover, each stage should include diagnostics of law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for professional stress.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been found that professional stress is a peculiar form of reflection by a law enforcement officer of a difficult, extreme situation in their professional activities, which is manifested in their mental reactions. It has been revealed that cadets under the influence of stressful situations of professional activities, even with prior professional psychological training, have negative changes both at the personal (well-being, mood, indicators of the emotional and volitional sphere) and functional (activity, ability to perceive extreme situations adequately) levels. It has been established that the decline in the indicators is due to the relative exhaustion of cadets during their utilization tours in practical units, which affects their well-being and the body's reaction to the negative factors of service in martial law. At the same time, targeted correctional and psychological work with cadets reduces the magnitude of negative changes in all diagnostic indicators: in Group A, the indicators of well-being, activity and mood significantly ($p \leq 0.05-0.01$) deteriorated by 0.6, 0.7 and 1.2 points, and in Group B – by 0.4, 0.4 and 0.5 points, respectively ($p > 0.05$); the indicators of psychological stress, stress resilience, predisposition to develop stress, endurance under stress in Group A deteriorated significantly ($p \leq 0.05-0.01$) by 6.2, 3.9, 4.9, 5.1 points, and in Group B – unreliably ($p > 0.05$) by 4.3, 2.6, 3.4 and 2.9 points, respectively.


The developed academic subject area referred to as "Professional and Psychological Training of Police Officers" is aimed at improving the process of formation and increasing future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for further professional activities in specific conditions. Its practical significance is manifested in the comprehensiveness of correctional and psychological measures aimed at ensuring the practice of counteracting stressful phenomena among cadets at the stage of their professional formation.


















It has been proven that a well-organized professional psychological training contributes to improving the level of future law enforcement officers' psychological readiness for professional activities under the influence of wartime stress factors.

PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is planned to investigate the peculiarities of future law enforcement officers' coping behavior because of martial law stressful situations.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

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