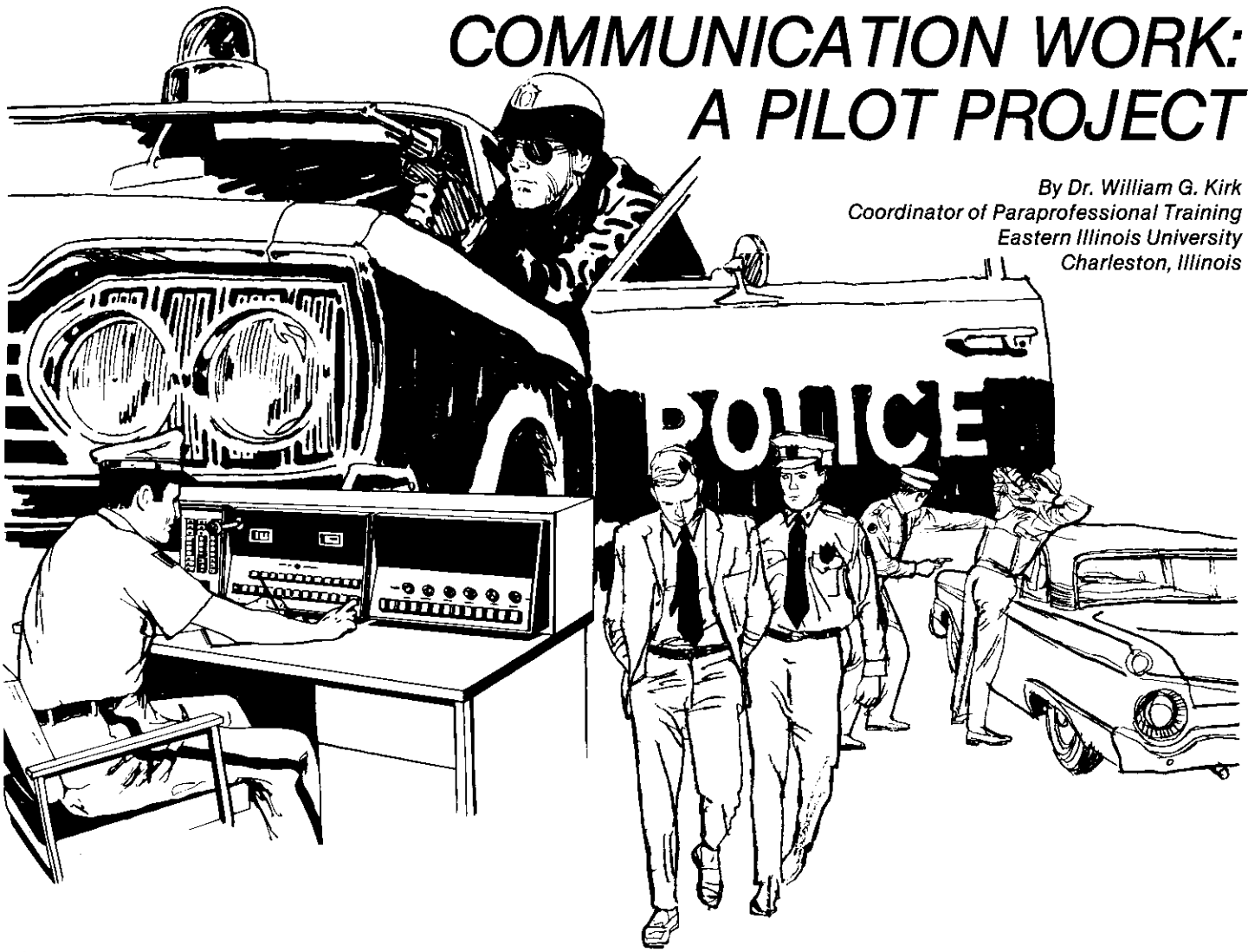


STRESSORS IN POLICE COMMUNICATION WORK: A PILOT PROJECT

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I was recently invited to conduct a series of stress management classes for the telecommunication department of a large south-eastern police department. I was on a sabbatical leave to direct the stress management programs of an intervention service and to study occupational stress and stress related disorders. This opportunity then seemed both timely and appropriate. A search of the literature yielded no references to any systematic investigation of stressors within the safety communications arena or data-based attempts to appraise stress management training with these critical members of the public safety team.

I was affiliating with Dr. Charles Spielberger, the Director of Research in Community Psychology at the University of South Florida. He had previously directed a research team in developing *The Police Stress Survey*, which had evolved from the Florida Police Stress Project. Thus, a standardized instrument was available for measurement of the nature of stress in police work and could be modified to serve as a basis for the Police Telecommunicators

Stress Survey. A telephone screening of fellow psychologists who had worked with or were working with police departments generally failed to suggest that there was much stress training for communications departments within police agencies. There was one exception.

One study was conducted in a relatively large police department in the State of Florida. The results of this stress yielded surprising results. When police telecommunicators were compared to patrol, investigative and administrative groups, dispatch workers (telecommunicators) scored significantly higher on life stress scores. These scores are often used as a basis for predicting health risk. That same study found that dispatch workers reported significantly more negative feelings about their job (frustration, anger, aggravation, and annoyance). A full 72% admitted to being bothered by health problems which to some extent affected their work. It was the consensus of psychologists and agency trainers with whom I talked that police telecommunicators received less training related to interpersonal

and psychological job factors than their counterparts (i.e. sworn officers) in police agencies. The reason for this is still unclear but seems related to the fact that telecommunicators may be seen as a "sub-part" of the public safety profession. That is, the telecommunications department is often informally assigned lesser status within the agency because 1) they are often civilian employees as opposed to sworn officers, and 2) their work is not understood due to a lack of information about the nature and sophistication of their work.

With these impressions in mind, I set about the task of adapting the Police Telecommunicator Stress Survey (PTSS) to determine the nature of stressors and the frequency of their occurrence in telecommunications work.

The original Police Stress Survey (PSS) is a 60-item survey where the respondent ranks each item by the relative amount of stress an event causes. This is done by rating each item from 0 to 100 with 0 representing "no stress" to a rating of 100 designating "extreme stress". Respondents are also