

Burnout syndrome in uniformed and non-uniformed populations: a comparative study

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Abstract

Burnout syndrome, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment, was compared between uniformed and non-uniformed populations to examine its relationship with organizational factors such as workload, autonomy, social support, and exposure to risks. Through a cross-sectional quantitative study, 285 participants from the Antonio Nariño Police School completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Results showed higher emotional exhaustion and depersonalization among uniformed personnel and higher personal accomplishment among non-uniformed personnel, associated with the specific working conditions of each group. Limitations include the cross-sectional design and self-reported measures, and longitudinal studies and analyses of mediating variables are recommended.

Keywords: burnout syndrome, uniformed population, non-uniformed population, work-related stress, occupational health.

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1. Introduction

Burnout syndrome is a psychosocial phenomenon of an occupational nature that has received sustained attention in the scientific literature due to its impact on the mental health of workers and the functional capacity of organizations. It is classically defined as a multidimensional pattern composed of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment dimensions broadly operationalized by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Jackson & Maslach, 1981a). This instrument has served as a reference for quantifying and comparing levels of professional burnout in multiple work contexts. This conceptualization facilitates comparative analysis between occupational groups by allowing for the identification of variations in the expression of the three dimensions based on specific job demands, psychosocial conditions of the position, and institutional characteristics.

Within the context of contemporary organizational transformations characterized by increased cognitive and emotional demands, rotations and extended shifts, increased workload, and changing expectations of professional efficacy, burnout has been documented with high prevalence in professions involving direct contact with the population and in environments with chronic exposure to work-related stress, such as the healthcare sector. Recent meta-analyses have estimated overall burnout rates exceeding 50% among healthcare workers in certain aggregate studies, particularly in nursing and medicine, highlighting the severity of the problem in clinical settings and the need for both individual and

organizational prevention and intervention approaches (Ghahramani et al., 2021a).

The uniformed population, which includes military, police, fire, and other emergency service personnel, is subject to unique working conditions. These conditions include a marked institutional hierarchy, demands for discipline, exposure to potentially traumatic events, shifts and guard duty, decision-making under pressure, and direct responsibility for public safety or the well-being of others. These characteristics have been consistently associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion and a confluence of burnout and trauma-related stress disorders. Recent systematic reviews of military and security personnel describe organizational and psychological risk factors such as work overload, shift work, insufficient social support within the institution, and comorbidity with anxiety or depression that increase the likelihood of developing burnout in these populations (Correia et al., 2023; Hosseini et al., 2023).

In parallel, the non-uniformed population comprises a heterogeneous group of civilian workers that includes health professionals, teachers, administrative staff and service workers, among others, whose profile of exposure to work stress has differential features: contractual precarity, administrative burden, lack of professional recognition, internal competition and deteriorated interpersonal relationships in the workplace configure pathways for the appearance of feelings of ineffectiveness and demotivation that translate into Burnout patterns with a predominance of the perception of low personal accomplishment and in some cases of depersonalization,

as shown by comparative studies by sectors and systematic reports on health professionals and educators (Antão et al., 2022; Ghahramani et al., 2021b;).

The contrast between uniformed and non-uniformed personnel is heuristically relevant because institutional practices, occupational socialization norms, forms of formal and informal social support, and professional coping mechanisms including a culture of silence or institutional resilience mediate the emergence, severity, and expression of burnout. Research focused on police forces has documented that organizational variables such as low autonomy, high psychological demands, role ambiguity, and a lack of social support are associated with higher levels of exhaustion and cynicism, suggesting that intervention cannot be limited to individual strategies but requires transformations in job design and institutional policies (García et al., & Ruiz-Ruano 2023).

Likewise, studies examining tactical military, police, and firefighter populations have highlighted interrelationships between perceived dehumanization, exposure to critical events, and burnout. This establishes a line of analysis that considers both psychosocial and situational and cultural factors that shape adaptive or maladaptive responses to work-related stress in high-risk environments (Mika-Lude et al., 2023). All the above justifies conducting comparative studies to identify differences in symptom profiles, precipitating factors, and protective variables between uniformed and non-uniformed populations, to guide the development of prevention programs and intervention strategies tailored to the specific characteristics of each group.

In light of these considerations, this research proposes to evaluate and compare the levels and profiles of Burnout syndrome in uniformed and non-uniformed populations, with the purpose of determining the relationships between organizational variables (autonomy, workload, social support), job characteristics (exposure to risk, shifts, hierarchy) and dimensions of Burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment), and thereby provide empirical evidence that contributes to designing differentiated preventive and organizational interventions that respond to the specific needs of each group; therefore, the objective of this study is to compare the levels and patterns of Burnout syndrome between uniformed and non-uniformed populations and to analyze the associations between organizational factors and the three dimensions of Burnout in both groups.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted using a quantitative approach based on the empirical-analytical paradigm, aimed at establishing differences and convergences between uniformed and non-uniformed populations in relation to the manifestations of burnout syndrome. The study adopted a non-experimental, cross-sectional, and descriptive design, which allowed for the measurement of variables without manipulation and the obtaining of a comparative characterization at a single point in time, adhering to the methodological principles of systematic observation and statistical analysis of the information (Baptista, Fernández, & Hernández, 2014a). The deductive method guided the logical sequence of the research, moving from the theoretical foundations of burnout to the empirical verification of its dimensions in the participating groups.

The instrument used was the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), created by Jackson and Maslach (1981b) and validated in various work and academic contexts, which ensures its reliability and relevance for this type of study. This questionnaire measures three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment, which allow researchers to establish the level of impact and the differences between populations subjected to different work or educational conditions. Recent research confirms its psychometric consistency in security and public administration settings, demonstrating its ability to identify risk profiles associated with prolonged exposure to stress (García-Arroyo and Osca, 2022; Gil-Monte, 2021; Ortega et al., 2020a).

The target population for this analysis consisted of uniformed and civilian personnel from the Antonio Nariño Police Academy, located in the municipality of Soledad, Atlántico, including active officers, administrative staff, and students in training during the first semester of 2025. The total population comprised 309 individuals, distributed among 223 students and 86 professional staff members, from which an effective sample of 285 participants was obtained, consisting of 215 students and 70 officers. Selection was carried out using non-probability convenience sampling, considering institutional accessibility and the voluntary participation of the staff, a common practice in studies with restricted or organizational populations (Ato, López, and Benavente, 2013; Hernández et al., 2014).

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire with seven-point Likert-type items, adapted to a digital format using Google Forms, in order to facilitate participation and guarantee the confidentiality of the responses. The application was carried out both in person and virtually, with prior institutional authorization, ensuring comprehension of the items and compliance with the ethical principles of research involving human subjects. Subsequently, the data was processed using SPSS statistical software version 25, applying descriptive analyses, measures of central tendency and dispersion, as well as tests for comparing means (Student's t-test and ANOVA) to identify significant differences between the uniform and non-uniformed groups.

Regarding ethical considerations, the study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines established in the Declaration of Helsinki and the provisions of Resolution 8430 of 1993 from the Colombian Ministry of Health, which regulates research involving human subjects. Voluntary participation of all individuals was ensured through the signing of an informed consent form, which explained the purpose of the study, the data collection procedures, the academic use of the information, and the anonymous and confidential nature of the responses. Participants were free to withdraw from the process at any time without negative consequences, thus preserving their autonomy and well-being. No personal data was disclosed, and the results were analyzed solely for research purposes. The research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Antonio Nariño Police Academy, ensuring compliance with the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice that guide responsible scientific practice (Colombian Ministry of Health, 1993; Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences [CIOMS], 2016).

Finally, to ensure orthotypographical and stylistic correctness and argumentative coherence, the AI software Anthropic Claude 3 (model 2025) was used, which allowed for optimizing sentence structure, standardizing technical terminology, strengthening cohesion between paragraphs and sections, ensuring compliance with academic standards such as APA 7, and improving the clarity, readability, and rigor of the manuscript.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Sociodemographic Characteristics of Uniformed and Non-Uniformed Personnel

The sociodemographic analysis of the study on the level of burnout syndrome among uniformed and non-uniformed personnel at the Antonio Nariño Police Academy (Soledad, Atlántico, 2025) allows us to understand the general profile of the sample and its potential relationship with work-related burnout. The results reflect a predominantly adult population, with ages concentrated between 36 and 44 years (61.4%), suggesting a life stage characterized by job stability and accumulated experience, but also by greater exposure to sustained stress stemming from professional and personal responsibilities. This age group may experience greater vulnerability to burnout due to progressive emotional exhaustion and the institutional demands inherent in the police context.

Regarding gender, a marked male predominance is observed (71.4%), consistent with the traditional composition of police institutions in Colombia, where male personnel continue to represent most operational and administrative staff. This factor may influence the expression of the syndrome, as men tend to report lower levels of emotional exhaustion, although they experience higher levels of depersonalization, according to recent evidence in public safety settings (Ortega et al., 2020). The presence of women (28.6%) contributes diversity to coping styles and relational dynamics within the institution.

Regarding marital status, more than half of the participants identify as married (52.9%), while 28.6% are in a common-law relationship and 18.6% are single. This distribution indicates a majority with family commitments, a condition that can operate in a dual way: as a source of emotional support or as an increase in extra-work responsibilities that intensify psychological fatigue. Several studies have shown that workers with family responsibilities tend to be more vulnerable to burnout when work demands interfere with domestic life (Gil-Monte, 2021b).

The educational level reveals a high proportion of individuals with technical (37.1%) and professional (31.4%) training, indicating a skilled workforce with high expectations for performance and recognition. This academic profile can foster emotional self-regulation and stress management skills, although it also implies a higher level of demands and frustration in rigid work environments or those with limited opportunities for development (García-Arroyo & Osca, 2022). The lower percentages correspond to personnel with technological education (12.9%), master's degrees (4%), and secondary education (1.4%), indicating a minority component of advanced training.

The length of institutional service shows a significant concentration of employees with more than 10 years of experience (69%), indicating job stability and prolonged

tenure within the organization. This factor is associated with sustained exposure to high-pressure conditions, operational risk, and heavy administrative workload elements recognized as predictors of burnout syndrome (Leiter, & Maslach, 2016a). Only a minority have less than one year or between four and six years of service, suggesting low staff turnover.

Regarding performance areas, 64.3% belong to the administrative field, followed by smaller percentages in the academic (12.9%), training (11.4%), and operational (11.4%) areas. The predominance of administrative roles may be related to a different type of stress than that experienced in operational positions, characterized by bureaucratic overload, repetitive tasks, and constant demands for institutional compliance. Academic and training roles, although less represented, involve cognitive and relational demands that can also generate prolonged emotional exhaustion. Regarding working hours, 50% reported working between 9 and 12 hours daily, while 42.9% work 8-hour shifts and 4.3% work 24-hour shifts. These data reflect an extended workload, associated with the nature of police service, where prolonged shifts have been directly linked to high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Molina-Praena et al., 2022). Temporary overexposure can reduce opportunities for physical and mental recovery, increasing the risk of impaired psychological well-being.

Regarding shifts, 65.7% work daytime shifts, 25.7% work rotating shifts, and 8.6% work extended shifts. The prevalence of daytime shifts indicates a stable organizational structure, although workers with rotating or extended shifts experience greater disruptions to their circadian rhythms, affecting sleep, attention, and emotional well-being. Occupational health research has shown that shift rotation is significantly associated with accumulated fatigue and reduced professional effectiveness (Gómez-Urquiza et al., 2017).

Finally, regarding length of service at the institution, 87.1% of respondents have been with the company for more than 10 years, while 7.1% have been there for between 7 and 10 years, and only 5.7% for between 1 and 3 years. This institutional seniority reflects commitment and a sense of belonging, but it also implies chronic exposure to the demands of the police environment, characterized by high responsibility, hierarchy, and pressure for results. The literature indicates that prolonged tenure without effective coping strategies or wellness programs increases the likelihood of experiencing psychological burnout and loss of job motivation (Leiter, & Maslach, 2016b).

3.2. Burnout in Uniformed and Non-Uniformed Personnel

A comprehensive analysis of the results obtained from applying the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to uniformed and non-uniformed personnel at the Antonio Nariño Police Academy in Soledad (Atlántico) identifies relevant patterns in the manifestation of burnout syndrome, considering sociodemographic variables and the three dimensions that structure this phenomenon: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. In general, the findings indicate low to moderate levels of burnout, although there are signs of sustained risk in certain work subgroups, especially those with more than ten years of service, long workdays, and

administrative responsibilities. This aligns with previous studies that link the chronicity of occupational stress to institutional seniority and the burden of bureaucratic tasks in police forces (González-Ramírez et al., 2021).

Regarding sociodemographic variables, it is evident that most participants are between 36 and 44 years old, representing a mid-career stage characterized by a combination of experience and accumulated exposure to psychological strain. This age range tends to be more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion, given the prolonged exposure to work demands and the institutional pressure inherent in police duties (Gil-Monte, 2020). Furthermore, the male predominance (71.4%) reflects the traditional structure of the police force, which may influence stress coping mechanisms, since men in uniformed contexts often resist showing signs of fatigue or seeking professional help (Oliveras-Faúndez et al., 2021). Regarding marital status, 52.9% of participants are married, which may imply both a network of emotional support and a greater emotional burden stemming from family responsibilities, as reported in previous research on Latin American security forces (Sánchez-López et al., 2020).

The educational level shows that more than two-thirds of respondents have technical or professional training, which is a favorable indicator for understanding self-care and stress management strategies. However, scientific literature has demonstrated that workers with higher levels of education may experience elevated expectations of the organization, increasing their perception of dissatisfaction when working conditions do not match their educational background (Leiter, & Maslach, 2022a)). Consistent with this, the large proportion of officers with more than ten years of service (69%) and institutional tenure (87.1%) demonstrates a consolidated population in terms of experience, but potentially more vulnerable to accumulated emotional burnout. This trend has been observed in research on Latin American police officers, where burnout increases with seniority and exposure to contexts of high emotional demand (Ortega-Campos et al., 2022).

Regarding the specific dimensions of the syndrome, emotional exhaustion is reflected in the presence of moderate symptoms in between one-third and one-half of the staff evaluated. Although most reports do not feel frequently exhausted, a considerable proportion experience feelings of fatigue, frustration, or occasional work overload, which constitutes a warning sign. This pattern is consistent with findings in the international literature indicating that emotional exhaustion represents the core of burnout, especially in public service professions that require continuous interaction with people and decision-making under pressure (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). In the items associated with feeling emotionally exhausted or at one's limit, the results show that between 30% and 50% experience these feelings intermittently, suggesting the need for preventive occupational mental health interventions within the institution.

Depersonalization, understood as the tendency to develop cynical, indifferent, or distant attitudes toward users and colleagues, presents low levels in the sample. Most participants reported maintaining empathy and treating people with compassion, which is a protective

factor against emotional deterioration. However, subgroups reported emotional hardening or a perception of blame assigned by users, which can lead to disaffection or job alienation if not addressed promptly (Oliveras-Faúndez et al., 2021). The fact that 64.3% indicated they worry about users daily is a sign of institutional strength, although the persistence of cases with perceptions of harshness or emotional distance suggests the existence of workplace microclimates that could be fostering emotional rigidity.

For its part, personal fulfillment showed predominantly positive results, indicating a favorable perception of work as a source of achievement, social impact, and professional meaning. The majority report feeling useful, energetic, and capable of solving problems and fostering positive work environments, which aligns with recent research indicating that a sense of purpose and perceived self-efficacy act as barriers against burnout in uniformed personnel (Mansilla-Ibáñez et al., 2023). However, certain items reveal that a portion of the population experiences emotional fatigue, lack of recognition, or low perceived efficacy, which can become a risk factor if psychosocial support mechanisms and job recognition are not strengthened.

Overall, the data reflects that the institution has a staff with a positive attitude and a strong sense of commitment, although they exhibit symptoms of burnout related to excessive workloads and seniority. The high proportion of officers working between 9 and 12 hours a day, along with the prevalence of extended daytime shifts, may be contributing to the development of accumulated physical and emotional fatigue, as documented in recent studies on the relationship between the length of workdays and the incidence of burnout in security forces (Alarcón et al., 2021). These findings suggest the need for internal policies on shift rotation, spaces for psychological rest, and the strengthening of institutional well-being programs.

The evidence obtained in this assessment suggests that, although the overall level of burnout syndrome at the Antonio Nariño Police Academy remains low to moderate, there are structural and psychosocial risk factors that require attention. The combination of long tenure, extended workdays, a predominantly administrative role, and institutional pressure creates an environment susceptible to emotional exhaustion and a progressive reduction in the sense of accomplishment. These findings are consistent with reports from the World Health Organization (2022), which defines burnout as an occupational phenomenon characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and low professional efficacy, resulting from chronic work-related stress.

3.3. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the levels of burnout syndrome in uniformed and non-uniformed personnel, with p-values less than 0.05 in the dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. In the total sample, comprised of 180 participants 90 from uniformed personnel (police, military, and security guards) and 90 from the non-uniformed population (teachers, administrative staff, and healthcare workers) 63.3% of the uniformed subjects presented high levels of emotional exhaustion, compared to 38.9% in the non-uniformed

Burnout syndrome in uniformed and non-uniformed populations: a comparative study population. In the depersonalization dimension, 52.2% of the uniformed personnel obtained high scores, while in the non-uniformed group this percentage decreased to 27.7%. Regarding personal achievement, the data showed an inverse trend: 61.1% of the non-uniformed population reported high levels of personal accomplishment, compared to 36.7% in the uniformed group.

Pearson correlation analysis indicated significant positive associations between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), as well as negative correlations between emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment ($r = -0.64$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that as emotional exhaustion intensifies, the perception of professional efficacy decreases. Independent samples t-tests confirmed relevant differences between the two groups in all three dimensions of the syndrome: emotional exhaustion ($t = 4.32$, $p < 0.001$), depersonalization ($t = 3.76$, $p < 0.001$), and personal accomplishment ($t = -3.18$, $p < 0.01$).

The discussion of these findings reveals that uniformed personnel face higher levels of emotional burnout and workplace cynicism, which could be associated with the high-demand conditions, exposure to danger, hierarchical pressure, and limited autonomy that characterize armed and security professions. This pattern aligns with international studies describing the psychological impact of work in contexts of risk and control, where prolonged exposure to stressful situations fosters the emergence of symptoms of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Maslach & Leiter, 2022b; García-Arroyo & Osca, 2022). In contrast, the non-uniformed occupations analyzed, such as teaching or administration, tend to involve higher levels of cooperative social interaction and symbolic recognition, contributing to a greater sense of achievement and personal satisfaction, as demonstrated by the work of Bakker and de Vries (2021) and Mäkikangas et al. (2022).

The difference observed in the personal achievement dimension suggests that the organizational context significantly influences the perception of self-efficacy and sense of purpose. In uniformed personnel, hierarchical structures and strict adherence to rules can reduce perceived autonomy and the possibility of self-expression, factors that, according to Fernández-Castro et al. (2023), increase the risk of job alienation. In contrast, among the non-uniformed population, flexibility in decision-making and the possibility of establishing horizontal relationships in the workplace appear to mitigate the negative effects of chronic stress, which coincides with the observations of Gil-Monte (2021a) in the Latin American context.

Furthermore, the negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and personal achievement reinforces the notion that burnout syndrome constitutes a progressive process in which exhaustion precedes the loss of meaning in the task and negative self-evaluation of performance. This pattern has been described as a “downward spiral of emotional burnout” (Maslach et al., 2022), where job demands and insufficient personal or institutional resources converge into a gradual deterioration of intrinsic motivation.

From a demographic perspective, the results showed a higher prevalence of burnout syndrome among uniformed men between 30 and 45 years of age with more than 10 years of service. This could be linked to a career stage in which initial service expectations are strained by routine

and bureaucratic burdens. In the non-uniformed population, burnout levels were higher among female teachers, especially in public institutions. This finding aligns with the findings of Cuervo-Carabel et al. (2023) on the relationship between gender, emotional overload, and job insecurity in the Colombian education sector.

In summary, the data reveal a clear difference between the experiences of job burnout in both groups, showing that burnout syndrome manifests more intensely in contexts of high operational demands and low control over working conditions. The instrument's internal correlations and the consistency of the patterns found reinforce the validity of the analysis and allow for the projection of research lines focused on psychosocial intervention in at-risk populations, especially in the uniformed sectors where exposure to work-related stress is structural.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this research indicate that both uniformed and non-uniformed personnel exhibit significant levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization; however, those belonging to the uniformed population show greater vulnerability to burnout syndrome, primarily related to constant exposure to risky situations, hierarchical pressure, and heavy workloads. In the non-uniformed population, burnout levels are more directly associated with work overload and the difficulty in balancing professional demands and personal life, demonstrating the influence of the organizational context and working conditions on the development of the syndrome.

The results suggest that intervention strategies should be tailored to the specific characteristics of each group, promoting psychological support programs, the development of coping skills, and workplace well-being. Furthermore, the need for institutional policies aimed at preventing burnout is highlighted, including workload optimization, job rotation of high-stress tasks, and strengthening supervision and organizational conditions.

Author contribution

Gloria Lastre Amell y Paola Mendoza Rios: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, investigation, supervision, project administration, fund acquisition, resources,

Manuel Julian Dorzon-Garcia methodology, validation

Ana Elvira Manuel Ferrer: investigation

Ana Coavas Martinez Revision final del Artículo

Antonio Campo Peña y Gloria Lastre Amell: writing-original draft preparation, writing-review, and editing. formal analysis, data analysis, data curation,

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Conflict of interest

The researchers declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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