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Stressors Among Counterterrorism Professionals in Indonesia

Zora Arfina Sukabdi[1,a,*], Chandra Yudistira Purnama[2,b], Winda Ruliana[3,c], Umi Muzayanah[4,d]

[1]Graduate School of Sustainable Development, University of Indonesia, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Jenderal Achmad Yani, Indonesia
[3]Woman Empowerment and Child Protection Unit of Regional Social Affairs, Indonesia
[4]National Research and Innovation Agency, Indonesia
[a]zora.arfina@ui.ac.id; [b]chandra.yudistira@lecture.unjani.ac.id; [c]windaruliana@gmail.com; [d]umim002@brin.go.id
*Corresponding author

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Abstract
Counterterrorism professionals in Indonesia face significant pressures due to the demanding nature of their work. This study was aimed at investigating stressors among Indonesian counterterrorism personnel. A mixed-methods research design was employed in the study. The results demonstrate that counterterrorism professionals, including national intelligence operatives, encounter stress chiefly from role expectations, workload, and insufficient social support. Different demographic groups view certain stressors as the most challenging. Furthermore, statistical evidence indicates that employment in security and national defence, or broader intelligence sectors significantly affects personnel's occupational stress levels. The study may help in developing resilience capacity-building strategies.

1. Introduction

Globally, extensive research has documented occupational stress in soldiers, police officers, and first responders (Maglione et al., 2022; Razik et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2022). These populations face unique stressors including acute, severe, and accumulated everyday stress that places substantial burden on personnel, particularly military members who may be isolated from support systems (Applewhite, 2012; Larsson et al., 2016; Maglione et al., 2022). Studies have identified first responders as a high-risk population for occupational stress injuries, with police officers being the most studied group (78.7%), followed by firefighters (17%) and correctional officers (4.3%) (Antony et al., 2020). However, counterterrorism personnel face unique stressors, such as prolonged surveillance duties, secrecy, moral dilemmas, and the potential for sudden exposure to violence.

Counterterrorism personnel operate in one of the most stressful security professions, characterized by unpredictable threats, high-risk operations, and constant psychological pressure. The nature of this work requires personnel to work in high-stress environments, make tough decisions, and handle the aftermath of terrorist attacks (Schmidt et al., 2016). As a result, counterterrorism practitioners are at risk of job stress, which can lead to negative consequences in terms of mental and physical health, as well as their job performance. In defining counterterrorism professionals, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) emphasises a multi-disciplinary approach of these roles which involve law enforcement, military, policy advisors, analysts, and civil society actors who collaborate to prevent and respond to terrorism in all its forms (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). Counterterrorism needs a whole-of-government approach, integrating capabilities across various roles such as diplomacy,

military, intelligence, and law enforcement (Langberg, 2010) with several challenges such as organisational differences and 'walls' between government and non-government communities (Langberg, 2010; Post & Ezekiel, 1988). The evolving nature of terrorism and cyber threats further complicates the conditions of personnel (Kraft & Marks, 2011) which may cause acute, episodic acute, and chronic stress (Hartwell et al., 2013; Schmidt et al., 2016; Wickwire et al., 2018).

High job demands, including long working hours, frequent travel, and the need to make life-or-death decisions, could contribute to job stress in counterterrorism (McCreary & Thompson, 2006). The need for relentless vigilance (the awareness that any terrorist attack could happen at any time), exposure to traumatic events/attacks), and organisational issues (e.g., limited resources or poor management) can also add job stress into this field (Brymer et al., 2006). Moreover, job stress in counterterrorism can have serious physical and mental health problems. Individuals in the field may experience increased rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Duret et al., 2015). They may also experience physical health issues such as cardiovascular disease and gastrointestinal problems (McCreary & Thompson, 2006) and lessened job satisfaction and burnout (Brymer et al., 2006).

Smith and Barrett (2019) identified several health challenges that counterterrorism professionals might experience, including physical challenges and psychological stress. Physical challenges in counterterrorism operations can be caused by thermal stress and hypoxia. Countries prone to terrorist activity, such as Somalia, Yemen, and Syria, have extremely high temperatures that can cause thermal stress and hinder the performance and safety of counterterrorism operations. Meanwhile, hypoxia can affect counterterrorism professionals in Afghanistan conducting operations at altitudes above 4000 meters, impacting their health and making them more irritable (Smith & Barrett, 2019). Psychological stress can also arise from factors such as monotony and boredom; threats, fear, anxiety, fatigue, and lack of sleep (Smith & Barrett, 2019). In the United Kingdom and Denmark, counterterrorism professionals face challenges related to the need for effective communication in preventing and mitigating radicalisation and attacks (Parker et al., 2019). In Kenya, counterterrorism professionals encounter obstacles related to inadequate training and funding within security organisations (Mutisya, 2024; Wagner, 2007). Mental health issues are also prevalent among Norwegian police in preventing violent extremism in the country (Moum Hellevik et al., 2024). In Sweden, counterterrorism intervention units (CTIUs) within the police force handle high-risk arrests and hostage situations. Research indicates that Swedish CTIU officers possess specific personality traits compared to the general Swedish population. The demanding nature of their work often leads to various mental and physical pressures. They also experience stress, both during training and in real-life high-risk terrorist situations (Tedeholm et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, the context is particularly distinctive. Since 2023, the country has reported zero attack ("from many to zero" attack) (Batubara, 2025; Irwanto, 2025; Sofyan & Priyanto, 2025; Sukabdi, 2025), a remarkable achievement attributed to the sustained efforts of counterterrorism agencies such as Special Detachment (Detasemen Khusus/Densus) 88 and the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) and intelligence agencies, such as the State Intelligence Agency (BIN) and the Strategic Intelligence Agency of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (BAIS). Yet this success may conceal an overlooked dimension: maintaining a zero-incident record can create new forms of stressors. Counterterrorism personnel must operate under constant pressure to detect hidden threats, prevent plots before they materialize, and live with the reality that a single failure could undo years of progress. Indonesian intelligence agencies in the counterterrorism, particularly, heavily depends on HUMINT (human intelligence) for its intelligence operations due to limitations in resources and technology; therefore, creating more pressures (Firmawati & Sa'adah, 2023; Mahyudin, 2016; Wijayanto, 2022).

Despite this, no study to date has systematically examined the stressors faced by Indonesian counterterrorism personnel with their 'unique' contexts: the biggest Muslim population which does not apply sharia/Islamic law, with zero terrorism attack (Sukabdi et al., 2023). The literature on Indonesian policing often addresses general occupational stress or community-facing challenges, but the internal, covert, and preventive demands of counterterrorism work remain underexplored. This gap limits our understanding of how these professionals sustain resilience: what unique stressors they face and how these personnel cope with such stressors in order to sustain operational readiness and effectiveness.

The study aimed to understand stress experienced by Indonesian counterterrorism personnel by applying a mixed-methods research design. This study defines Indonesian counterterrorism professionals as individuals employed by or collaborating with BNPT (the coordinating agency), the State Intelligence

Agency/BIN or the Strategic Intelligence Agency of the Indonesian National Armed Forces/BAIS (the intelligence execution agency), and/or Densus 88 (the law enforcement execution agency). Their roles encompass detecting, preventing, responding to, and recovering from acts of terrorism, which includes gathering intelligence (e.g., espionage and observation), assessing threats (e.g., through research and analysis), managing crises (e.g., via covert operations), and executing direct operational responses to terrorist incidents (i.e., arrests), prevention (i.e., through counternarrative and counterintelligence), and rehabilitation/deradicalization programs.

The novelty of this study is to understand how Indonesian counterterrorism practitioners maintain resilience, encompassing the stressors they encounter and the coping techniques they employ, so achieving a significant reduction in attacks from numerous to none. A novel study on stress pressures and coping strategies among Indonesian counterterrorism practitioners may also be a good baseline to start assessments and research aiming to understand stress impact on wide-ranging counterterrorism practitioners' efficacy in work. This study may contribute to formulating capacity building to counterterrorism personnel which promotes mental health.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stress at Work

Stress is generally regarded as a negative condition affecting people across ages and cultures (Jones, 2001). Selye defined stress as the body's non-specific response to demands (Fink, 2009). It can be understood as: (1) a stimulus caused by pressure, (2) a response to harmful stimuli, or (3) a dynamic process shaped by internal and external interactions (Butler, 1993). In behavioural science, stress is the perception of threat causing discomfort and adjustment difficulties (Fink, 2009). Psychologically, it occurs when environmental demands exceed adaptive capacity (Cohen et al., 2007). Thus, stress reflects an imbalance between demands and coping ability (Muawanah et al., 2023), potentially leading to both physical and psychological health impacts (American Psychiatric Association, 2014). Stress is also described as a reaction to change or anxiety within a time frame (Stranks, 2005). It is now one of the most pressing health issues (Kudielka & Wüst, 2010), triggered by conditions that cause frustration, anger, or anxiety (Silverman et al., 2010). Stressors vary—environmental (e.g., temperature), work-related (e.g., workload), and social (e.g., family) (Stranks, 2005). Responses differ individually, and stress may be beneficial (eustress) or harmful (distress) (James et al., 2023). It can be acute (temporary) or chronic (lasting longer) (Reineke & Neilson, 2019). Other forms include psychosocial (Cohen & Herbert, 1996), elderly (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987), work-related (Theorell, 1992), and traumatic stress (Brewin et al., 2000). Stress affects emotions, behaviour, cognition, and physical health, leading to anxiety, withdrawal, impaired concentration, or somatic symptoms (Michie, 2001). A common perception is loss of control (Peters et al., 2017).

Workplace stress refers to extreme pressures exceeding individual capacity, creating psychological dysfunction and strain (Stranks, 2005). It emerges from imbalances between job demands and coping abilities, producing psychological, emotional, and physical tension (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stress results from interactions between work demands and personal traits (Hwang, 2018), with consequences for both employees and organizations, including reduced satisfaction, absenteeism, turnover, and lower productivity (Chandraiah, 2016).

Sources of job stress include heavy demands, lack of control, insufficient skills, poor workplace relations, organizational culture, and structural changes (Peterson, 2018; Tennant, 2001). Competitive environments and job insecurity further heighten stress (Yuliana, 2005). These pressures often lead to fatigue, declining performance, depression, and compromised health (Kocalevent et al., 2011). Stress also increases absenteeism, economic costs, and family strain (Tennant, 2001). Within organizations, the highest stress levels are found among managers, professionals, and paraprofessionals due to excessive workloads, performance targets, and poor work–life balance (Peterson, 2018).

Several factors contribute to job stress, including workload, lack of control, interpersonal conflicts, role ambiguity, and job insecurity:

1. Workload: High workload is a major contributor to job stress, as individuals overwhelmed by job demands are more prone to stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).
2. Lack of control: A lack of control over work-related decisions can lead to job stress, as individuals may feel powerless to change their situation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Low job control, encompassing control over job tasks and work pace, may result in feelings of helplessness (Schulze & Hwang, 2019).
3. Interpersonal conflicts: Conflicts with colleagues, supervisors, or customers are significant sources of job stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Social support, from both supervisors and co-workers, acts as a buffer against job stress, reducing its impact (Chandraiah, 2016).
4. Role ambiguity: Unclear job expectations contribute to job stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).
5. Job insecurity: The perceived threat of job loss can lead to job stress, causing anxiety and stress among employees uncertain about their job security (Schulze & Hwang, 2019).

The Indonesian scholar in the field of human resource management, Wahjono (2010), categorises the causes of job stress into three diverse categories:

1. Environmental factors:

   Environmental uncertainty affects organisational structure, and it also influences the stress levels among employees within an organisation. Forms of environmental uncertainty include economic uncertainty affecting the income and rewards received by employees, political uncertainty impacting the organisation's state and smooth operation, technological uncertainty affecting the organisation's progress in technology use, and security uncertainty influencing the organisation's position and role.

2. Organisational factors:

   Potential sources of stress within the organisation include: (1) Job demands in terms of individual job design, working conditions, and physical workplace layout. (2) Role demands related to the pressure placed on an individual as a function of a specific role played in the organisation, including the workload received by an individual. (3) Interpersonal demands, which are pressures created by other employees, such as lack of social support and poor interpersonal relationships among employees. (4) Organisational structure determining the level of differentiation in the organisation, rules and regulations, and decision-making processes. Excessive rules and lack of individual participation in decision-making are potential sources of stress. (5) Organisational leadership related to leadership or managerial styles and senior executive leadership. Specific leadership styles can create a culture that becomes a potential source of stress.

3. Individual factors:

   Individual factors involve aspects of an individual's personal life, including family issues, personal economic problems, and inherent personality characteristics.

Leithy et al. (2006) note that stress levels vary among individuals, even under the same stressors, with differences shaped by factors such as work experience, social support, locus of control, effectiveness, and personality. These can serve as intervening variables in stress research. Stress management can be approached at two levels:

1. Individual approach: Effective time management, physical exercise, relaxation techniques (e.g., meditation, hypnosis, biofeedback), and strong social support networks.
2. Organisational approach: Improved personnel selection and job placement, realistic goal-setting, job redesign for greater control, employee participation in decision-making, clearer communication, and welfare programs for overall well-being (Leithy et al., 2006).

Moreover, work stress progresses through three stages: alarm (initial response with adrenaline/cortisol), resistance (adaptation with fatigue and concentration problems), and exhaustion (physical/emotional breakdown) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

2.2. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model is an influential framework proposing that working conditions can be categorized into job demands and job resources, which are differentially related to employee outcomes (Demerouti et al., 2001). The model suggests two key processes: job demands primarily relate to exhaustion and health impairment, while job resources relate to motivation, engagement, and reduced cynicism (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker et al., 2003).

Empirical support comes from multiple studies across diverse occupational groups, including human services, industry, transport, and home care organizations, with sample sizes ranging from 374 to 3,092 participants (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker et al., 2003). A comprehensive meta-analysis of 74 longitudinal studies confirmed the model's essential assumptions using structural equation modeling, though only 39% were considered high-quality studies (Lesener et al., 2018). Despite strong empirical support, several unresolved issues remain, including the distinction between demands and resources, reciprocal causation, and the model's epistemological status (Schaufeli & Taris, 2014).

2.3. Terrorism Stress

Terrorism and persistent threats of violence impose a distinctive form of chronic environmental stress on workers in affected regions and organizations. Employees exposed to terrorism-related risk report heightened fear and uncertainty that shape attitudes, behaviours, and performance, and increase the likelihood of job burnout and psychological distress (Soomro et al., 2021; De Clercq et al., 2017). Recent empirical work explores the mechanisms linking perceived terrorism threat to workplace outcomes, and highlights individual and organizational resources that can buffer these effects.

2.4. Terrorism Stress and Employee Behaviour

Fear of terrorism changes how employees appraise risk and prioritize safety, which in turn alters behaviours such as absenteeism, reduced organizational commitment, risk-avoidant decisions, and withdrawal from high-exposure tasks (Soomro et al., 2021). Employees who perceive high sensitivity to terrorism (a dispositional or situational tendency to react strongly to terror threats) show amplified negative job attitudes when work conditions offer poor rewards relative to effort; sensitivity to terrorism thus moderates classic job-stress relationships (effort–reward imbalance) and can intensify counterproductive behaviours or reduced engagement. Organizational justice perceptions further shape whether fear translates into maladaptive behaviours or is contained.

2.5. Job Burnout and Job Stress in Terrorism-Affected Contexts

Empirical studies in terrorist-ridden areas document elevated levels of job burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment) linked to ongoing threat exposure, ambiguous safety policies, and feelings of inadequate organizational support (Soomro et al., 2021). Job stress pathways in these contexts often follow an effort–reward imbalance: when employees feel their efforts are not fairly compensated (materially or psychologically) amid elevated external risk, burnout increases. Chronic activation of stress systems under prolonged threat contributes to exhaustion and impaired job functioning.

2.6. Psychological Well-Being and Downstream Effects

Terrorism stress undermines core aspects of psychological well-being (manifesting as anxiety, sleep disturbance, lowered life satisfaction, and depressive symptoms) which mediate the effect of threat on performance and turnover intentions. Studies show that perceived organizational support and clear safety measures can preserve well-being by restoring some sense of control and predictability; lacking these, employees' psychological health and job outcomes deteriorate. Thus, psychological well-being is both an outcome and a mediator in the terrorism-stress (performance chain) (Soomro et al., 2021).

2.6. Resilience as a Protective Factor

Resilience, defined as the capacity to recover, adapt, or even thrive after adversity, strongly buffers the negative effects of terrorism stress on burnout and well-being. Individual resilience reduces the likelihood that stress will produce long-term burnout or performance declines, while organizational resilience (including perceived organizational support, training, and adaptive policies) moderates the impact of threat exposure (Rees et al., 2015; Shatté et al., 2016; Bader, 2015). Bader's work on expatriates in terrorism-endangered countries highlights that perceived organizational support (POS) and family/relational stability mitigate safety-related tensions that otherwise harm performance and well-being. Interventions that build personal coping skills, social support networks, and organisational safety climates are therefore central to reducing the human costs of terrorism stress (Rees et al., 2015).

2.7. Organizational Strategies to Limit Harm

The literature converges on several organizational levers that reduce terrorism-related job stress and burnout: (1) clear communication and realistic safety planning to reduce uncertainty; (2) fair effort–reward structures and transparent justice practices to prevent perceived inequity; (3) training for threat awareness and coping skills; (4) facilitation of social support (peer and supervisory); and (5) policies that enable employee participation and flexible work arrangements in high-risk periods. Studies demonstrate that these measures not only lower immediate stress responses but also preserve long-term psychological well-being and retention (Soomro et al., 2021).

2.8. From Individual to Community Resilience

Recent work extends the focus beyond individual employees and organizations to community resilience. Lived experiences of terrorism and community responses shape collective resources (e.g., social capital, local NGOs, community leadership) that influence recovery and long-term adaptation (Soomro, 2024). Community resilience initiatives (mental health outreach, local preparedness, and civic engagement) relieve individual burdens by creating environments where safety and social support are more available, thereby indirectly protecting employees' psychological health and workplace functioning. Building community resilience is thus a complementary strategy to organizational interventions

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

This study applied a mixed methods research design which combined qualitative and quantitative approach to investigate pressures amongst counterterrorism personnel in Indonesia. The qualitative method was used to gain as many information as possible about the stressors faced by personnel/participants of this study, whereas quantitative was used to understand the significance of difference within each variable (such as age, sex, organisation of counterterrorism, and length of work in counterterrorism) in giving impact to stress level. The null hypothesis for the quantitative technique in this study posits that there is no significant difference across groups in each variable (e.g., age, length of work in counterterrorism field, marital status, education) in influencing stress levels (Table 1). The alternative hypothesis posits that there is a significant difference among groups in each variable in influencing stress levels.

As researches on terrorism and intelligence/national security encounter numerous challenges, such as confidentiality, sensitivity issues, and the suspicion from both authorities and terrorist offenders (Bhui et al., 2012), a qualitative approach is more appropriate in exploring the most challenging stressors to personnel. For theoretical framework in coding participants' responses, this study uses Wahjono's three categories of job stress in classifying stress faced by counterterrorism professionals (Wahjono, 2010). The categories are described in Table 2. Nonetheless, since the landscape of counterterrorism has shifted dramatically, this study conducted supplemental interviews in 2025 with some participants of study to gain a deeper understanding of recent phenomena. These additional interviews are presented in Results without being coded under Wahjono's (2010) categories of stress.

Table 1. Null hypothesises of study

Variables		Null Hypothesis
Independent	Dependent	
Sex	Level of job stress	There is no significant difference in job stress scores across gender groups
Age		There is no significant difference in job stress scores across age groups
Level of education		There is no significant difference in job stress scores across levels of educations
Marital status		There is no significant difference in job stress scores across marital statuses
Length of work in the field of counterterrorism		There is no significant difference in job stress scores among people with different lengths of work in counterterrorism field
Organisation of counterterrorism		There is no significant difference in job stress scores among personnel from government and non-government organisations of counterterrorism
Element of counterterrorism		There is no significant difference in job stress scores among personnel from different elements of counterterrorism
Working in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields		There is no significant difference in job stress scores among personnel working in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields)
Length of employment in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields		There is no significant difference in job stress scores among people with different lengths of employment in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields)
Sex	Level of personal stress	There is no significant difference in personal stress scores across gender groups
Age		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores across age groups
Level of education		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores across levels of educations
Marital status		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores across marital statuses
Length of work in the field of counterterrorism		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores across lengths of work in counterterrorism field
Organisation of counterterrorism		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores among personnel from government and non-government organisations of counterterrorism
Element of counterterrorism		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores among personnel from different elements of counterterrorism
Working in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores among personnel working in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields)
Length of employment in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields		There is no significant difference in personal stress scores among people with different lengths of employment in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields)

Table 2. Categories of Job Stress

Factors	Indicators
A. Organisational factors	A.1. Working demands: individual tasks, working conditions, and physical workspace layout. A.2. Role demands: pressures and workload. A.3. Interpersonal demands: pressure created by other employees. A.4. Organisational structure: the level of differentiation, chains of commands, and rules and regulations within organisation. A.5. Organisational leadership: leadership style, management, and attitudes of senior executives.
B. Environmental factors	B.1. Economic uncertainty: salary and benefits. B.2. Political uncertainty: political situations/turbulence. sustainability, and policy coming from external organisation. B.3. Technology uncertainty: technological advancements within the organisation. B.4. Security uncertainty: organisation's position and role.
C. Individual factors	C.1. Work experience: individual's experience in a particular job and individual's educational background. C.2. Social support: support, encouragement, and personal motivation. C.3. Locus of control: self-control. C.4. Personality: attitude and coping strategy.

Source: Wahjono (2010)

3.2. Participant

Fifty-six counterterrorism professionals participated in this study. Most of them were in the productive age range of 31 – 50 years old with the majority holding master's (S2) and bachelor's (S1) degrees. In terms of marital status, 91% of the participants were married and most of them had 1 to 3 children. Sixty-four percent of the participants worked in the field of counterterrorism within government institutions (BNPT, BIN, BAIS, and Densus 88), while the remaining 36% worked in non-governmental organisations. A more detailed description of the participants is presented in Table 3.

The participants in this study were selected by purposive sampling. Thair names were recommended by BNPT and Densus 88. The chosen participants were recognised for their exceptional achievements in working with offenders, garnering positive feedback from former offenders. In addition to the agency's recommendations, the participants were carefully chosen based on their nationwide recognition and documented contributions, such as in deradicalisation programs and terrorism investigations. Given the above, this study employed purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants with significant expertise or impact in the field of counterterrorism. To reduce bias in purposive sampling, firstly we clearly defined counterterrorism professionals in this study which are individuals 1) with experience in the counterterrorism field, who 2) have collaborated with or been employed by BNPT, BIN, BAIS, and/or Densus 88, and 3) have been referenced or recommended by these entities to be involved in this study. Secondly, we employed inter-rater judgment in coding, classifying, and interpreting the data obtained from participant interviews, as detailed in the analysis section.

3.3. Procedure and Materials

In terms of data collection, a thorough review of participant names, initial contact, and correspondence with candidates of participants were conducted followed by structured interviews with people who agreed to participate in this study. Prior to interviews, participants who consented to participate in the study were provided with informed consent forms. All participants voluntarily provided information regarding their occupational stressors through anonymous interviews. No personally identifiable or operationally sensitive data were collected. Participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage. As the study posed minimal risk and involved adult professionals discussing non-sensitive occupational experiences, formal institutional ethics approval was deemed unnecessary according to the authors' institutional policy.

Table 3. Participants of this Study

Characteristics	Category	Total	Percentage
Sex	Male	32	57%
	Female	23	41%
	N/A	1	2%
Age	30 years old and below	6	11%
	31 – 40 years old	19	34%
	41 – 50 years old	20	36%
	51 – 60 years old	7	12%
	Above 60 years old	4	7%
Education	Doctorate (Ph.D.)	7	12%
	Master's (M.A., M.S.)	27	48%
	Bachelor's (B.A., B.S.)	20	36%
	Diploma	1	2%
	High schools	1	2%
Marital status	Married	51	91%
	Single	4	7%
	Widowed	1	2%
Number of children	1	12	21%
	2	16	29%
	3	14	25%
	4	5	9%
	5	1	2%
	0	6	11%
	N/A	2	3%
Working as a full-timer in counterterrorism field	Yes	55	98%
	No	1	2%
Length of work in counterterrorism field	Less than 1 year	4	7%
	1 - 5 years	28	50%
	5,1 - 10 years	13	23%
	10,1 - 15 years	4	7%
	15,1 - 20 years	4	7%
	More than 20 years	1	2%
	Non-regular	1	2%
	Per case	1	2%
Organisation of counterterrorism	Government	36	64%
	Non-governmental	20	36%
Element of counterterrorism	Civilian	41	73%
	Police	10	18%
	Military	5	9%
Working in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields	Yes	32	57%
	No	24	43%
Length of employment in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields	Less than 1 year	10	18%
	1 - 5 years	11	20%
	5,1 - 10 years	5	9%
	10,1 - 15 years	3	5%
	15,1 - 20 years	6	11%
	More than 20 years	7	12%
	Never	8	14%
	N/A	6	11%

Interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2025, in a private setting during participants' working hours at their offices in Jakarta, Indonesia's capital. The interview guideline is presented in Table 4. To ensure reliability, this interview guideline was pilot-tested with one of the researcher's colleagues. Each participant underwent a single interview session lasting approximately thirty to sixty minutes. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with the researcher taking notes as participants preferred not to have their responses digitally recorded. Before concluding each interview, the researcher reviewed the written notes with the participant for verification to avoid misunderstanding and bias.

Table 4. Interview Guideline

Demographics: age, education, domicile, family, others
Have you ever worked in counterterrorism? How long?
What is the name of the agency where you worked in counterterrorism?
What element did you work in counterterrorism? Military, police, or civilian?
Have you also worked in intelligence or defense more broadly beyond the terrorism field? How long?
What stressors do you face at work?
What stressors do you face in your personal life that are related to your performance at work?
What are the most significant issues that cause you stress?
What efforts do you take to cope with these stressful situations?

3.4. Analysis

For the qualitative analysis, participants' responses about stressors in their day-to-day life were tabulated and coded using Wahjono's stress categories (Wahjono, 2010). This helped identify key similar concepts. Four coders/raters were involved: a clinical psychologist, a psychometrician, and two counterterrorism practitioners (inter-rater judgement). Excel was utilised for data management. Subsequently, researchers discussed the participants' responses and coding to ensure inter-rater agreement. The quantitative analysis was employed to review frequencies and examine difference test in each variable (ANOVA).

4. Results and Discussion

This study's findings indicate that both female and male counterterrorism practitioners encounter job-related stress, mostly due to pressure created by other colleagues, political uncertainty, and policy coming from their external organisations. The findings also show that practitioners experience various personal stressors, stemming from a lack of situational control, restricted personal capability, and insufficient social support from significant persons (e.g., family and friends). For the practitioners, the most significant stressors are role demands and pressures stemming from a heavy workload, national political instability, and insufficient support from key individuals (families and friends); conversely, organisational structure (including differentiation levels, chains of command, and rules and regulations), organisational leadership, and work experience are the least stressful factors. This may originate from Indonesian culture and upbringing, which emphasise diverse forms and expressions of obedience. Moreover, different than the male practitioners who emphasise economic uncertainty (salary and benefits) and lacking encouragement from families as crucial stressful factors, the females accentuate office politics and a lack of self-control (i.e., restricted access due to their gender, or discrimination) as the most distressing stressors.

> "HUMINT is a big part of what our intelligence agencies do here. They prefer this method over OSINT (open-source intelligence), COMINT (communication intelligence), ELINT (electronic intelligence), SIGINT (signal intelligence), IMINT (imagery intelligence), and MASINT (measurement and signature intelligence). People can make mistakes with it." (Participant1 of this study)

> "You know, as an intelligence agent, if I get lost, no one will look for me, and if I do well, no one will praise me. I get lonely too sometimes. So, I need to be able to handle stress and urges. There are moments when I want to be famous and show up in the news so everyone knows how well I've stopped terrorist attacks. But I keep telling myself that because I have chosen to be an intelligence agent, so I have to ignore the feelings to be narcissistic or populist." (Participant2 of this study)

> "My headache and neck issues come back every time I go to work. When I go out of town to see my family, I'm so happy. This job in intelligence is killing me." (Participant3 of this study)

> "When I was about four or five months pregnant, I was given a job that was quite far away. To get me to work on time, my driver sped up to 110 km/h. Can you imagine how stressful it would be to be pregnant and must deal with this? I don't want to lose my job if I don't do it." (Participant5 of this study)

In terms of ages, all ages consider workload, pressures created by other colleagues, economic uncertainty (e.g., salary and benefits), political turbulence/policy changing, and technology uncertainty as the most frequent stressors at work (job stress). They perceive the absence of support from significant people in their lives and restricted autonomy, due to systemic and bureaucratic constraints, as primary sources of personal stress. For practitioners under 30 years old, their job stress is frequently related to competition/rivalry amongst peer colleagues. For practitioners between 41 to 50 years old, working demands such as excessive individual tasks, hostile working conditions, and unpleasant physical workspace arrangement become more frequent stressors they face in their daily basis. Furthermore, among semi-retired practitioners (over 60), the loss of position and authority (e.g., due to retirement), diminished stress tolerance, and the reduced ability of coping techniques are the most formidable stressors.

The results indicate that "interpersonal demands" or pressures from coworkers, are the most prevalent stresses among single and widowed practitioners. This is due to the expectation that they will be more gregarious in their interactions with others compared to the married individuals. However, for the married, balancing professional and marital responsibilities ("role demands") is a troubling challenge. Moreover, practitioners holding Diplomas and Bachelor's degrees experience greater peer/interpersonal pressures than those with Master's degrees, as they perceive themselves as 'easily replaceable'; hence, they feel compelled to socialise with and appease their colleagues to secure their employment. Surprisingly, persons with Doctorate-level education said that interpersonal demands were the most challenging, as they prefer engaging in intellectual work and study over social interactions when given a choice.

> "I lived two or three lives at the same time. I had a lot of mistresses because I was stressed out by this high-pressure job that didn't get any praise." (Participant5 of this study)

> "I really need a shrink. [biting nails]" (Participant6 of this study)

> "One of the people in the counterterrorism agency fabricated my assessment instrument. This isn't the first time this has happened. I am stressed, but what can I do about it? To be honest, I am scared to work with officials." (Participant7 of this study)

> "My hairs turn grey. I've been throwing up, feeling sick, having migraines, and even having sore eyes lately. One of my counterterrorism coworkers used my organisation to undertake an evaluation that I don't know much about." (Participant18 of this study)

Practitioners with less than nine years of experience in the counterterrorism field view both workload and lack of support from family and friends as the most distressing factors, while those with 10 to 18 years of experience regard only workload as distressing, as their families have already acknowledged the inherent risks of their profession. In other words, individuals with less than nine years of experience in the sphere of terrorism still juggle in finding balance: simultaneously navigate the perils associated with grassroots environments (such as in militant or terrorist villages), while at the same time seeking familial supports in their works. Further, practitioners with over 19 years of experience do not perceive any issue as significantly concerning. This is due to their proficient abilities/well-established skills of coping techniques within the realm of counterterrorism.

The results of this study demonstrate that for the non-government practitioners, political uncertainty (i.e., turbulence, sustainability, and changing policy) and lacking control/access are the most challenging stressors; while for government personnel, working demands (such as stressful tasks, working conditions, and physical workspace layout) and lacking salary and benefits are the most distressing factors. Moreover, different than military and police officers, civilian personnel reported that high pressures/workload and lacking personal motivation as the most unpleasant issues. Further, for them who have been working in security and national defence (bigger areas of intelligence), lacking encouragement from families is still the most difficult stressor to deal with.

As mentioned earlier, this study investigates several variables to determine whether any of them influences stress level of counterterrorism practitioners. The quantitative analysis reveals that the employment in security and national defence or broader intelligence fields (as intelligence agents for BIN, BAIS or Densus 88) significantly contributes to job stress, as the responsibility of ensuring national security encompasses more than merely countering terrorism (e.g., safeguarding mining and natural resources, securing Indonesian maritime interests, managing separatism), thereby imposing greater strain on these personnel. Moreover, aging serves as an additional component that worsens stress in a personnel's life (Table 5).

Table 5. Recapitulation of Different Tests (ANOVA)

Variables		p-value	Descriptions	Significant Difference
Independent	**Dependent**			
Sex	Level of job stress	0.461	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels across gender groups. Interpretation: the gender does not have a significant impact on job stress score	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Age	Level of job stress	0.728	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels across age groups. Interpretation: age does not exert a substantial influence on job stress score	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Level of education	Level of job stress	0.335	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels across levels of educations. Interpretation: the level of education does not have a significant impact on job stress score	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Marital status	Level of job stress	0.395	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels across marital statuses. Interpretation: marital status does not have a significant impact on job stress score	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Length of work in the field of counterterrorism	Level of job stress	0.412	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels throughout different lengths of employment in counterterrorism. Interpretation: the length of work in the counterterrorism industry does not substantially affect job stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Organisation of counterterrorism (government or non-government)	Level of job stress	0.360	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels among personnel from various counterterrorism organisations. Interpretation: the organisation of counterterrorism does not significantly affect job stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Element of counterterrorism (civilian, police, or military)	Level of job stress	0.857	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels among personnel engaged in different elements of counterterrorism. Interpretation: element of counterterrorism does not significantly affect job stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Working in security and national defence/broad	Level of job stress	0.0195	There is a statistically significant difference in job stress scores among personnel working in security and national defence.	√ (Null Hypothesis is rejected)

Variables		p-value	Descriptions	Significant Difference
Independent	**Dependent**			
er intelligence fields			Interpretation: working in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields) has a significant impact on job stress level	
Length of employment in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields	Level of job stress	0.162	There is no statistically significant difference in job stress levels across various lengths of work in security and national defence. Interpretation: the duration of employment in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields) does not significantly influence job stress score	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Sex	Level of personal stress	0.697	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress levels across gender groups. Interpretation: gender does not exert a substantial influence on personal stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Age	Level of personal stress	0.0188	There is a statistically significant difference in personal stress scores across age groups. Interpretation: the age group has a significant impact on personal stress level	√ (Null Hypothesis is rejected)
Level of education	Level of personal stress	0.0661	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress scores across different levels of educations. Interpretation: the level of education does not significantly influence personal stress score	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Marital status	Level of personal stress	0.898	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress scores across marital statuses. Interpretation: marital status does not significantly influence personal stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Length of work in the field of counterterrorism	Level of personal stress	0.546	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress scores across varied lengths of work in counterterrorism field. Interpretation: the duration of employment in the counterterrorism sector does not significantly influence personal stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Organisation of counterterrorism (government or non-government)	Level of personal stress	0.452	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress scores among personnel from government and non-government organisations of counterterrorism. Interpretation: the organisation of counterterrorism does not significantly affect personal stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Element of counterterrorism (civilian,	Level of personal stress	0.344	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress scores among personnel from different elements of counterterrorism.	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)

Variables		p-value	Descriptions	Significant Difference
Independent	**Dependent**			
police, or military)			Interpretation: element of counterterrorism exerts no influence on personal stress level	
Working in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields	Level of personal stress	0.162	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress scores among personnel working in security and national defence Interpretation: employment in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields) does not exert a considerable influence on personal stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)
Length of employment in security and national defence/broader intelligence fields	Level of personal stress	0.529	There is no statistically significant difference in personal stress scores among people with different lengths of employment in security and national defence. Interpretation: the duration of employment in security and national defence (broader intelligence fields) does not significantly influence personal stress level	χ (Null Hypothesis is accepted)

Subsequent interviews with participants in 2025 reveal emerging threats in the realm of terrorism, despite Indonesia experiencing no attacks: terrorism financing, the escalation of extremism stemming from the 2025 trade war resulting in an economic crisis, cyber threats, diminished governmental efficacy worldwide (due to the economic crisis and tension) undermining international cooperation, and lone-wolf actors after the disbandment of Jamaah Islamiyah (JI). These dangers exacerbate pressures to counterterrorism professional (due to the scarcity of resources, e.g., technology and skilled practitioners). Furthermore, when numerous experienced security professionals are supplanted by individuals who are novices in the domain, the participants also expressed their concerns. Moreover, ethical dilemmas faced by counterterrorism personnel, including plagiarism, data breaches, and betrayal/disloyalty, exacerbate the challenges of counterterrorism efforts. Below is the participants' expression of stress:

> "The most important issues to deal with right now are cyber threats, terrorism financing, the development of extremism because of the trade war, and lone wolf actors. One of the JI leaders has just been let out of jail. Don't get too comfortable with 'zero attack' narratives." (Participant1 of this study)

> "The most difficult to work with us when handling terrorism financing is private banks. They don't provide us anything or any data, on suspicious transactions detected by us. Even we, the police, have a hard time in gathering data from private banks. They are very, very uncooperative. This, of course, puts pressure on us to uncover terrorism cases." (Participant7 of this study)

> "Yes, Jamaah Islamiyah has been disbanded, but many of its members still don't think it should be disbanded. This is why we are keeping an eye on them. This is making us stressed. But we can't focus on our mental health because we have too much to do, we don't have enough time, and there aren't any counselling or consultation programs for us practitioners. We just need to rely on our coping mechanism." (Participant15 of this study)

> "We were told by former terrorists who we are deradicalising that they would do terrorist acts again if there was no program established for them. This is hard for us because our budget is little, and the country is trying to be more efficient." (Participant27 of this study)

In terms of coping strategies, participants reported that they do several efforts as coping mechanisms to counter stress. The coping methods are classified into four categories: 1) problem-focused, 2) emotion-focused, 3) meaning-focused, and 4) social coping, as per the study of Algorani et al.79 The findings indicate

that emotion-focused coping mechanisms are frequently employed by personnel in counterterrorism to alleviate stress, followed by problem-focused and meaning-focused strategies (Table 6).

Coping strategies	**Mentions**	**Categories of coping skills**	**Total mentions**
1. Accepting imperfections,	12	Emotion-focused	44
2. Doing hobbies	6		
3. Meditation and contemplating	6		
4. Exercise	6		
5. Recreation	5		
6. Resting and sleeping	3		
7. Connecting with good people	2		
8. Playing music	2		
9. Gaming	1		
10. Going to salon and spa	1		
11. Learning new technologies	6	Problem-focused	31
12. Consulting with seniors	6		
13. Finding support system	5		
14. Time managing	4		
15. Setting priorities	4		
16. Looking for alternative solutions	4		
17. Preparing families for the worst scenarios	1		
18. Managing finance	1		
19. Maintaining passion	9	Meaning-focused	29
20. Praying	7		
21. Fasting	7		
22. Writing on journals	3		
23. Reading the Holy Book	1		
24. Discussing problems with religious advisers	1		
25. Building God-Family-Communities relationship	1		
26. Gathering with family and friends	10	Social coping	25
27. Sharing with significant others	9		
28. Teamworking	2		
29. Coordinating	2		
30. Training juniors at offices	2		

This study analyses the diverse challenges encountered by Indonesian counterterrorism professionals. The study may serve as a valuable foundation for evaluating and researching the effects of stress on practitioners' work efficacy and for developing coping skills training to enhance mental health. Addressing job stress is principal to safeguarding these practitioners' mental and physical health and maintaining operational effectiveness.

At present when this study is formulated, while BNPT has expressed concern for psychological factors in its various initiatives, particularly concerning victims and perpetrators of terrorism, there is no publicly available information indicating a mental health program specifically targeting the internal staff of BNPT and other outsourced personnel (from civil society organisations/CSOs/ NGOs). On the contrary,

participants from the national police, public civil servants (ASN), and military agencies explained that there were counselling programs/clinics for them in their respective institutions. However, those programs are ineffective because they are predominantly available in major cities, and stressed professionals fear that expressing their problems in the clinics/programs may lead to stigmatisation as 'vulnerable' or 'weak', thus jeopardising their employment. Furthermore, participants candidly expressed their satisfaction with the study, as it by chance provided them the opportunity to narrate their stories, and articulate their stress/'grievance' in an anonymous manner, free from professional repercussions.

> "Don't stop working on counterterrorism just because the economy is bad and the government is trying to be more efficient. Because security costs a lot of money. And cutting the security budget is quite risky." (Participant3 of this study)

> "Some folks had been working in the same counterterrorism job since the organisation was created, and we had suspicions about them that were "bad." This isn't good for you; it's like a septic tank where the problems were "stuck" there, generating problems and stressors here and there, with an old-fashioned technique that didn't work. I don't think a person should stay in the same job for more than ten years." (Participant33 of this study)

> "Sometimes, I become so angry for no reason at all. This is after I got shot by terrorist. I think I have PTSD. My supervisor agrees with me. But I'm fine. There is a counselling facility for us officers, but the competent counsellors are only available in big cities, also I'm scared that if I go there, they would record my sessions and use them against my career growth in the future, saying that I am weak. I can't afford to take that chance after everything I've been through." (Participant35 of this study)

> "To be honest, this made me feel better about getting involved in your study. I feel so much better now that I've told you about my problems, sadness, and tension in this area." (Participant39 of this study)

Several strategies can be employed for addressing stress of counterterrorism personnel. Firstly, fostering social support networks, both among colleagues and supervisors, serves as a protective factor against job-related stressors (Duret et al., 2015). Secondly, promoting work-life balance by offering flexible work arrangements and encouraging leisure activities can significantly aid in stress management for counterterrorism professionals (McCreary & Thompson, 2006). Thirdly, providing comprehensive training and resources for stress management, such as mindfulness meditation and cognitive-behavioural therapy, proves instrumental in mitigating job stress among counterterrorism personnel (Brymer et al., 2006). Furthermore, in the domain of intelligence and counterintelligence, governmental investments in Artificial Intelligence (AI), together with projects including OSINT (open-source intelligence), COMINT (communication intelligence), ELINT (electronic intelligence), SIGINT (signal intelligence), IMINT (imagery intelligence), and MASINT (measurement and signature intelligence), should be executed to reduce factors that lead to human error.

5. Conclusion

The study on stress among counterterrorism professionals reveals the pervasive nature of job stress within this critical field. Stress is defined as a response to pressure or demands that exceed an individual's ability to cope, with various types including acute, episodic acute, and chronic stress. Environmental, organisational, and individual factors contribute to job stress, with organisational factors such as workload and leadership style being significant sources. Counterterrorism practitioners face a multitude of stressors, ranging from high job demands and political uncertainty to personal factors like limited social support and self-control. Stress experienced by counterterrorism personnel can result in serious physical and mental health problems, reduced job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover.

The study aimed to explore stress among Indonesian counterterrorism personnel. Literature review and a mixed-methods approach was employed in this study, involving both qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis. Participants included fifty-six counterterrorism professionals selected based on their track records in BNPT, BIN, BAIS, and/or Densus 88. Qualitative analysis revealed most disturbing stressors such as workload, interpersonal conflicts, and political uncertainty, while quantitative analysis tested several variables such as age, education, and employment in the field of counterterrorism. The quantitative analysis shows that the employment in security and national defence or broader intelligence fields significantly increases job stress.

The findings underscore the importance of addressing job stress to safeguard the mental and physical well-being of these professionals and to ensure operational effectiveness in countering terrorism. Organisational interventions, including providing resources for mental health support and promoting work-life balance, are crucial for mitigating job stress. Equally important are individual interventions aimed at equipping practitioners with coping mechanisms, resilience-building strategies, and new technologies (AI) to minimise factors that lead to human error. Fostering social support networks, offering flexible work arrangements, and providing comprehensive stress management training are key components of effective stress management initiatives for counterterrorism personnel.

The key implications of this study pertain to the institutional reform, mental health infrastructure (such as clinics and counselling centres), capacity-building within Indonesia's counterterrorism efforts (i.e., resilience-focused training programs for handling high-risked environments), and investments in advanced technologies (AI) by the Indonesian Intelligence Agencies. In policy making, comprehending personnel pressures can facilitate the development of policies that bolster rather than obstruct counterterrorism efforts, balancing security with human rights; consequently, the government can allocate funding, staffing, ethical guidelines, learning materials, and advanced technologies to minimise distress of personnel.

This study, despite its distinctiveness, has limitations. The study may demonstrate sampling bias since it exclusively involved recommended or high-performing practitioners. Another concern is to the generalisability of this study. The study only examined the stress and coping mechanisms of Indonesian practitioners; therefore, it cannot clarify the coping strategies of practitioners in other countries. Future research is advised on comparative analyses of stress and coping strategies among counterterrorism professionals across other cultures and contexts, as well as on best practices across countries in developing mental health systems for their counterterrorism and security personnel.

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