

More than Just Workload-Personnel's Perspective on Workload at the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee

Stegerhoek, Pablo M; van der Zande, Jesse; IJzerman, Herman; Verhagen, Evert A L M; Kuijer, P Paul F M; Bolling, Caroline

Published in:
Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine

DOI:
[10.1097/JOM.0000000000003073](https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000003073)

Publication date:
2024

License:
CC BY

Document Version:
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Stegerhoek, P. M., van der Zande, J., IJzerman, H., Verhagen, E. A. L. M., Kuijer, P. P. F. M., & Bolling, C. (2024). More than Just Workload-Personnel's Perspective on Workload at the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 66(5), 185-192. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000003073>

Copyright

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form, without the prior written permission of the author(s) or other rights holders to whom publication rights have been transferred, unless permitted by a license attached to the publication (a Creative Commons license or other), or unless exceptions to copyright law apply.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document infringes your copyright or other rights, please contact openaccess@vub.be, with details of the nature of the infringement. We will investigate the claim and if justified, we will take the appropriate steps.

OPEN

More than Just Workload—Personnel’s Perspective on Workload at the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee

A Qualitative Study

Pablo M. Stegerhoek, MSc, Jesse van der Zande, MSc, Herman IJzerman, PhD, Evert A. L. M. Verhagen, PhD, P. Paul F. M. Kuijter, PhD, and Caroline Bolling, PhD

Objectives: We investigated the perspective on workload within the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, part of the Dutch armed forces. **Methods:** This qualitative study follows an emergent design based on grounded theory principles and used semistructured interviews and focus groups with 91 Royal Netherlands Marechaussee employees. The interviews ($n = 31$) and focus groups ($n = 14$) were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by two researchers (C.B. and J.v.d.Z.) according to comparative data analysis. **Results:** Participants believed the perception of workload to be more important than the actual workload. Furthermore, participants mentioned that indirect factors, such as organizational factors and recruitment, could modulate their workload perception. **Conclusions:** The perception of workload is key within the context of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee. Modifiable factors related to the perceived workload could facilitate employee well-being without reducing the actual workload.

Keywords: workload, occupational demands, military, qualitative, police, absenteeism

Military professionals often experience extremely demanding occupational conditions.¹ The physical demands are higher than in most jobs, and military organizations are characterized by a culture

From the Amsterdam Collaboration on Health and Safety in Sports, Department of Public and Occupational Health, Amsterdam Movement Science, Amsterdam UMC, Amsterdam, the Netherlands (P.M.S., E.A.L.M.V., P.P.F.M.K., C.B.); Amsterdam UMC, University of Amsterdam, Department of Public and Occupational Health, Amsterdam Public Health Research Institute, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; Academic Medical Centre Amsterdam, the Netherlands (P.M.S., J.v.d.Z., P.P.F.M.K.); and Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, Health Care Section, Plein-Kalvermarkt-Complex, Den Haag, the Netherlands (P.M.S., J.v.d.Z., H.I.J.)

Pablo M. Stegerhoek 0000-0001-7636-8395

Jesse van der Zande 0000-0001-6694-6147

Herman IJzerman 0009-0007-1679-6663

Evert A. L. M. Verhagen 0000-0001-9227-8234

P. Paul F. M. Kuijter 0000-0002-8277-3730

Caroline Bolling 0000-0002-7607-4765

Funding sources: This study was partially funded by the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee.

Conflicts of interests: None declared.

Authors’ contributions: E.V., P.K., C.B., and J.v.d.Z. did the conception or design of the work. C.B. and J.v.d.Z. did the data collection. C.B., J.v.d.Z., P.S., and H.I. did the data analysis and interpretation. P.S. and C.B. did the drafting of the article. P.K., E.V., J.v.d.Z., and H.I. did the critical revision of the article. C.B., P.K., E.V., H.I., J.v.d.Z., and P.S. did the final approval of the version to be published.

Data availability: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from the corresponding author, P.S., with the permission of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee.

Supplemental digital contents are available for this article. Direct URL citation appears in the printed text and is provided in the HTML and PDF versions of this article on the journal’s Web site (www.joem.org).

Address correspondence to: Pablo M. Stegerhoek, MSc, De Boelelaan 1109, 1081 HV Amsterdam (p.m.stegerhoek@amsterdamumc.nl).

Copyright © 2024 The Author(s). Published by Wolters Kluwer Health, Inc. on behalf of the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (CCBY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

DOI: 10.1097/JOM.0000000000003073

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this educational activity, the learner will be better able to:

- Understand the value of direct and indirect workload-related factors such as support from superiors, shiftwork schedules, and focus on autonomy in training.
- Discuss the directly and indirectly related factors to workload in a military police environment and how these factors impact the perception of workload by personnel.

where failure is not an option.¹⁻⁴ These high physical workloads leave employees vulnerable to adverse health effects such as musculoskeletal complaints.⁵ In addition, the mental workload in the military is often extreme because of the intensity and diversity of the mental challenges.⁶ These challenges range from exposure to extreme combat situations to prolonged periods of boredom.⁷

The Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (RNLM) is one of the four armed forces services of the Dutch military. They are responsible for safeguarding national security in the Netherlands and abroad. The RNLM has the following three main tasks: border control, security and surveillance, and military police tasks. For example, as part of their duties, the RNLM deploys at strategically important places and guards people and structures of interest.⁸ While their tasks are often static and unchanging, the threat of sudden, intense physical or mental demands is always present. For example, when guarding the House of Representatives, the situation is primarily innocuous. Nevertheless, threats of violence against parliament members, the possibility of evacuation, or other potentially dangerous situations are always looming. Hence, personnel must be constantly vigilant even though nothing happens most of the time.

Any organization or company must keep its workforce ready and able to work. From a legal perspective, for example, companies in the Netherlands are legally required to ensure safe and healthy working for all employees.⁹ In this regard, understanding and managing the workload are essential.¹⁰ When examining the occupational workload, Bowling et al¹¹ (2012) signify the importance of differentiating between the actual and perceived workload. Perceived workload may differ from the actual workload depending on individual capacity.

Interestingly, there is a modest relationship between actual and perceived workload, confirming that they measure different constructs.^{11,12} While a high actual workload may not inherently lead to adverse outcomes, combined with a high perceived workload, it can result in poor job performance, counterproductive work behaviors, and dropout.¹¹ Therefore, understanding how workers experience occupational workload is vital for any organization. In military organizations, dropout rates are generally high, and the time investment to recruit by the

organization is large.¹³ Hence, military organizations may benefit from a better understanding of the perception of workload among workers, thereby preventing dropout.^{14–17}

Qualitative research methods can help understand the perceived workload in an organization.^{17,18} Employees can provide information about how they perceive and handle the workload and its related organizational factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of workload in various contexts. Such knowledge can help develop context-driven interventions further. Many studies have investigated the context for injury prevention or mental health protection interventions in sports, schools, or occupational settings.^{17,19,20} To our knowledge, no previous research exists on the perception of workload in the military context. Therefore, with this study, we explore how workers perceive and deal with the workload at the RNLM.

METHODS

Study Design

This qualitative study used semistructured individual interviews and focus groups. We followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research during this study.²¹ We followed an emergent design, meaning that data collection and analysis evolved during the study duration.²² We applied grounded theory principles, an inductive methodology often used for analyzing qualitative data.²³ We analyzed data continuously during the data collection, evolving the interview questions in response to what we found.²⁴ The RNLM Medical Ethics Committee waived the study from the approval process (DOSCO 2021002986).

Study Setting

We conducted the interviews and focus groups at the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (RNLM), a branch of the Dutch armed forces. The RNLM has a broad range of tasks that may differ from similar military branches in other countries and from other national branches. Therefore, we briefly introduce the structure of the RNLM. The RNLM consists of the following three main branches: the National Training Centre (OTC), National Tactic Command (LTC), and a staff division (STAFF)

The LTC is subdivided into 25 brigades, with 21 operational brigades and four supportive departments. These are all located in the Kingdom of the Netherlands and its constituent countries. Depending on the location of these brigades, their tasks vary widely. For example, one of the brigades at Schiphol Airport, Brigade Border Security, focuses on border control, while another brigade, high-risk security (HRB), stationed at the House of Representatives, guards and protects objects with high strategic value. Furthermore, the brigade in the province South-Holland (Brigade Zuid-Holland) is responsible for various tasks, such as customs at Rotterdam-The Hague Airport and maritime border surveillance at the Rotterdam harbor. Finally, the Brigade Special Security has similar tasks to the HRB but operates in more specialized and high-stakes environments. Most employees in the LTC branch are military personnel.

At the OTC, all recruits receive 7 months of education, including a 12-week basic military training and a 16-week theoretical education regarding their work field. After these 7 months, graduates get their initial rank: “marechaussee.” After gaining experience in the field, some personnel can enter the 53-week training to become a “wachtmeester”; this is comparable to the rank of a sergeant in the US Army. Most employees in the OTC branch are military personnel.

The STAFF consists of six managing departments that support the commander of the RNLM. They are responsible for several tasks, such as creating policy, allocating and monitoring the RNLM budget, and advising the commander on current and future operations. The staff has a larger proportion of civilian personnel than the LTC and OTC; again, most are military personnel.

Participants

The participants in this study were employees from the RNLM. In line with the maximal variation sampling method, we aimed to include people from as many divisions and ranks as was feasible. We included people who worked at the OTC, LTC, and staff. In addition, people from most military ranks and civilians not holding a military rank were interviewed or included in the focus groups. The RNLM informed potential participants about the project, arranged all contact with the participants, and planned the interviews and focus groups. All participants received an information letter and provided verbal informed consent. The interviews and focus groups were held during working hours.

In total, our study included 91 participants for the focus groups and the interviews. The focus groups had 61 participants, of which 49 were male and 12 were female. For the interviews, 22 participants were male and 8 were female. The main themes based on our analysis were *general aspects of workload, physical workload, mental workload, and indirectly related factors to workload perception*. We then divided the indirectly related factors into organizational factors, factors relating to training, and factors relating to recruitment. Figure 1 represents the interplay between these themes as a system (Fig. 1).

Data Collection

During April and June 2021, two researchers (C.B. and J.v.d.Z.) conducted 31 semistructured individual interviews and 14 focus groups with a total of 91 employees. Of the 31 individual interviews, we conducted 10 at the LTC, nine at the OTC and 12 at the STAFF. We held three focus groups at the OTC and 11 at the LTC. C.B. was not a native Dutch speaker and posed the questions in English, while J.v.d.Z. was present as a native speaker in case language barriers arose. All participants answered the questions in Dutch. All the interviews were audio recorded and followed an interview guide (Table 1). Due to COVID restrictions, we conducted the interviews online; the focus groups took place at various RNLM locations. After 27 interviews and 10 focus groups, most concepts that participants previously mentioned started to be repetitive. We continued data collection for another four interviews and focus groups to ensure the saturation of our data.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and data was analyzed through constant comparison analysis. Two authors (C.B. and J.v.d.Z.) independently coded two interviews initially, followed by a meeting to discuss initial coding. After that, three more interviews and two focus groups were also independently analyzed. Subsequently, the authors discussed their codes and merged them into categories. After reaching a consensus, one author (J.v.d.Z.) coded the remaining interviews and focus groups using the ATLAS.ti software (V.1.5.4) (<https://atlasti.com/research-hub/citing-atlas-ti-in-your-research>) while any new codes or added categories were discussed with C.B. After all interviews and focus groups were analyzed, the main concepts were presented and discussed with the other authors not involved in the data collection. We determined the main themes from the coded data after completing this process.

Background of Interviewers

C.B. is a sports physical therapist and a postdoctoral researcher interested in sports injury prevention. She is a native Portuguese speaker who guided all stages of the study due to her extensive experience with qualitative research methods and thematic analysis. J.v.d.Z., a native Dutch speaker, supported C.B. during the interviews and focus groups when language barriers arose. J.v.d.Z. also coded all data in Dutch before translating the quotes and themes to English (see

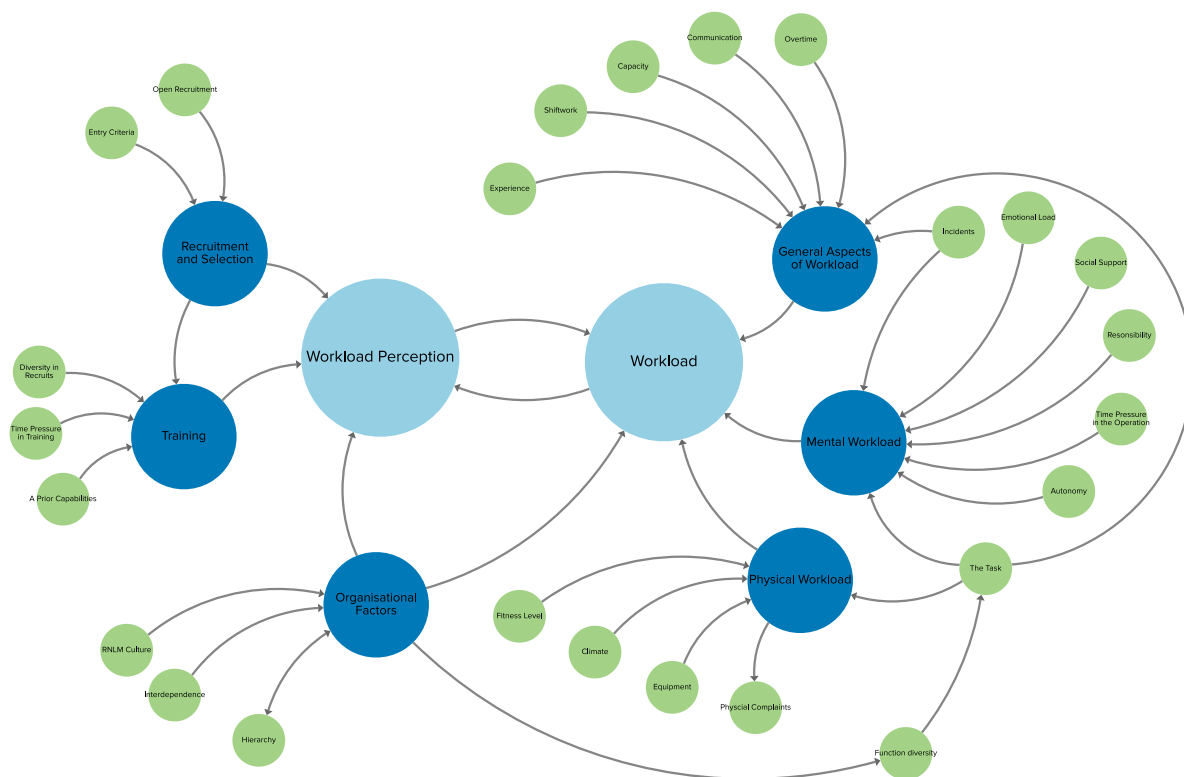


FIGURE 1. Workload and workload perception and the directly and indirectly related factors. A systems map representing the workload in relation to their, directly and indirectly, related factors at the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee. The light blue circles are the two central concepts in this study: workload and workload perception. The dark blue circles represent the general themes derived from the thematic analysis. The green circles represent the key factors that were mentioned by participants in the interviews and focus groups, in relation to the general themes.

supplementary Table 1, Supplemental Digital Content 1, which shows the COREQ checklist, <http://links.lww.com/JOM/B521>).

RESULTS

General Aspects of Workload

Participants mentioned that what matters most is not the actual workload but how it is perceived. They also stated that the workload varies wildly across the roles at the RNLN and even in the same role due to daily changes. Thus, participants presented the workload as a

multifactorial concept wherein many interrelated factors could positively or negatively influence it. Such factors may change the actual workload but also the perception of the workload. Commonly mentioned factors included incidents, limited individual capacity, emotional load, occupational activity, reliance on colleagues, lack of information, lack of communication, experience, and irregular work demands. Especially, the irregular work demands, or shiftwork, were linked to increased overall short- and long-term workload according to the participants. The distance of the commute and shift schedule can exacerbate the overall workload (Table 2).

Physical and Mental Workload

Some participants perceived their physical workload as low, while others perceived it as high; this relates to the diversity of functions at the RNLN. Participants related high physical workloads to specific job demands such as walking, driving, or prolonged static postures: *“That walking is in itself the most physical thing you do have with that vest”* (FG LTC4, Table 3). In addition, they stated that their uniform or gear could negatively influence the physical workload, environmental circumstances could do the same, and combined, the effect could be even more pronounced. Participants from the staff often perceived their physical workload as low. The diversity in physical workload was also referred to when discussing “function clusters,” with higher cluster numbers indicating a more physically demanding function. For example, special forces are often classified as Cluster 6, while all other RNLN positions are classified as Cluster 1. However, participants considered the cluster classification for some RNLN positions unsuitable for the current work demand (Table 2).

In concurrence with the findings regarding physical workload, participants also had varying perspectives on the mental workload.

TABLE 1. Focus Group and Interview Guide

1. How do you perceive the workload in your daily routine? Why?
2. Which activities/aspects of your work do you believe increase your physical load? Please provide examples. What do you believe is “physical workload”? How and why do you consider an activity more or less demanding?
3. Which activities/aspects of your work do you believe increase your mental load? Please provide examples. What do you believe is “mental workload”? How and why do you consider an activity more or less demanding?
4. How do you feel about the training/preparation that you received to perform your work? Which factors of the training influence or impact the way that you deal with mental and physical load? How do such factors influence the workload?
5. Which are the strategies that you have to modulate or change your physical and mental load in your daily routine?
6. Which are the elements of your workload—mental and physical that you would like to improve? Why? How could you do that?

TABLE 2. Codes Related to General Aspects of Workload

Codes	Quotes
Workload definition	<p>“Workload is the actual amount of work you have versus the time you have available, so you can have 120% of tasks while I only have 100% time, which is workload. (...) work pressure is what you experience, and that can, of course, be very different.” STAFF 2</p> <p>“Well, the workload is high because the workload is high. There is too much work for the people here, and therefore, people experience high work pressure. Combined with that, they have little space to determine that they do not have to do things at times.” STAFF 7</p>
Workload perception	<p>“Yes, because the workload does not change at all; only the carrying capacity of the people fits in with that.” OTC 7</p> <p>“It’s fun, or let me put it this way, I like it, but that’s personal; I’d rather be busy than having to go looking for work.” OTC 2</p>
Acceptance of the level of the workload	<p>“Is quite high, but I feel comfortable with that.” OTC 9</p> <p>“You must be able to accept that you can’t do more than you can” OTC 7</p> <p>“Yes, because the workload does not change at all; only the carrying capacity of the people fits in with that.” OTC 7</p>
Different positions have different workloads	<p>“That ends up varying by task. One is a bit easier and less loadable than the other tasks. Then you have, yes, for me, there is also a real difference in the physical and mental workload and pressure that the profession entails, so I see differences within the Marechaussee.” LTC 2</p> <p>“Then you can distinguish whether it is physical or mental, where it, of course, also differs considerably per function and, of course, also differs per rank that you perform.” OTC 8</p> <p>“When you talk about the guard, you often talk about people who come to such a post. You are only standing statically there, so that is a bit of a remote area, and when you switch to function HRB or GBB, you are talking about the busier places, the most appealing places, that’s different.” FG LTC 2</p>
Irregular work demands	<p>“So, what’s the story behind it? Suppose you are confronted with physical violence and mental challenges. There is a component that can make the work heavier in the end, or if it is a very quiet flight, then it is easy to say so.” FG LTC 1</p> <p>“Well, yes, on the one hand, it is a bit of the nature of the organization with such different tasks and different authorities. There is always a bit of a clash about where you put your scarce capacity.” Staff 7</p>
Shiftwork	<p>That requires something from your body. Your sleep rhythm is adjusted, your eating rhythm may be different, and it becomes a bit harder to exercise, so it requires some self-reliance to save yourself the moment you get into it. FG LTC 2</p> <p>The first Friday you get out of bed on time, you can go back to bed on time. You should not stay in bed until 5 o’clock, because then you will not sleep the following Monday and you will not sleep on Tuesday. FG LTC 6</p>

LTC, National Tactic Command; OTC, National Training Centre; STAFF, staff.

workload by causing exhaustion or stress. Finally, because their occupation can potentially expose the participants to challenging situations, like medical emergencies or shootings, the emotional load was also believed to be related to mental workload: “If you are in the forensic investigation in body finding and things like that, well, that does something to you and then if you are also frequently burdened, those are really heavy mental loads” (LTC 4, Table 3). Participants mentioned that having personal responsibility and autonomy could moderate the mental workload by facilitating personal ownership. Meanwhile, lacking experience and encountering incidents were believed to be potentially exacerbating factors (Table 3).

Indirectly Related Factors

Apart from the general workload, the physical workload, and the mental workload, many participants mentioned organizational factors related to actual workload and perception of workload. A recurring theme in the interviews and focus groups was how workers dealt with these factors significantly influenced the perception of the workload. We divided these factors into *organizational, training, and recruitment and selection*. Participants indicated that modulating these factors may influence the perception of the physical and mental workload.

Participants from all levels of the organization mentioned organizational factors in relation to workload. The three most common themes were RNLM culture, policy and regulation, and hierarchical structure. Another common issue was prioritizing tasks due to the high workload, resulting in stress and frustration, which, as previously mentioned, also increased the workload. In contrast, participants reported getting things done within the organization as highly motivating and rewarding (Table 4).

Many participants believed training could better prepare employees to handle the given workload and did not consider the OTC to prepare employees adequately for the operation. For example, participants mentioned that they acquired mainly “textbook” knowledge at the OTC instead of much-needed practical experience: “It is a lot of theory and almost no practice what you learn there and when you come here, even the theory that is taught there, it does not correspond to what you do here” (FG LTC 2). Simultaneously, participants acknowledged that it was impossible for the OTC to adequately train each employee for each task due to the vast range of tasks laid upon the RNLM. Some brigades fill this gap between the OTC and the operation by offering integration periods or extra formal training. However, this is not feasible for all brigades, so employees often feel that they start their work underprepared (Table 4).

Finally, the selection upon recruitment was believed to impact the workload within the organization significantly. Participants mentioned that the current criteria for selecting recruits do not reflect the operational demands, and most candidates are selected despite not having the desirable capacity to fulfill future positions. Because of unfitting recruitment criteria, enrolled recruits may not have the appropriate profile. In addition, the exact operational demands and the appropriate accompanying profile were not always known within the organization. This resulted in a heterogeneous group where some individuals’ baseline level of physical and mental skills is insufficient. For example, recruits with poor a priori physical fitness may perceive a higher workload associated with carrying heavy protective gear than recruits with high baseline physical fitness.

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study described the perception of workload among RNLM employees. Our findings show that workload is not a simple construct at the RNLM. Instead, the workload comprises various general aspects and has a mental and physical component. Furthermore, workload perception among RNLM employees depends on various indirect factors categorized to recruitment and selection, training,

They stated that a high mental workload was unfavorable, while a low mental workload, resulting in boredom, was also unfavorable. Participants also mentioned a connection between physical and mental workload; physically challenging situations could also impact the mental

Downloaded from http://joem.ww.com/ by BNDMSEPHKAV1E0UM1QIN44KJLHEZ9BSH04XM10HCWCK1AW on 11/27/2024

TABLE 3. Main Codes Related to Mental and Physical Workload

Codes	Quotes
High physical workload	<p>“But in terms of physical load capacity, you come back sweaty when you walk such a stretch. Because of that, you feel that you have walked a bit. I think that is mainly because of the stuff you have with you.” FG LTC 4</p> <p>“What I find the most physically demanding, not super heavy, but taxing, would be when we travel out and look for illegal immigrants who may be hidden in trailers. The thing is that you are busy climbing and walking back and forth very often. That would be the most physical strain we experience now.” FG LTC 7</p>
Low physical workload	<p>“The physical part, you know... it’s an office job, so it’s not heavy. So that’s just like all the other people who are in the office. That’s not physically demanding. That’s not a heavy thing, so to speak.” Staff 2</p> <p>“Yes, I have also worked in guarding and securing, and there is a much heavier physical component, in my opinion. That is a bit less here on the border, I think.” Staff 7</p>
Climate	<p>“Previously, we had the choice to wear polo shirts, but they have gone out. So now it is mandatory, even in the summer, to walk in this uniform. That’s another side of physical load capacity.” FG LTC 2</p> <p>“What I do notice is a lot of walking in combination with the heat that is quite a thing. We walk in long pants, crates that weigh 5 kilos, and on their own. I don’t want to look pathetic, but you eventually notice it sits on your back. Your body can’t cool, so it gets very tiring.” FG LTC 1</p>
Physical training/capacity	<p>“Here you are walking quite a lot. You are walking with your vest, with your belt. I think it would be beneficial if, for example, extra attention was paid to the physical aspect. You should still get time from the boss to do something about your physical development, and you also reduce your workload as a result.” FG LTC 1</p> <p>“So that’s why I think it’s necessary, and I also think it’s necessary when I look at a large part of our workforce, I sometimes question their physical employability, so to speak.” OTC 6</p>
Cluster	<p>“And linked to that, static loading is often scaled very low in how we measure the physical load capacity in function clusters. So, the boys and girls at work with me are in function cluster 0 or 1, while those special units are in 6. However, if I look at when I suffered from my body, it was mainly in the static variant with a heavy vest.” LTC 6</p> <p>“You must be much more trained for the heavy vest, a bigger weapon in combination with the static service that you have. You will also have to train your body for that before you start. So, we are all being trained function cluster 1, but that does not fit.” OTC 8</p>
Job demand (standing/walking)	<p>“Furthermore, we are only outside, walking and driving. If you are driving, you are in that armor, but that vest is not good. Then, you are supporting at a point on your back. If you are walking, you will notice at some point that everyone has a bit of a tired back.” FG LTC 2</p>
Physical load and equipment	<p>“That walking is your most physical thing with that vest.” FG LTC 4</p> <p>“I think physical strain, the vest, the weapon, everything that comes with it. It adds.” FG LTC 2</p> <p>“It presses, all hangs down, and then streaks on your shoulders.” FG LTC 4</p>
Codes (mental)	<p>Quotes</p>
High mental workload	<p>“For myself, I have always found the mental workload greater than the physical, and that is due to the work pressure, the stress that comes with it, and also how we have set up our processes.” OTC 8</p> <p>“If you are in the forensic investigation in body finding and things like that, well, that does something to you, and then if you are also frequently burdened, those are true mental loads.” LTC 4</p>
Low mental workload	<p>“I was looking outside at a tree; I didn’t see a car pass by. I started counting the tree leaves, and I was so bored. Normally, you look at people or see something nice, animals or something, but sometimes you don’t see anything.” FG LTC 1</p> <p>“It can also be mentally tough if you don’t have that much to do, and that’s where I am at night when I’m behind that camera, but that’s also because I can’t sit still and stuff. He said: ‘Also, just indicate that sometimes you think there is something too little and insufficient to do.’ FG LTC 7</p>
Connection mental and physical workload	<p>“So yes, I think that mental component is tough, especially to keep your focus to keep doing your job. And then, of course, it does not help at the moment that you are physically also burdened in a certain way that you also suffer a lot from. So it reinforces each other.” LTC 6</p> <p>“A few years ago, that was 2013, I really had physical complaints, so I also spent two weeks in the hospital. I’m almost certain it has to do with work stress.” FG LTC 1</p>
Responsibility	<p>“Then you also have colleagues who experience a lot of work pressure, as it were. This is possible because there are a lot of incidents in a row or your role and responsibility, right?” LTC 4</p>
Autonomy	<p>“The mental load is different. You are ultimately responsible for a pretty large brigade of more than 400 people” LTC 6</p> <p>“I think, our brigade commander, you can talk about with him about it well. He does not agree with how things are going at the moment. That experience has to go away to make room for new staff, and they have really been working on that, but higher up, they just say: ‘This is our rule, and that’s how we’re going to do it’. He doesn’t have much to say about that either.” FG LTC 6</p> <p>“I think if you look at the RNLN, there are 120 theses written about reorganization, which is impossible as it is happening now, and yet we still do it. I think it would take away a lot, yes, entrepreneurship, freedom, space, efficiency if you took away those rules without us acting very crazy.” LTC 1</p>
Experience	<p>“I recently had a night shift, and then we had an arrest with a boy who had never been arrested. Then you are quite busy because no one can come and help you anymore. I will do this for you. You have to explain to that boy exactly how to do it and why. It’s also nice that you give a bit of a background on why they’re doing something. That in itself makes it quite busy.” FG LTC 7</p> <p>“So, I have been able to pick up my experience in the 5 yr I have been in the operation. That also means that I was not fully versed in being a manager in the beginning. You have to learn that being an assistant public prosecutor, being a police officer, and there is a build-up in that. Hey, and after 2 yr, I could work fairly independently when I should have been able to do that on day 1.” OTC 8</p>
Incidents	<p>“You can stand statically on the street corner for 10 yr, and at once, you have to go from 0 to 1000% because there is some attack that you must stop. So yes, I think that mental component is tough, especially to keep your focus to keep doing your job.” LTC 6</p>

LTC, National Tactic Command; OTC, National Training Centre; STAFF, staff.

and the organization. Moreover, according to RNLN workers, it is not only the actual workload that can result in adverse outcomes, such as sick leave, dropout, or mental health problems. Instead, the perception

of the workload through directly and indirectly related factors and how workers handle the given factors seems to be an essential part of dealing with the workload.

Downloaded from http://journals.lww.com/joem by BHD/MSF-PHKav12Eoum1tQIN4a+kJLHEZ9bsHio4XM10hCwCX1AW nYOp/llQH3D3D00dRv7TYSF14C3V3C1y0abg9QZXdg5j2mWIZLel= on 11/27/2024

TABLE 4. Main Codes Related to Indirectly Related Factors to Workload

Codes	Quotes
Low level of education	<p>“That initially came out of the fact that we are severely below par with all kinds that came with all kinds of risks. So, safety risks, but also, yes, risks in the field of professional knowledge.” LTC 9</p> <p>“But they don’t get any training in how to lead, for example, when in fact they are expected to do so as a kind of security and surveillance unit. So that’s one thing that I think they’re actually not being prepared enough for at the OTC to be able to do that.” LTC 3</p>
Diversity is a challenge	<p>“I expect the OTC to train us so that we can work in all positions, mentally and with knowledge. Of course, one is fitter than the other; but I expect anyway, with the knowledge we get, that we can work wherever we are put.” FG OTC 2</p> <p>“But the same man that stamps the passports goes to St. Maarten for 3 months, or he is suddenly between the riots say if there is something, so I think we have to differentiate there.” OTC 7</p>
Lack of applied knowledge	<p>“They also do not know how it goes in practice, and they then have to explain with instruction booklets from 10 yr ago how someone should tap an arrest, which is no longer of this time. We don’t do it that way, so they all get outdated training because those instructors no longer know how it works.” FG LTC 7</p> <p>“Basically, it’s not right. Basically, what we teach it is in some ways outdated.” FG OTC 3</p> <p>“The training center focuses on things you never actually use in the workplace. I have an idea. You learn things there; legislation is focused on, and in the end, that’s fun, and you spend six months doing that.” FG LTC 4</p>
Gap between practice and education	<p>“The main activities you do here are not taught there.” FG LTC 4</p> <p>“It is a lot of theory and almost no practice what you learn there, and when you come here, even the theory taught there, it does not correspond to what you do here.” FG LTC 2</p>
Lack of clarity/direction	<p>“On the other hand, it would help us a lot if there were just a clear line in the organization, who has what responsibility, what authority, that we just start working with decision notes, that we record decisions, that we just professionalize all that a step further.” Staff 7</p> <p>“Now, a little bit to understand how the structure works here in the sense of if I want to change things or if you want to get change done. There are so many players, and no one can really tell you exactly how to do it now or how to do it now.” OTC 9</p>
Military rules/policies	<p>“We are also dependent on chain partners; we have mandatory shopping, so we can’t just go to the MediaMarkt to get computers; no, we have to do that at a defense company. Well, viciousness at its best is just bureaucracy, only problems, so that doesn’t help achieve successes or solve problems either.” LTC 7</p> <p>“In terms of security requirements that you meet, but also with all kinds of procurement problems. So, we see in the military that we are going to break the system, and now we are going to make progress, and no, we are going to buy that stuff there, and lawsuits are being filed, and we are 5 yr back in time. So, you can say very boldly I want to have that power, but in the end, laws and regulations just determine the procedures.” LTC 4</p>
Structure/hierarchy	<p>“That also stops once, and it is very strange that you always have to deviate from the existing processes because, apparently, those processes do not help the work. That’s just how I experience it from my perspective, so I would much rather that you look at the organization from the work and build it on it instead of looking at the work from the organization.” FG LTC 4</p> <p>“Yes, in the organization, because the closer you are to the operation, the better you also have insight into what would be needed. Then that requires certain knowledge about how those processes work and what is possible” FG LTC 2</p> <p>What you would like is that our managers no longer want to influence every move on a board like a chess player. Still, more output-oriented, much less leader-centric and with that, you stimulate entrepreneurship lower in the organization. I am convinced that it is bursting with energy, and the managers themselves are the only obstacle to releasing that energy. Staff 3</p>
Pressure to recruit a high number of employees	<p>“Now we have to say if I have 100 places, 100 people will train, so every person I lose in the training is a problem. So, I can’t set such high standards, and we’re quite worried about the people who go into the operation because I think of the 100 people we get in, 10% are really unfit anyway. So, then we already have 10% problems, and if we can prevent that with selection.” OTC 7</p>
Entry-level of students	<p>“So it’s also very much in the selection like, ok, what kind of people do you bring in? And I think we’ve, for a very long time, focused on, well, everyone is welcome; the only question is whether that’s still realistic and do we still need to bring in a certain basic physical and mental competence.” LTC6</p>

LTC, National Tactic Command; OTC, National Training Centre; STAFF, staff.

More than Workload

Military organizations are often characterized by high workloads, which can lead to high attrition rates, injuries, and mental health complaints.^{1,2,3} However, our findings suggest that the workload per se may not be the determining factor in these adverse outcomes. Participants in this study mentioned that perception of workload might be more important than the actual workload itself. This concurs with Bowling et al¹¹ (2012), who stated that the way the workload is perceived has a stronger relation to adverse outcomes such as poor job performance, counterproductive work behaviors, and dropout than the actual workload.

In organizations such as the military, a given task and the workload related to completing the task are often unmodifiable. However, factors influencing the perceived workload associated with the task may be modifiable. Hence, the perceived workload may be mediated by modifying factors indirectly related to workload. For example, participants in the current study reported that support from superiors was

related to lower perceived workloads. This is in line with research from Woo et al²⁶ (2021), who showed that support from superiors is related to better mental well-being in a military population. Furthermore, support from superiors is one factor that seems easily modifiable in a hierarchical environment. Therefore, organizations may aim to improve the mental well-being and thereby the perceived workload by adjusting the support employees receive from their superiors, independently of the actual workload.¹¹

Shiftwork is another example of where the actual workload is largely unmodifiable. While shiftwork may be necessary for many organizations, its adverse effects are omnipresent. Folkard et al²⁷ (2004) showed that the risk of occupational accidents increases from early to late shifts and increases further from late shifts to night shifts. In addition, shiftwork that includes night shifts negatively impacts circadian rhythms in workers.²⁸ This can result in poorer overall sleep quality and an increased risk for serious health problems like diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In some cases, shiftwork also increases the risk for

Downloaded from http://jocem.ww.com/joem by BNDMSEPHKav1ZEoum1IQIN4a+kJLHEZ9bsHio4XM0hCwCX1AW nYOp/llQhD3i3D00dRv7ITV5F14C3V3C1y0ab9g9ZQZdgGj2mWIZleI= on 11/27/2024

developing sleep disorders.^{28,29} Regardless of these consequences, shiftwork is often inevitable, so many efforts have been made to aid workers in handling shiftwork. Changing the order of shifts,³⁰ viewing bright lights before driving home,³¹ or implementing power naps³² are possible aids regarding shiftwork. These interventions could be used to modulate the perception of workload without changing the actual workload. Thereby enabling workers to handle the demands that shiftwork poses without ceasing shiftwork altogether. Future research should investigate these and other interventions in military and police organizations.

Off to a Running Start

Recruitment and selection, as well as training, were often mentioned in relation to the workload at the RNLM. Recruitment aims to match the employee to a job that fits their capabilities, so the recruiter has a “gatekeeper” function within an organization.^{33,34} Where recruitment and selection focus on identifying the potential of future employees, training is where that potential is further cultivated. The Dutch Military addresses the physical recruitment, selection, and training through “function clusters”; these clusters range from one (light physical demands, e.g., border control) to six (very high physical demands, e.g., special forces) given to all military roles, indicating the physical requirements necessary to occupy a specific military position.³⁵ However, as participants in the current study indicated, not all jobs are assigned the proper function cluster, leading to mismatches between capacity and demands.

Most of the physical workload at the RNLM consists of static or unidirectional load-carrying tasks. Workers stand, sit, drive, and walk extensively during their shifts, mostly while carrying or wearing protective gear. For many participants in the study, this is the leading cause of physical complaints. Prolonged static loading is known to be related to musculoskeletal complaints in police populations, with prevalence rates of low back pain of up to 62%.³⁶ In the current study, participants related their physical complaints because of static load to a lack of physical training. A systematic review by Knapik et al³⁷ (2012) deems progressive strength training, specifically focused on load carriage, necessary to avoid injuries due to static loading in a military population. Logically, physical training is often common practice in the military and, by extension, at the RNLM. However, given the misclassification of the function clusters indicated by participants in the current study, workers lack an organizational, physical standard adequately related to their physical demands. Therefore, aligning the function cluster classification with the occupational demands may incentivize workers to attain a certain physical standard, and thereby, the RNLM may improve the perception of the workload without altering the actual workload.

The function clusters classify positions in the Dutch Military according to physical demands. However, in military police occupations, mental demands may be more prominent.³⁸ Participants in the current study also indicated that employees are often not mentally prepared to do their jobs when they leave the OTC. This results in newly appointed workers not yet equipped to handle the specific task demands of various brigades. The training not being in line with the actual workload has been argued by police officers in previous studies.³⁹ More specifically related to the RNLM, Birzer (2003)⁴⁰ argued that much of the police training is too militaristic, which can hinder the learning process. As an alternative, White and Escobar (2008)^{40,41} offered a self-directed learning method specifically developed for adults, focused on autonomy. In concurrence with Stegerhoeck et al⁴² (2023), our study within this population shows that more autonomy is related to lower perceived workloads. Consequently, increased emphasis on increasing autonomy in the learning approach may facilitate the development of cognitive and mental skills in RNLM personnel. It may thereby better prepare workers for tasks specifically related to the military policing occupation.

Strengths and Limitations

We made various efforts to facilitate the robustness of our results. First, we ensured that we interviewed diverse participants regarding demographics and positions within the organization. In addition to that, we included employees from all branches of the RNLM, which resulted in a variety of perspectives. Second, two researchers independently coded, improving our data’s reliability. Third, our sample size of 91 participants was large in relation to previous qualitative studies and covered most of the organization’s functions from different hierarchical levels.⁴³

Because of the broad nature of the tasks of RNLM employees, the transferability of our findings to other military or police organizations may be limited. However, part of the strength of the military lies in its uniformity, so that generalizations may be warranted in this context. Furthermore, there may have been language barriers in the interviews. We attempted to resolve this by allowing the participants to answer the questions in Dutch and having a native speaker present during all interviews and focus groups to clarify any language issues. The interview and focus group transcripts were independently coded, and the authors not involved in the coding process critically appraised the analysis. Finally, we did not differentiate between military and civilian personnel. Given that these two groups potentially face some distinct challenges within the organization, distinguishing between the groups might have enhanced the transferability of the results.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on our participants’ perspective in the current study, the actual workload alone is not the main obstacle for RNLM personnel handling their occupational demands. Instead, the perception of workload and its directly and indirectly related factors seems of greater significance when understanding the workload in this context. Directly and indirectly related factors to workload could also be helpful for military organizations wanting to modify workload perception without changing the actual workload. Adjustments in shiftwork structure and support from superiors can directly influence workload perception. The proper classification of occupational demands for each job and a greater focus on autonomy in training could indirectly influence workload perception among RNLM personnel.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We used the *Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ)* checklist as a framework for this study.

REFERENCES

- dos Santos Bunn P, de Oliveira Meireles F, de Souza Sodré R, Rodrigues AI, da Silva EB. Risk factors for musculoskeletal injuries in military personnel: a systematic review with meta-analysis. *Int Arch Occup Environ Health* 2021; 94:1173–1189.
- McGraw LK, Tumer BS, Stotts NA, Dracup KA. A review of cardiovascular risk factors in US military personnel. *J Cardiovasc Nurs* 2008;23:338–344.
- Lennox GM, Wood PM, Schram B, et al. Non-modifiable risk factors for stress fractures in military personnel undergoing training: a systematic review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2021;19:422.
- Molloy JM, Pendergrass TL, Lee IE, Chervak MC, Hauret KG, Rhon DI. Musculoskeletal injuries and United States Army readiness part I: overview of injuries and their strategic impact. *Mil Med* 2020;185(9–10):e1461–e1471.
- Dijkema CI, Bekkers M, Spek B, Lucas C, Stuijver M. Epidemiology and financial burden of musculoskeletal injuries as the leading health problem in the military. *Mil Med* 2020;185(3–4):e480–e486.
- Langston V, Gould M, Greenberg N. Culture: what is its effect on stress in the military? *Mil Med* 2007;172:931–935.
- Mæland B, Brunstad P, Mæland B. *Enduring Military Boredom: From 1750 to the Present*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan; 2009.
- Defensie. Royal Netherlands Marechaussee Organisation. 25–10-22, 2022. Available at: <https://english.defensie.nl/organisation/marechaussee>. Accessed October 25, 2022.

9. Zaken MvS. Wat staat er in de Arboret? 2023. Available at: <https://www.arboportal.nl/onderwerpen/arboretgeving/wat-staat-er-in-de-arboret>. Accessed September 25, 2023
10. Hultén A-M, Bjerkeli P, Holmgren K. Work-related stress and future sick leave in a working population seeking care at primary health care centres: a prospective longitudinal study using the WSQ. *BMC Public Health* 2022;22:1–12.
11. Bowling NA, Kirkendall C. Workload: A review of causes, consequences, and potential interventions. In Houdmont J, Leka S, Sinclair RR (eds.), *Contemporary occupational health psychology: Global perspectives on research and practice*. 2012;2:221–238. Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119942849.ch13>.
12. Dwyer DJ, Ganster DC. The effects of job demands and control on employee attendance and satisfaction. *J Organ Behav* 1991;12:595–608.
13. Bush NE, Sheppard SC, Fantelli E, Bell KR, Reger MA. Recruitment and attrition issues in military clinical trials and health research studies. *Mil Med* 2013;178:1157–1163.
14. Wardle SL, Greeves JP. Mitigating the risk of musculoskeletal injury: a systematic review of the most effective injury prevention strategies for military personnel. *J Sci Med Sport* 2017;20:S3–S10.
15. Zamorski MA. Suicide prevention in military organizations. *Int Rev Psychiatry* 2011;23:173–180.
16. Schreiber M, McEnany GP. Stigma, American military personnel and mental health care: challenges from Iraq and Afghanistan. *J Ment Health* 2015;24:54–59.
17. Bolling C, Barboza SD, Van Mechelen W, Pasman HR. Letting the cat out of the bag: athletes, coaches and physiotherapists share their perspectives on injury prevention in elite sports. *Br J Sports Med* 2020;54:871–877.
18. Bolling C, Van Mechelen W, Pasman HR, Verhagen E. Context matters: revisiting the first step of the ‘sequence of prevention’ of sports injuries. *Sports Med* 2018;48:2227–2234.
19. Kyndt E, Berghmans I, Dochy F, Bulckens L. ‘Time is not enough.’ Workload in higher education: a student perspective. *High Educ Res Dev* 2014;33:684–698.
20. Carayon P, Gurses AP. Nursing workload and patient safety—a human factors engineering perspective. In: Hughes RG, ed. *Patient safety and quality: An evidence-based handbook for nurses*. Rockville, MD: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US); 2008.
21. Booth A, Hannes K, Harden A, et al. COREQ (Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies). In: Moher D, Altman DG, Schulz KF, Simera I, Wager E, eds. *Guidelines for Reporting Health Research: A User’s Manual*. Wiley: 2014;214–226.
22. Pailthorpe BC. Emergent Design. In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. 2017:1–2. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0081>.
23. Jørgensen, U. Grounded theory: Methodology and theory construction. *Int Encycl Soc Behav Sci* 2001;1:6396–6399.
24. Strauss A, Corbin J. *Grounded theory methodology: an overview*. 1994.
25. Ballenger-Browning KK, Schmitz KJ, Rothacker JA, Hammer PS, Webb-Murphy JA, Johnson DC. Predictors of burnout among military mental health providers. *Mil Med* 2011;176:253–260.
26. Woo SY, Kim H, Kim B, Ahn H, Jang B, Park E. Support From superiors reduces depression in Republic of Korea military officers. *BMJ Mil Health* 2021;167:378–382.
27. Folkard S, Åkerstedt T. Trends in the risk of accidents and injuries and their implications for models of fatigue and performance. *Aviat Space Environ Med* 2004;75:A161–A167.
28. Åkerstedt T, Wright KP. Sleep loss and fatigue in shift work and shift work disorder. *Sleep Med Clin* 2009;4:257–271.
29. Axelsson J, Åkerstedt T, Kecklund G, Lowden A. Tolerance to shift work—how does it relate to sleep and wakefulness? *Int Arch Occup Environ Health* 2004;77:121–129.
30. Bamba CL, Whitehead MM, Sowden AJ, Akers J, Petticrew MP. Shifting schedules: the health effects of reorganizing shift work. *Am J Prev Med* 2008;34:427–434. e30.
31. Weisgerber DM, Nikol M, Mistlberger RE. Driving home from the night shift: a bright light intervention study. *Sleep Med* 2017;30:171–179.
32. Dore E, Guerero D, Wallbridge T, et al. Sleep is the best medicine: how rest facilities and EnergyPods can improve staff wellbeing. *Future Healthc J* 2021;8:e625–e628.
33. Newell S. Recruitment and selection. *Managing human resources: Personnel management in transition* 2005;115–147.
34. French R, Rumbles S. Recruitment and selection. In: *Leading, Managing and Developing People*. London: CIPD Publications; 2010:169–190.
35. Test D. Uitleg per functiecluster van defensie. 2023. Available at: <https://defensiestest.nl/functieclusters/>. Accessed May 30, 2023
36. Paudel L, Manandhar N, Joshi SK. Work-related musculoskeletal symptoms Among traffic police: a review. *Int J Occup Saf Health* 2018;8:4–12.
37. Knapik JJ, Harman EA, Steelman RA, Graham BS. A systematic review of the effects of physical training on load carriage performance. *J Strength Cond Res* 2012;26:585–597.
38. Abdollahi MK. Understanding police stress research. *J Forensic Psychol Pract* 2002;2:1–24.
39. Bayley DH, Bittner E. Learning the skills of policing. *Law and Contemporary Problems* 1984;47:35–59.
40. Birzer ML. The theory of andragogy applied to police training. *Policing* 2003;26:29–42.
41. White MD, Escobar G. Making good cops in the twenty-first century: emerging issues for the effective recruitment, selection and training of police in the United States and abroad. *Int Rev Law Comput Technol* 2008;22(1–2):119–134.
42. Stegerhoek PM, van der Zande J, Bolling C, IJzerman H, Verhagen EA, Kuijper PPF. Royal Netherlands Marechaussee personnel’s self-perceived occupational demand profiles: a latent profile analysis shows the “good” versus the “bad”. *Mil Med* 2023;188(11-12):e3575–e3582.
43. Boddy CR. Sample size for qualitative research. *Qual Mark Res Int J* 2016;19:426–432.