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# Impact of Work on the Well-Being of Police Officers and Firefighters

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**Abstract.** Work is one of the most important spheres of human functioning and has a significant impact on individual overall well-being. The purpose of this study is to assess the positive and negative impact of the work of police officers and firefighters on their well-being in different spheres of life. In particular, the study examines the relationship between the type of occupation and the elements that generate a feeling of well-being, issues relating to a positive influence of work on different spheres of life, as well as the relationship between the length of service and the influence of work on health. A hedonistic model of the quality of life has been assumed. The study encompassed 499 Polish officers serving in operational positions, including 195 police officers and 304 firefighters. For cognitive applications, a modified scale of satisfaction with various aspects of life, and a calculated potential positivity rate for work in the field of life, were used for the assessment of subjective well-being in relation to work. The results showed that the impact of work on well-being in the social, economic, and health spheres, and in relation to self-esteem, was determined by the nature of that work. Compared to police officers, firefighters were more positive in their assessment of the impact of work on their private life and overall well-being. Among the police officers, work was considered to have a negative impact on health, leisure and economic well-being. The results obtained from the group of firefighters are explained in accordance with the "top - down" model, and those from the group of police officers on the lines of the "bottom - up" model, in Czapiński's onion theory of happiness. Practical implications for health and leisure are discussed.

**Keywords:** job-related quality of life, subjective well-being, work - life balance, uniformed officers, positivity, health

## Introduction

A good life is one with an appropriate quality of life. According to the hedonist model of quality of life, psychological well-being is a subjective cognitive and emotional evaluation of life, including emotional reactions and evaluative judgments of satisfaction and contentment in its various fields. Work is one of the most important spheres of human functioning and has a significant impact on overall well-being<sup>1</sup>. The growth of resources and well-being in one area can contribute to a flourishing in other aspects of life. This is especially so for high-risk occupations such as police officers or firefighters. The impact of work on the private lives of

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<sup>1</sup> Diener E, Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and proposal for a national index. *American Psychologist*, 2000, Vol. 55, pp. 34-43.

officers has already been the subject of academic studies<sup>2</sup>. The majority of research focused on the effects of occupational stress on the health of officers and the work-family relationship. To date, not enough attention has been paid to the positive impact of work on various aspects of life. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the positive and negative impact of work on different aspects of the well-being of police officers and firefighters.

Subjective psychological well-being consists of two dimensions: emotional and cognitive. The emotional dimension reflects the balance of emotional experience with the proportions of positive and negative affects being important. A study by Fredrickson and Losada<sup>3</sup> observed that a flourishing and broadening of an individual's resources does not happen when there is a straightforward balance between positive and negative events, but only when the ratio exceeds three positive to a single negative. This is what initiates the spiral of positivity with consequent benefits. The cognitive dimension of well-being includes evaluative assessment of past, current and future life. According to Czapinski's onion theory of happiness<sup>4</sup>, the shallowest layer of well-being is the dimension of partial satisfaction (the degree to which an individual feels satisfied with particular areas of life) and current emotional balance. This dimension, compared to the deeper dimensions, general subjective well-being and the will to live, gives rise to the most realistic assessments but has greater instability under the influence of situational factors.

The onion theory of happiness includes two models<sup>5</sup>. The "top - down" model shows that the will to live and general well-being have an effect on satisfaction in various areas of life. According to the "bottom - up" model, happiness is the sum of partial satisfaction. Spheres of life important to subjective well-being can be classified as social (interpersonal relationships in the family and relationships with colleagues), economic (satisfaction with financial situation and living conditions), health and environmental (satisfaction with the situation in the region and the country) and those related to self-esteem (satisfaction with own achievements, prospects for the future and leisure opportunities). The report *Diagnoza Społeczna 2011* showed that Poles were more satisfied with their social well-being than economic well-being, health and well-being associated with self-esteem<sup>6</sup>.

Work is a very important element of human activity. The study based on data from *Diagnoza Społeczna 2011* shows that police officers, firefighters, military, customs officers and guards are satisfied with their work and their achievements. Stability of employment and satisfaction with wages was declared by more than 60% of them. The negative aspects related to officers' working hours and prospects for the future. In these, the percentages of satisfied officers are 12% and 25% respectively.

The service of police officers and firefighters, despite the differing content of tasks, can be classified as high-risk occupations. Police work is more restrictive in nature, as a consequence of their role in law enforcement and public protection. A firefighter's work is predominantly centred on rescue operations. Perceived negative aspects of their work included working shifts, participation in traumatic events, fatigue, lack of time to maintain good physical condition and not enough time for family and friends. The most important operational and organizational irritations were bureaucracy, shortage of staff and the use of non-objective

<sup>2</sup> m.in. Wiciak I, Baranowska M, Wybrane patologie społeczne. Uwarunkowania, przejawy, profilaktyka. Szczytno: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Policji w Szczytnie 2011, pp. 105-126.

<sup>3</sup> Fredrickson B.L, Losada M.F, Positive affect and the complex dynamics of human flourishing. *American Psychologist*, 2005, Vol. 60, pp. 678-686.

<sup>4</sup> Czapiński J, *op.cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Czapiński J, Sulek A, Szumlacik T, Individual quality of life. Social Diagnosis 2011. Objective and subjective quality of life in Poland. *Contemporary Economics*, 2011, Vol. 5, 3, pp. 113-187.



criteria for evaluation of officers (favoritism). The least frequently mentioned was that occupational stress limited social life<sup>7</sup>.

Operational stress, resulting from the ongoing task, and traumatic stress should be considered risks in these occupations, but the daily organizational stress has the strongest impact on the well-being of officers. Organizational stressors lower job satisfaction in police officers and firefighters far more than trauma symptomatology<sup>8</sup>. Longitudinal studies show that this effect is also visible among police officers starting work [police recruits]<sup>9</sup>.

Work-family conflict is caused mainly by requirements relating to working time. This reinforces exhaustion and depersonalization, and lowers the sense of personal achievement<sup>10</sup>. Similar conclusions have been presented by Hall et al<sup>11</sup>, who also noted that this is a feedback effect. This means that the professional requirements result in emotional exhaustion and then intensify the work-family conflict. For firemen's wives, work-family conflict, is associated with shift work, transference of their response to emergencies and traumatic events to the family, and brotherhood<sup>12</sup>. According to the firefighters themselves, stress, long hours and difficulties with sleep, cause them to feel overloaded in the parental role and have a lower satisfaction with fatherhood. Work fatigue also makes children's behaviour arouse their widespread displeasure and impatience<sup>13</sup>.

Occupational stress, and the long-term effects of the participation of police officers and firefighters in traumatic events, lower their quality of life dependent on their physical and mental health and reduce their vitality<sup>14 15</sup>. A Dutch health assessment of professional and voluntary firefighters showed the greatest deficits were in somatic health. A quarter of firefighters had inadequate physical fitness. An increased risk of cardiovascular disease is indicated by excessive weight, elevated systolic blood pressure and smoking (57%, 23% and 22% of firefighters). Psychological markers were far less important: 9% felt the symptoms of anxiety, 7% symptoms of depression and 4% post traumatic stress symptoms<sup>16</sup>.

There are many studies showing the negative effects of occupational stress on the health of officers and work-family relationships. However, there is no research showing the positive effects of working in these high-risk occupations. The aim of this study is to assess the

<sup>7</sup> McCreary D.R, Thompson M.M, Development of two reliable and valid measures of stressors in policing: The Operational and Organizational Police Stress Questionnaires. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 2006, Vol. 13, pp. 494–518.

<sup>8</sup> Brough P, Comparing the influence of traumatic and organizational stressors on the psychological health of police, fire and ambulance officers. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 2004, Vol. 11, pp. 227-244.

<sup>9</sup> Huddleston L, Stephens C, Paton D, An evaluation of traumatic and organizational experiences on the psychological health of New Zealand police recruits. *Work*, 2007, Vol. 28, pp. 199-207.

<sup>10</sup> Martinussen M, Richardsen A.M, Burke R.J, Job demands, job resources, and burnout among police officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2007, Vol. 35, pp. 239–249.

<sup>11</sup> Hall G.B, Dollard M.F, Tuckey M.R, Winefield A.H, Thompson B.M, Job demands, work-family conflict, and emotional exhaustion In police officers: A longitudinal test of competing theories. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 2010, Vol. 83, pp. 237–250.

<sup>12</sup> Regehr C, Dimitropoulos G, Bright E, George S, Henderson J, Behind the brotherhood: rewards and challenges for wives of firefighters. *Family Relations*, 2005, Vol. 54, pp. 423–435.

<sup>13</sup> Shreffler K.M, Meadows M.P, Davis K.D, Firefighting and fathering: work-family conflict, parenting stress, and satisfaction with parenting and child behavior. *Fatering*, 2011, Vol. 9, pp. 169-188.

<sup>14</sup> Martinussen M, Richardsen A.M, Burke R.J, Job demands, job resources, and burnout among police officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2007, Vol. 35, pp. 239–249.

<sup>15</sup> Slotje P, Twisk J.W.R, Smidt N, Huizink A.C, Witteveen A.B, van Mechelen W, Smid T, Health-related quality of life of firefighters and police officers 8.5 years after the air disaster in Amsterdam. *Quality of Life Research*, 2007, Vol. 16, pp. 239-252.

<sup>16</sup> Plat M-C.J, Frings-Drese M.H.W, Sluiter J.K, Diminished health status in firefighters. *Ergonomics*, 2012, Vol. 55, pp. 1119–1122.

positive and negative impact on the personal well-being of firefighters and police officers. Firstly, the study searched for differences related to the impact of work in association with each profession. Secondly, it estimated the potential positive effect of work on other areas of the life of firefighters and police officers. Thirdly, it estimated the impact of work on health, depending on length of service.

### Method

The study included 499 Polish officers in basic operational roles (Pomeranian region), including 195 police officers and 304 firefighters. In this group there were 25 women (police officers only). Most of the officers were married (71%) and had children (66%). The study distinguished four categories of length of service. In the group of police officers, 27% were probationers (under 3 years service), 13% were in the group with 4 to 10 years service and 14% were from 11 to 15 years service. The remaining 46% of police officers in the study had more than 15 years service and had therefore acquired pension rights. In the group of firefighters, 22% had professional experience up to 3 years, 30% from 4 to 10 years, and 19% from 11 to 15 years. The remaining 26% had more than 15 years service. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

For the assessment of subjective well-being in relation to work (cognitive dimension) the study used a modified scale of satisfaction with aspects of life<sup>17</sup>. Respondents assessed the extent to which work affected different aspects of life: social (relations in marriage, relationships with children, relationships with colleagues and friends), health and economic (financial situation) and in relation to self-esteem (achievement in life, prospects for the future, potential for leisure activities). It used a scale with four levels of response from 1 - "very negative" to 4 - "very positive". It was possible to choose "not applicable". For this reason, the total of responses of the groups differed in respect of the various fields related to well-being (range 327-477). The results were recoded into two categories: the positive and negative effects of work on the subjective well-being in particular fields of life.

A potential positivity index of work was constructed, representing the ratio of positive to negative indications in each aspect of life. The scope of the index is from 0 (100% negative indications) to 100 (100% of positive responses in the group). The value of 1.00 means that half of the officers made a positive and half negative indications. Just as with affective positivity<sup>18</sup>, a value above 3 indicates an appropriate environment for well-being to flourish.

Differences in subjective well-being in relation to work in two occupational groups were verified using the  $\chi^2$  test.  $\Phi$  is a measure of the coefficient of correlation between the quality characteristics (Table 2 x 2), as is the Cramer's V (in the multi-way tables).  $\Phi$  coefficient and Cramer's V of 0.1 and 0.3, and above 0.5 indicates respectively low, moderate, and large dimensions of impact<sup>19</sup>.

### Results

Impact of work on functioning in the social, economic, health spheres, and in relation to self-esteem, was determined by occupation. Detailed results are presented in Table 1.

<sup>17</sup> Rada Monitoringu Społecznego. Diagnoza społeczna, kwestionariusze 2005. *Electronic source:* <http://www.diagnoza.com/10.01.2006>, accessed: 25.01.2013

<sup>18</sup> Fredrickson B. L., Losada M. F., positive affect and the complex dynamics of human flourishing. *American Psychologist*, 2005, Vol. 60, pp.678-686.

<sup>19</sup> King B.M., Minium E.W., *Statystyka dla psychologów i pedagogów*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2009.

**Table 1. Subjective well-being in different spheres of life – differences among police officers and firefighters**

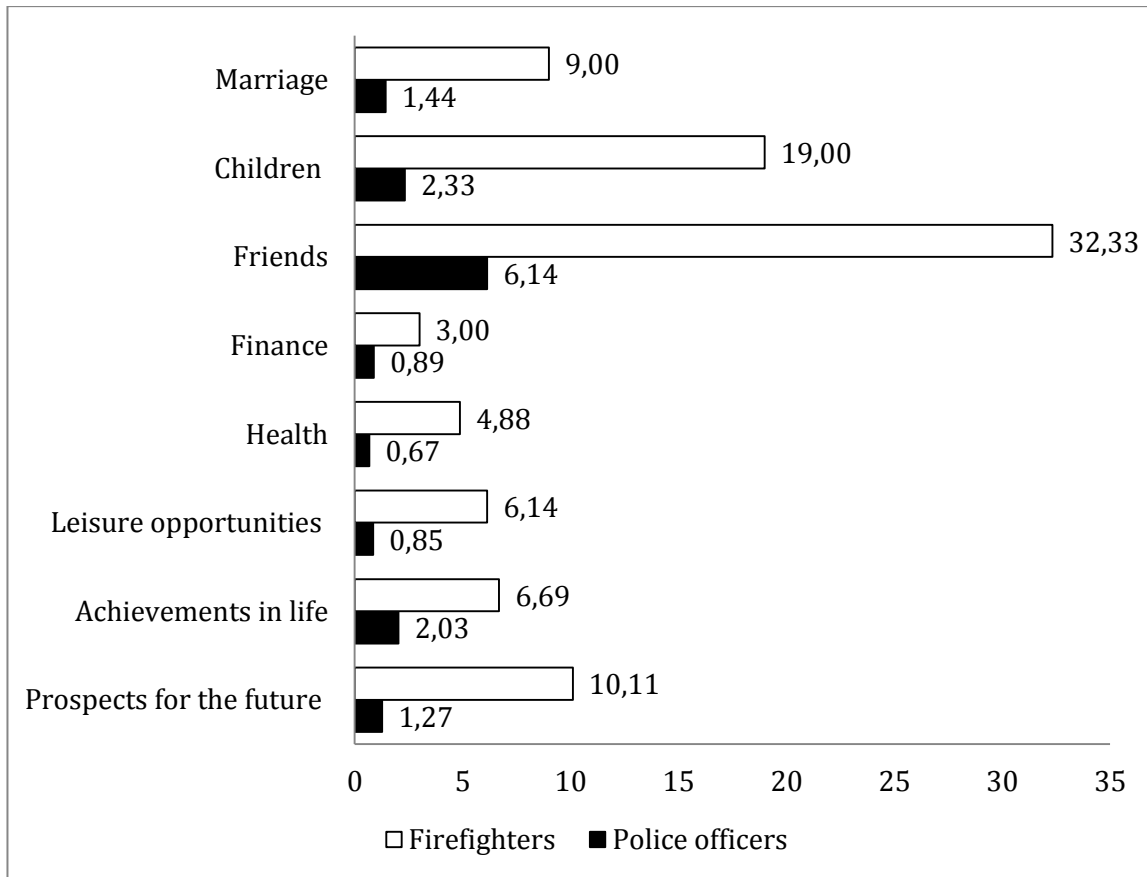
Well-being	Police officers		Firefighters		$\chi^2$
	N	P	N	P	
Social well-being					
Marriage	41	59	10	90	40,56*
Children	30	70	5	95	39,09*
Friends	14	86	3	97	19,99*
Economical well-being	53	47	25	75	36,14*
Health	60	40	17	83	91,88*
Self-assessment related well-being					
Leisure opportunities	54	46	14	86	77,61*
Achievements in life	33	67	13	87	34,30*
Prospects for the future	44	56	9	91	81,09*

Note: \*  $p < 0,001$ , N = negative impact, P = positive impact

The impact of work on marital relations, and relations with children, were more positive among firefighters than among police officers (moderate effect, size  $\phi = 0.35$ ). Similar differences were observed in the groups of officers with respect to relations with colleagues and friends (small effect, size  $\phi = 0.21$ ). Economic well-being depended on their profession. The firefighters' response was more favourable than that of police officers in respect of the impact of work on their financial situation (small effect, size  $\phi = 0.28$ ). Similarly, satisfaction with the impact of work on health was more highly assessed by firefighters than police officers (moderate effect, size  $\phi = 0.45$ ). Well-being in respect of self-esteem is related to satisfaction in their own achievements, prospects for the future and opportunities for leisure activities. Firefighters, compared to the police, were more satisfied with the impact of work on their own achievements (small effect, size  $\phi = 0.27$ ). They also evaluated more positively in terms of the impact of work on their prospects for the future (moderate effect, size  $\phi = 0.41$ ). Leisure opportunities were also determined to have a moderate effect ( $\phi = 0.42$ ) in this professional group.

In conclusion, the firefighters had better subjective psychological well-being in relation to the job than police officers. The strongest differences affecting the components of well-being were in relation to health, future prospects and leisure opportunities.

The work-related potential positivity indicators were then calculated for the different areas of well-being. Detailed results are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Police and firefighters’ work – Potential positivity indicators in relation to other areas of life**

In the group of firefighters all values exceeded 1, which means that most firefighters consider their work to have a positive impact on well-being in the social, economic, health spheres and in relation to self-esteem. The lowest score, while still meeting the criterion for flourishing, pertained to satisfaction in the economic sphere. Three times as many firefighters assessed the impact of work on their own financial situation positively than negatively. In the group of police officers, the positivity ratio did not reach the value of 1 in three spheres. This means that more than half of the police officers pointed to the negative impact of work on aspects of their well-being. These were health, economic well-being and leisure opportunities.

The relationship between health and length of service in the group of firefighters was significant, although the strength of this relationship was small ( $\chi^2 = 15.20$   $p < 0.01$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.23$ ). However, the relationship between health and length of service in the group of police officers was also significant, and the strength of the effect moderate ( $\chi^2 = 25.33$   $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.38$ ). In the two groups of longer serving police officers i.e. from 10 to 15 years and above 15 years, 73% and 75% respectively, police work was considered to have a negative impact on health. In contrast, only 18% and 25% of firefighters with service from 10 to 15 years and more than 15 years respectively estimated work to have a negative impact on their health.

**Discussion**

Summing up the results of the study, the impact of work on well-being in the social, economic, health spheres, and in relation to self-esteem, was determined by occupation. Firefighters, unlike police officers, more positively assessed the impact of work on well-being in their private life, especially in relation to health, leisure opportunities and prospects for the

future. The potential for work positivity for firefighters indicated satisfaction in relation to work in respect of all areas examined. It was different in the group of police officers where there was a negative impact of work on health, leisure opportunities and economic well-being. In both groups, the relationship between length of service and the impact of work on health was important, but was stronger among police officers.

The positive impact of work on satisfaction in other areas of life among firefighters compared to the police, can be interpreted according to the "bottom - up" model of the onion theory of happiness<sup>20</sup>. The first is affective balance of work. While working, firefighters are more likely to experience the intense positive emotions associated with eustress. However, in police work negative emotions often appear, including those of a high intensity<sup>21</sup>. This paper concentrates on the cognitive dimension of well-being: this is one of the dimensions of well-being alongside the affective dimension. These two dimensions interact with each other. Eustress is related to job satisfaction, which emphasizes the interdependence of the affective and cognitive dimensions of well-being<sup>22</sup>.

Social well-being is another very important factor for happiness. It includes a close relationship with family, and relationships with friends. Social well-being can be considered as an indicator of social support. Firefighters work as a team, and share brotherhood and the "fireman's family"<sup>23</sup>. It is probable that the potential for support is greater than is possible amongst the police officers, who increasingly complain about a lack of integration.

Firefighters' work has the potential for positivity. Police work did not reach the critical point of balance in respect of health, leisure opportunities and economic well-being in relation to the indicators of positivity. Financial and health stressors have the biggest negative impact on well-being<sup>24</sup>.

*Diagnoza Społeczna 2011* research shows that virtually all professional groups complained that they earn too little. However, the level of police dissatisfaction with their economic well-being is much deeper. This result can be interpreted by referring to the sense of justice and social comparison in accordance with the effort - reward imbalance model<sup>25</sup>. The effort expended at work should be compensated by the rewards achieved, inter alia, pay and respect. Although these professions pay is at a similar level, police officers, with their focus on public safety, have less opportunity to gain the level of social recognition granted to firefighters.

Health is a highly prized value: its deterioration is easily recognized and its loss comes at a high price. Health is also strongly associated with physical activity, and some free time is usually spent on taking care of one's physical condition. The officers are a professional group in which every fifth person has problems with obesity. Health is dependent to a similar extent on internal factors and external factors. A two-way adaptation and incentive mechanism shows that the external factors negatively influence health to a greater degree whereas internal factors motivate its improvement<sup>26</sup>.

In both occupational groups the proportion of people having a negative opinion of the

<sup>20</sup> Czapiński J, *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Basińska B.A, Job burnout among policemen and firemen – The effect of job-related affectivity and fatigue at work. *Psychology & Health*, 2011, Vol. 26, Supp. 2, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> McGowan J, Gardner D, Fletcher R, Positive and negative affective outcomes of occupational stress. *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 2006, Vol. 35, pp. 92–98.

<sup>23</sup> Regehr C, Dimitropoulos G, Bright E, George S, Henderson J, Behind the brotherhood: rewards and challenges for wives of firefighters. *Family Relations*, 2005, Vol. 54, pp. 423–435.

<sup>24</sup> Czapiński J, Sulek A, Szumlicz T, *op.cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Siegrist J, Starke D, Chandola T, Godin I, Marmot M, Niedhammer I, Peter R, The measurement of effort-reward imbalance at work: European comparisons. *Social Science & Medicine*, 2004, Vol. 58, pp. 1483–1499.

<sup>26</sup> Czapiński J, Sulek A, Szumlicz T, *op.cit.*

impact of work on health increased with length of service, but this relationship was stronger among police officers. This tendency can also be related to age. Health problems in respect of length of service are greater among police officers than among firefighters. As many as three-quarters of police officers and only one quarter of firefighters with service of more than 15 years, negatively evaluated the impact of work on health. It is worth noting that the daily work of firefighters involves activities to maintain and improve physical fitness. Such a routine is not common in the police service. As already mentioned, the negative impact of work on leisure opportunities of police officers may have consequences for their health. Health, well-being and leisure opportunities are strongly interlinked.

The study has some limitations that are associated with its exploratory nature and the subject area. However, the group examined was quite large and consisted of officers from the so-called front-line. This study also has strengths. Adoption of the hedonistic model of quality of life has allowed it to show a positive, rather than negative impact of work on personal life. Various elements of well-being were measured in relation to work, expanding their scope beyond health and the work-family relationship. The study introduced a work-related potential positivity ratio defined in a similar manner to that applied to the affective domain.

### Conclusion

The study shows the relationship between work and elements of subjective well-being is dependent on profession. Firefighters have a sense of happiness, and their subjective psychological well-being may contribute to flourishing and expanding resources. The model that probably works here is the "top - down" onion theory of happiness, which is amplified by the potential of positivity. The feeling of happiness and general well-being allows one to see one's well-being in different spheres of life through so-called. rose-coloured glasses. Unfortunately, in relation to work, police officers do not have positive potential in three major areas. The assessment of well-being for health, leisure opportunities and finance are in a weak state [languishing], which, according to the "bottom - up" model, may reduce satisfaction with other areas of life and general well-being.

The results presented can form a basis for practical applications. Mainly, these should focus on preventive measures in relation to health and leisure. This means on the one hand taking stronger measures governing the organization of work and leisure time, because prolonged working hours – so called overtime – are one of the sources of discontent for police officers. On the other hand, it is worth developing activities that focus on promoting a healthy lifestyle. An improvement in these aspects can be a driving force for growth and start the spiral of well-being in other areas of life, in accordance with the "bottom - up" model of the onion theory of happiness. Considering the principle of positivity takes many coordinated and long-term actions in order to improve well-being<sup>27</sup>, developing a positive organizational capacity requires greater involvement of senior management, but also brings a higher return in the long term.

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<sup>27</sup> Fredrickson B.L, Losada M.F, *op.cit.*



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**Abstrakt.** Praca jest jedną z ważniejszych sfer funkcjonowania człowieka i ma istotny wpływ na ogólny dobrostan. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest zatem ocena pozytywnego i negatywnego wpływu pracy policjantów oraz strażaków na dobrostan w różnych dziedzinach życia, w szczególności zależności pomiędzy rodzajem zawodu a dobrostanami cząstkowymi, jak również ocena zagadnień dotyczących potencjału pozytywności pracy dla różnych dziedzin życia oraz związku pomiędzy wpływem pracy na zdrowie a stażem pracy. Przyjęto hedonistyczny model jakości życia. W badaniu uczestniczyło 499 polskich funkcjonariuszy służących na stanowiskach wykonawczych, w tym 195 policjantów i 304 strażaków. Do oceny subiektywnego dobrostanu w relacji do pracy w wymiarze poznawczym zastosowano zmodyfikowaną skalę zadowolenia z różnych dziedzin życia oraz obliczano wskaźnik potencjału pozytywności pracy w danej dziedzinie życia. Wyniki pokazały, że wpływ pracy na dobrostan w sferze społecznej, ekonomicznej, zdrowia i w relacji do samooceny był zdeterminowany wykonywanym zawodem. Strażacy, w porównaniu z policjantami pozytywniej oceniali wpływ pracy na dobrostan pozazawodowy. Wśród policjantów odnotowano negatywny wpływ pracy na zdrowie, czas wolny i dobrostan ekonomiczny. Otrzymane wyniki w grupie strażaków wyjaśniano zgodnie z modelem „góra – dół”, w grupie policjantów zaś zgodnie z modelem „dół – góra” cebulowej teorii szczęścia Czapińskiego. Implikacje praktyczne w odniesieniu do zdrowia i czasu wolnego są obecnie przedmiotem dyskusji.