

Unequal Workload Distribution in Law Enforcement: Barriers and Implications for Employee Performance

Mohamed A. Balalaa
Learning and Performance System, Penn State University
100 Jules Dr. State Collage, Pennsylvania 16801, USA
E-mail: Mohd.Balalaa@gmail.com

Abstract

Workload distribution plays a critical role in the functioning of law enforcement agencies, where high-pressure environments and rigid hierarchies often result in task imbalances. In many such organizations, systemic and interpersonal dynamics contribute to unequal task allocation, undermining employee well-being and operational efficiency. This qualitative study explores the systemic and interpersonal barriers contributing to unequal workload distribution within a hierarchical law enforcement agency and examines their effects on employee performance. Drawing from nine semi-structured interviews with non-supervisory personnel, the research identifies two core themes: structural inefficiencies and interpersonal challenges. Structural barriers include inconsistent task allocation, role ambiguity, and operational inefficiencies that result in overburdened employees and heightened stress. Interpersonal challenges involve lack of recognition and strained supervisor relationships, further affecting morale and productivity. The findings highlight the need for equitable task distribution frameworks, improved communication practices, and leadership development initiatives. This study contributes to the field of workforce management by offering actionable insights tailored to structured and high-stakes environments such as law enforcement

Keywords: workload distribution, employee performance, law enforcement

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Overview of Workload Distribution Challenges

Workload distribution is critical to organizational efficiency and employee well-being, particularly in law enforcement, where high demands and public scrutiny heighten the risk of burnout. Unequal task allocation often overburdens high performers and sidelines others, leading to emotional exhaustion, dissatisfaction, and operational inefficiencies (McCarty et al., 2019).

Research highlights that these imbalances stem from systemic barriers, inadequate communication, and a lack of accountability within rigid organizational structures (Cohen et al., 2013; Poulouse & Dhal, 2020). Addressing these issues is essential for fostering a sustainable work environment where all employees can contribute effectively, improving both morale and service delivery.

Effective workload distribution not only enhances employee well-being but also strengthens overall organizational resilience. Research has shown that an equitable allocation of tasks reduces employee fatigue and increases productivity, as excessive workloads and meeting loads have been linked to significant declines in employee well-being (Luong & Rogelberg, 2005). When tasks are fairly distributed, employees are more likely to feel valued and motivated, fostering higher levels of engagement and collaboration. Additionally, balanced task allocation mitigates the risk of burnout, particularly among high-performing individuals, while providing underutilized employees with opportunities to develop their skills (Geurts et al., 2003). This equitable approach promotes teamwork as employees perceive a fairer distribution of responsibilities, which is especially critical in law enforcement agencies, where task execution often directly impacts public safety and operational success. Ensuring fairness in workload distribution also strengthens trust within organizations, an essential element for maintaining resilience and efficiency.

Problem Statement

The problem of workload inequity is not unique to law enforcement but is amplified in such settings due to the highly structured nature of the work environment. Employees often report feeling overburdened while others contribute minimally, leading to frustration and reduced job satisfaction. Furthermore, inadequate mechanisms

for equitable workload distribution can hinder creativity and innovation, key factors for organizational growth and adaptability in dynamic environments (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Research Purpose and Objectives

This study investigates the barriers to equitable workload distribution and their impact on employee performance within a hierarchical law enforcement agency in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The analysis focuses on systemic inefficiencies, such as uneven task allocation and operational challenges, as well as interpersonal dynamics, including recognition and supervisory relationships. By using qualitative data from employee interviews, the research aims to uncover actionable strategies to address these barriers, improve task equity, and enhance both organizational efficiency and employee morale. Ultimately, this study contributes to broader discussions on workforce management in hierarchical organizations by integrating structural and relational perspectives.

Significance of the Research

The significance of this research lies in its ability to provide actionable insights into the systemic and relational barriers affecting workload distribution and employee performance. By identifying structural inefficiencies such as uneven task allocation and operational gaps, along with interpersonal challenges like insufficient recognition and strained supervisory relationships, the findings offer a dual focus for organizational improvement. Addressing these barriers holistically can lead to enhanced employee well-being, reduced stress, and improved task efficiency. Furthermore, the study enriches existing scholarship on workforce management by integrating employee-centric perspectives, providing a foundation for practical interventions and future research in hierarchical organizations.

The primary research question guiding this study is: What are the barriers to equitable workload distribution, and how do these affect employee performance? By analyzing employee experiences, this study seeks to identify systemic gaps and propose solutions for fostering equity in task allocation.

Methods

Data Sources and Participants

The data for this study were sourced from a previous dissertation that conducted a qualitative investigation into supervisor-subordinate dynamics within the Human Resources Sector in the same law enforcement agency. This sector was selected due to its structured, hierarchical environment and its relevance to understanding workload distribution challenges in law enforcement.

Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with non-supervisory personnel from various departments. Each participant was selected based on their tenure of at least two years within the same branch to ensure familiarity with the organizational dynamics. Participants included both civilian and military personnel, representing diverse roles, genders, and years of experience, with an average tenure exceeding 11 years (Almaeeni, 2021). This diversity facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the systemic barriers to workload equity.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic	Category	Value
Gender	Male	6
	Female	3
Personnel Type	Military	6
	Civilian	3
Years Worked at the agency	Range	7–21 years
	Average	11.8 years
Sample Size (n)		9

Instruments and Measures

The analysis guide was adapted to address systemic and interpersonal barriers to equitable workload distribution and their effects on employee performance. Systemic challenges included task delegation, workload equity, and operational inefficiencies, while interpersonal factors focused on recognition, supervisory relationships, and motivation. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive examination of structural inefficiencies and human dynamics impacting workplace equity.

Reliability

To ensure reliability, the interviews followed a consistent, semi-structured format. The same core questions were asked of all participants, supplemented by prompts as needed to gather deeper insights. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review their transcripts before analysis to ensure accuracy and credibility (Almaeeni, 2021).

Validity

Validity for this study was established through several key strategies. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing themes identified during the analysis with existing literature to ensure consistency and depth. Methodological triangulation, as described by Bekhet and Zauszniewski (2012), enhances data credibility by combining different methods to confirm findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The coding process involved two researchers independently reviewing data and reaching consensus on themes. Organizational policies and documents were also analyzed to align findings with institutional practices, enhancing credibility and ensuring methodological rigor. These steps grounded the findings in the data and aligned them with the research question.

Data Collection

The data were collected through nine semi-structured interviews with employees from various departments within the agency. The interviews were conducted as part of a prior dissertation study, where participants shared their experiences related to workload distribution and managerial behaviors. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a virtual format using Zoom, ensuring convenience and adherence to ethical guidelines during the data collection process. The semi-structured format allowed for both standardized questioning and open-ended discussions, enabling participants to provide detailed and nuanced insights into their experiences (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality protocols were strictly followed to protect their identities and responses.

Analytical Strategy

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data systematically, ensuring consistency with the approach used in the original dissertation. The process began with an initial review of the interview transcripts to familiarize the researcher with the content and identify initial patterns. Data were segmented into manageable units, such as sentences or phrases, directly relevant to the research question (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Approximately 20 initial codes were developed, capturing recurring ideas and concepts across the transcripts (Appendix C). These codes were refined and reduced by grouping similar ones and eliminating redundancies, resulting in a condensed set of five codes. Through iterative refinement, these codes were collapsed into two overarching themes: structural barriers to equitable workload distribution and interpersonal and motivational challenges.

The analysis was conducted using Microsoft Word for organizing and annotating transcripts. Features such as commenting and highlighting were used to support the coding process, ensuring a structured and thorough examination of the data. This approach provided a clear framework to derive meaningful insights and address the research question effectively.

Results

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed two primary areas of concern that encompass the barriers to equitable workload distribution and their impact on employee performance. These areas reflect both systemic and relational challenges within the organization. The first area highlights structural barriers, focusing on the operational inefficiencies and uneven allocation of tasks that hinder workplace equity. The second area delves

into interpersonal and motivational challenges, emphasizing the role of human dynamics, such as recognition and supervisory relationships, in shaping employee experiences and performance outcomes. Below, these two areas are presented as overarching themes, integrating the key codes identified during the analysis.

Theme 1: Structural Barriers to Equitable Workload Distribution

Code 1: Workload Distribution Issues

Finding: Inequities in workload distribution were frequently noted, often leading to over-reliance on certain individuals or inefficiencies in task allocation.

Participants reported that task allocation processes often lacked structure, resulting in inconsistent and inequitable distribution. This led to some employees being overburdened while others were underutilized. For instance, one participant described their experience upon joining the organization:

"When I joined the agency, I had not been selected for the General Commander office, but Human Resources Sector set me here directly in the Strategic Branch... Just imagine the load and difficulty of my work when I came here." (Interview 1)

Another participant highlighted how tasks were frequently assigned based on availability rather than expertise or fairness:

"It is not distributed exclusively, certain tasks for specific people. Tasks are given based on who is available and with less workload." (Interview 4)

Additionally, seasonal variations in workload amplified these inequities. Employees noted that during busy periods, certain individuals were disproportionately assigned more complex tasks while others received simpler duties:

"It depends on the branch workload, which varies seasonally. But when it's busy, people know that certain correspondence will go to me and the simple stuff to others." (Interview 8)

These quotes reflect systemic inefficiencies in workload distribution, underscoring the need for clearer task allocation processes to ensure fairness and improve organizational efficiency.

Code 2: Work Pressure and Stress

Finding: Overwhelming workloads, exacerbated by staff shortages or seasonal peaks, contributed to significant stress and burnout among employees.

Participants frequently highlighted the detrimental impact of excessive workloads on their mental and emotional well-being. Many described taking on responsibilities beyond their capacity, often without adequate support or relief. One participant shared their struggle with balancing multiple roles:

"I handle the work of three employees... I suffer work pressure." (Interview 5)

The stress caused by such conditions was not limited to lower-level staff but extended to section heads as well, despite their cooperative attitudes:

"I was very stressed and even section heads, but they were cooperative." (Interview 1)

In some cases, the pressure became so overwhelming that employees felt compelled to seek drastic measures, such as requesting transfers to less demanding roles:

"I reached a high level of stress... I blew up. I submitted my transferring request to the deputy." (Interview 2)

These accounts illustrate how overwhelming workloads, compounded by staff shortages and fluctuating demands, not only affected individual employees but also threatened organizational stability and productivity. The findings highlight the urgent need for strategies to alleviate work pressure and foster a more sustainable work environment.

Code 3: Barriers to Task Efficiency

Finding: Inefficient task distribution and unclear roles created delays and confusion in achieving timely results.

Participants highlighted several instances where unclear task roles and poor communication led to inefficiencies and wasted efforts. These barriers often created frustration among employees and delays in completing critical assignments. One participant described how misunderstandings with their manager resulted in unnecessary redundancy:

"Sometimes, my manager thinks I didn't do something, but I find it already done. This creates unnecessary back-and-forth." (Interview 9)

Another participant highlighted the confusion caused by unclear task distribution, stating:

"I was auditing awards lists, then someone came and asked me to complete an official mail. I stopped, and when I came back, I thought I had finished auditing a section but skipped it accidentally." (Interview 2).

This example underscores how interruptions and a lack of structured task allocation can lead to errors and inefficiencies in workflow.

Another participant highlighted how unclear roles and responsibilities led to ongoing delays and inefficiencies, particularly in correspondence management. They stated:

"Many times, I notice correspondences between two people that are 'pending,' each one expecting the other to reply or take action concerning it." (Interview 3)

This lack of role clarity not only caused frustration but also stalled critical workflows, as employees relied on others to take the initiative. Such situations underscore the necessity of establishing clear task ownership and accountability to ensure seamless operations and timely outcomes.

These examples reveal systemic issues with task allocation and role clarity, which not only reduce efficiency but also contribute to employee frustration. Establishing clearer workflows and improving communication between team members and supervisors could address these inefficiencies and enhance overall productivity.

Theme 2: Interpersonal and Motivational Challenges

Code 1: Lack of Recognition

Finding: Many participants felt underappreciated, both personally and professionally, despite handling demanding workloads.

The absence of recognition for their efforts was a recurring concern among participants, who described feeling overlooked and undervalued. This lack of acknowledgment often stemmed from disconnects between their contributions and the appreciation shown by management. One participant expressed frustration about how their performance was evaluated by someone who was disconnected from their daily work:

"I don't feel appreciated, especially as my line manager is not the one who completes my annual appraisal." (Interview 8)

Others noted that their accomplishments were sometimes claimed by others, diminishing their sense of ownership and pride:

"Sometimes they even attribute the accomplishments to themselves... It's frustrating." (Interview 4)

In some instances, the lack of recognition was glaring, as employees who had managed significant responsibilities were overlooked in favor of others. One participant recounted:

"I was handling all Secondment students' affairs from A-Z... but they honored someone else, not me." (Interview 5)

These examples highlight the emotional toll of unacknowledged contributions, which can lead to decreased morale and a sense of inequity within the organization. Addressing this issue through transparent and consistent recognition practices could significantly enhance employee satisfaction and motivation.

Code 2: Supervisor Relationships

Finding: Supervisor relationships were a mixed experience. While some managers were described as supportive, others were seen as indifferent or overly dependent on subordinates.

Participants shared varied experiences regarding their relationships with supervisors, reflecting a spectrum from supportive trust to perceived indifference. Some employees described managers who demonstrated confidence in their abilities and entrusted them with key responsibilities. For instance, one participant noted:

"The director trusts me and has confidence in me. If anyone is not there, the director calls for me!" (Interview 3)

However, other participants described supervisors who excessively relied on subordinates or delegated tasks without clear involvement or oversight. As one employee observed:

"Our section head is dependent, relies on branch managers, who rely on their subordinates." (Interview 7)

Additionally, there were instances where inexperienced managers dismissed employee input, leading to frustration and a sense of being undervalued. One participant highlighted this issue:

"Some fresh managers apply things their own way, regardless of what the employees suggest." (Interview 5)

These mixed experiences indicate that while positive supervisory relationships can enhance trust and motivation, indifferent or overly dependent management styles can hinder collaboration and reduce employee satisfaction. Promoting effective leadership practices and fostering open communication could help improve these dynamics. In conclusion, the analysis highlights significant barriers to equitable workload distribution within the organization, stemming from both structural inefficiencies and interpersonal challenges. Structural issues, such as uneven task allocation, staffing shortages, and operational inefficiencies, create significant pressure on employees and hinder productivity. Simultaneously, interpersonal and motivational challenges, including inadequate recognition and strained supervisory relationships, further impact employee morale and performance. Addressing these themes holistically is crucial to fostering a more equitable and efficient work environment that supports both organizational goals and employee well-being.

Discussion

From a practical standpoint, organizations must address systemic inefficiencies in workload distribution to ensure equity and improve outcomes. One effective strategy is to implement structured task allocation systems that use transparent and objective frameworks for assigning tasks. Such systems align workloads with employee skills and availability, reducing over-reliance on specific individuals and promoting fairness across teams (Simmons & Kuys, 2011). These findings are consistent with recent research demonstrating that structured, survey-based workload monitoring among law enforcement officers achieved high adherence and usability, and was considered valuable by both officers and administrative leadership (Giuliani-Dewig et al., 2024). Such tools may provide real-time insight into workload imbalances and inform more data-driven scheduling practices.

Investing in regular training and development programs is another essential approach. These initiatives enhance employee competencies, enabling them to handle diverse responsibilities effectively. By addressing skill gaps that contribute to workload inequities, organizations ensure that all employees are well-prepared to manage their tasks (Dahlgaard-Park, 2014).

Establishing robust recognition and feedback mechanisms further promotes fairness and motivation. Systems that regularly acknowledge employee contributions improve morale, foster a sense of equity, and increase engagement (Westover, 2024).

Leadership development is also critical for organizational success. Equipping supervisors with tools for effective communication and management fosters a collaborative work environment, enhances trust, and ensures employees receive necessary support (Barling & Frone, 2017).

Finally, stress management interventions, such as flexible schedules, mental health resources, and workload adjustments, are essential for alleviating work pressure. These measures reduce burnout and enhance overall productivity (Zappalà et al., 2022).

Adopting these strategies in tandem ensures that organizations address both systemic inefficiencies and interpersonal barriers, fostering a fair and efficient work environment.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the barriers to equitable workload distribution in the agency, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Sample Size and Scope

The study relied on data from nine semi-structured interviews, which, while rich in detail, may not capture the full range of experiences within the organization. The findings may not be transferable to other departments or hierarchical organizations without further validation.

Single-Organization Focus

The study's focus on a single law enforcement agency limits the applicability of the findings to broader organizational contexts. Differences in organizational culture, policies, and practices may yield different results in other settings or sectors.

Limited Quantitative Validation

As a qualitative study, the findings provide deep insights but lack quantitative validation. The absence of statistical data to support patterns or trends may limit the study's ability to provide generalizable recommendations.

Cultural and Organizational Specificity

The unique cultural and structural aspects of the agency, such as its hierarchical nature and regional practices, may influence the findings. These contextual factors should be considered when interpreting and applying the results in different environments.

Potential Researcher Bias

Although the analysis adhered to rigorous thematic methods, the researcher's role as an employee within the organization may have introduced potential bias due to insider knowledge or personal experiences. To mitigate this, triangulation and peer review were employed to enhance objectivity and credibility. However, despite these measures, some degree of bias may remain inherent in the interpretation of qualitative data.

Addressing these limitations through larger samples, comparative studies, and quantitative methods will improve the robustness and applicability of future research findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should expand the scope and include larger, more diverse samples spanning multiple departments, ranks, and regions to improve the generalizability of findings. Comparative studies across sectors such as healthcare, education, or the private sector could determine whether the barriers identified in this study are unique to law enforcement or shared across other organizational contexts.

Incorporating quantitative methods, such as surveys or workload assessments, can complement qualitative findings by identifying trends and validating observed patterns. Longitudinal research is also recommended to explore the long-term effects of workload inequities on performance, morale, and retention while assessing the impact of interventions over time.

Further studies could investigate the role of leadership styles and supervisor training programs in mitigating workload inequities and fostering equitable task distribution. Exploring cultural and contextual influences, such as regional practices and organizational values, would provide deeper cross-cultural insights into workload distribution dynamics.

Moreover, research on the role of technology in workload management is essential. As organizations increasingly adopt digital tools, examining their impact on task efficiency and equitable practices could offer practical solutions to modern workload challenges. By addressing these areas, future research can advance strategies to promote equity, efficiency, and well-being in hierarchical organizations.

Finally, future studies could also examine the psychological impacts of unequal workload distribution, including burnout, disengagement, and turnover intentions. Additionally, cross-national research comparing law enforcement agencies in different countries may reveal how cultural and institutional differences shape task allocation practices. Such efforts would further deepen understanding of workload dynamics in high-stakes professions.

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Appendix A

Permission Statement

I extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Fahad Almaeeni for granting permission to utilize the data from their dissertation titled A Qualitative Exploration of Manager-Subordinate Relationships at [redacted] as part of my research paper. This permission was formally granted on January 16, 2025, ensuring compliance with academic and ethical standards.

The data, originally collected to explore the relationships between subordinates and supervisors in the Human Resources Sector of the agency, has been incorporated into this study to address the barriers to equitable workload distribution and their impact on employee performance. Proper acknowledgment of its source and relevance has been maintained throughout this research.

The integration of this data is instrumental in identifying systemic gaps and proposing strategies to foster equity in task allocation, contributing significantly to the objectives of this research paper. This work adheres to the ethical guidelines set forth by Penn State University and the [redacted].

Appendix B

Approval Letter for Use of Human Research Subjects in the Dissertation: A Qualitative Exploration of Manager-Subordinate Relationships at [redacted]



PennState

Office for Research Protections

Vice President for Research
The Pennsylvania State University
205 The 330 Building
University Park, PA 16802

814-865-1775

Fax: 814-865-8699

orp@psu.edu

research.psu.edu/orp

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

Date: December 9, 2019

From: Joyel Moeller,

To: Fahad Abdalla Ahmed Almaeeni

Type of Submission:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF MANAGER-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIPS AT [redacted]
Principal Investigator:	Fahad Abdalla Ahmed Almaeeni
Study ID:	STUDY00013637
Submission ID:	STUDY00013637
Funding:	Not Applicable
Documents Approved:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HRP591-HumanSubjects(edited version3)_Fahad.doc.pdf (0.05), Category: IRB Protocol• Interview Materials (0.01), Category: Other

The Office for Research Protections determined that the proposed activity, as described in the above-referenced submission, does not require formal IRB review because the research met the criteria for exempt research according to the policies of this institution and the provisions of applicable federal regulations.

Continuing Progress Reports are **not** required for exempt research. Record of this research determined to be exempt will be maintained for five years from the date of this notification. If your research will continue beyond five years, please contact the Office for Research Protections closer to the determination end date.

Changes to exempt research only need to be submitted to the Office for Research Protections in limited circumstances described in the below-referenced Investigator Manual. If changes are being considered and there are questions about whether IRB review is needed, please contact the Office for Research Protections.

Penn State researchers are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual ([HRP-103](#)), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within CATS IRB (<http://irb.psu.edu>).

This correspondence should be maintained with your records.

We would like to know how the IRB Program can better serve you.
Please fill out our survey; it should take about a minute: <https://www.research.psu.edu/irb/feedback>.

ID27

Appendix C

Codebook for Thematic Analysis of Barriers to Equitable Workload Distribution

#	Initial Codes (20)	Grouped Codes (5)	Themes (2)
1	Unequal task allocation	Workload Distribution Issues	Structural Barriers to Equitable Workload Distribution
2	Seasonal workload variations		
3	Lack of structured task distribution		
4	Staff shortages		
5	Over-reliance on experienced employees		
6	Dependency on specific individuals.		
7	Lack of collaboration among team members		
8	Lack of task clarity	Barriers to Task Efficiency	
9	Delays due to unclear roles		
10	Conflicting task priorities		
11	High stress and burnout	Work Pressure and Stress	
12	Difficulty negotiating task instructions with supervisors		
13	Lack of recognition for extra work	Lack of Recognition	Interpersonal and Motivational Challenges
14	Supervisors claiming credit for work		
15	Insufficient acknowledgment of achievements		
16	Dependent or indifferent supervisors	Supervisor Relationships	
17	Supervisors' reluctance to address inefficiencies		
18	Limited feedback mechanisms		
19	Lack of autonomy in task execution		
20	Dependency on supervisors for approvals		