



# Chronic Stress and Burnout in a National Sample of Urban Teachers

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## Abstract

Urban teaching is associated with community/school violence, limited resources, and racial tensions, which contribute to significant stress/burnout, decrease in job performance and possible psychological problems. This study assesses the impact of chronic stressors and burnout on teachers in faith-based urban ministries. Participants included 284 urban ministry workers in five cities who were surveyed for demographics, chronic stressors, burnout, and other variables. Comparing chronic stressors and burnout between urban teachers versus non-teachers, it is hypothesized that teachers compared to non-teachers will report more chronic stressors, less Personal Accomplishment, higher Depersonalization, and higher Emotional Exhaustion. An ANCOVA revealed that teachers had significantly higher levels of personal accomplishment. School administrators should consider the impact of stressors and burnout in supporting policies for teachers.

## Introduction

- Teachers remain one of the primary groups that experience high levels of burnout related to perpetual stress in the profession and school environment. (Farber, 2000; Talmor, Reiter, & Feigin, 2005).
- Stressors for teachers include lack of resources, student misbehavior and discipline issues, demands on time, discrimination against teaching as a profession, excessive workload, and health problems (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Kaufhold, Alvarez, & Arnold, 2006; Miller & Travers, 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).
- Teachers who work in urban schools report more stress and face more chronic stressors than do teachers who work in suburban or rural schools (Abel & Sewell, 1999; Farber, 2000).
- School counselors in urban schools reported higher levels of the depersonalization and emotional exhaustion components of burnout than did counselors working in suburban or rural schools (Butler & Constantine, 2005).

## Study Hypotheses

- Urban workers with primary teaching responsibilities will report more chronic stressors than workers doing other ministry activities (both over-all stressors, as well as teaching-specific stressors).
- Urban workers with teaching responsibilities will report more burnout symptoms represented by lower personal accomplishment, higher depersonalization, and higher emotional exhaustion than other urban ministry workers.
- Within the teaching sub-sample, it is hypothesized that a positive correlation exists between teachers-specific chronic stressors and emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and a negative correlation exists with personal accomplishment.

## Method

### Procedures

- Five cities selected: Phoenix, Chicago, Los Angeles, Memphis, and Philadelphia
- Urban ministry workers deliver services to inner-city families/youth in various contexts, includes mentoring, tutoring, teaching, leadership, various types of training and education, and networking.

### Measures

#### Chronic Stressors:

Chronic stressors were assessed with a 24 item measure derived from a focus group of urban ministry personnel who listed hassles/stressors that negatively impact their work, including high workload, community violence, little/no salary, feeling unappreciated, housing problems.

#### Burnout: Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1996)

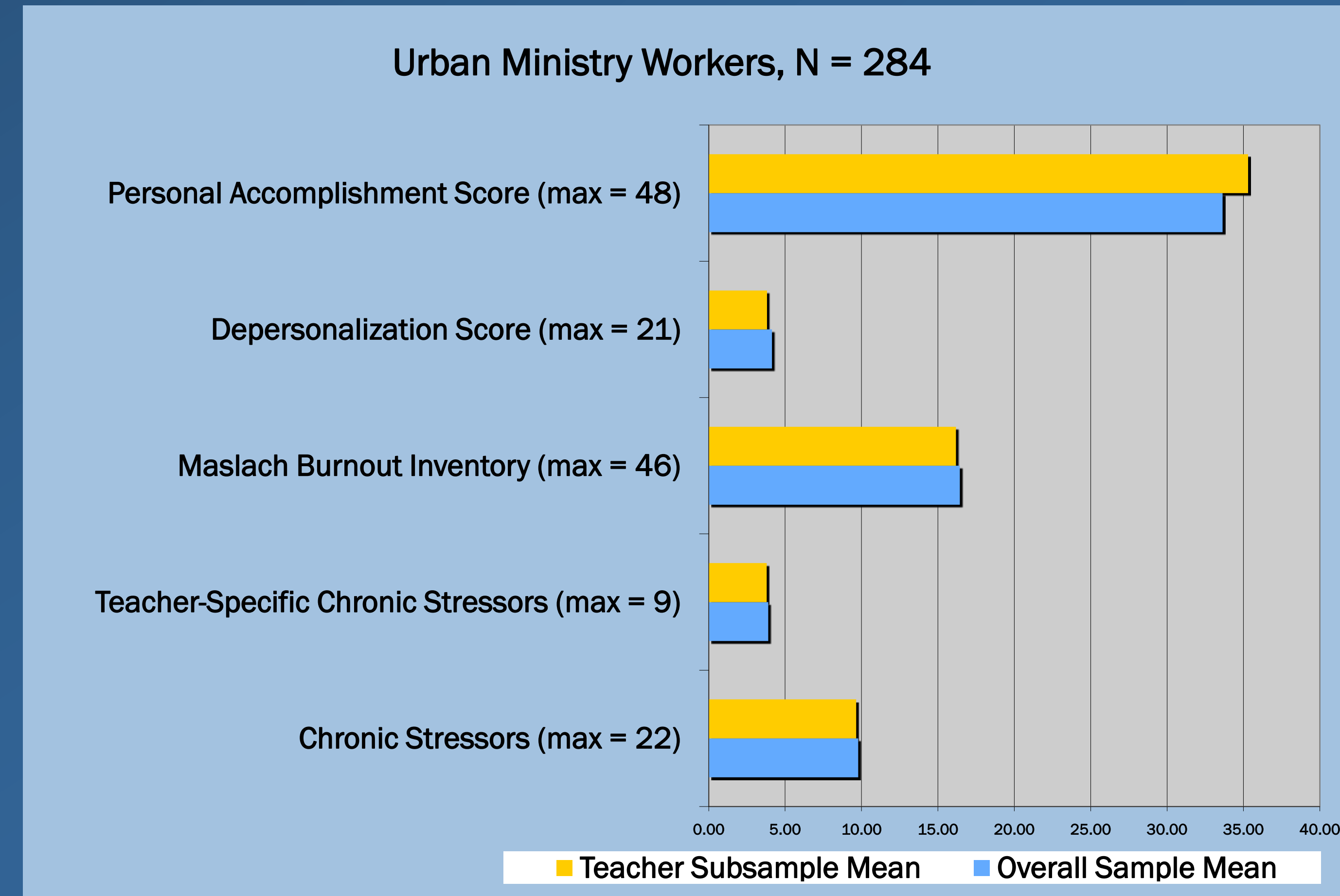
- 22 items, 7 point scale ("never" to "every day"), 3 subscales
- Emotional Exhaustion (EE:  $\alpha = .90$ )
- Depersonalization (Dp:  $\alpha = .79$ )
- Personal Accomplishment (PA:  $\alpha = .71$ )

#### Participants: Full Sample , N = 284 (Teacher Subsample, N = 113)

Age:  $M = 35.5$ ,  $SD = 12$  ( $M = 34.93$ ,  $SD = 11.69$ )

Variable	Percentage By Category		
Gender	Female = 65% (76%)		Male = 34% (24%)
Organization Affiliation Status	Paid Staff = 62% (70%)		Volunteer = 34% (30%)
Reside in Neighborhood of Service	No = 65% (same)		Yes = 34% (same)
Marital Status	Married = 53% (57%)	Single = 39% (35%)	Divorced = 8% (4%)

## Results



The total score of teacher-specific chronic stressors was significantly correlated at the  $p < .01$  level with each MBI subscale (DP:  $r = .29$ ; PA:  $r = .21$ ; EE:  $r = .44$ ).

### Question 1: Urban Teachers vs. Urban Workers: Group Differences in Chronic Stressors

- After controlling for confounding demographics, ANCOVA showed that urban teachers were not significantly different from other urban ministry workers in the total number of chronic stressors reported by participants in each group,  $F(1, 209) = 1.601$ ,  $p > .05$ .
- After controlling for confounding demographics, ANCOVA revealed that there was no significant difference between urban teachers and other urban workers in relation to chronic stressors identified in the literature as being more salient for teachers,  $F(1, 212) = 1.576$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### Question 2: Urban Teachers vs. Urban Workers: Group Differences in Burnout

- Urban teachers were not found to significantly differ from other urban workers in levels of Emotional Exhaustion.
- Confounding variables for the Emotional Exhaustion subscale: age, whether or not the participant currently lives in the neighborhood in which he or she works, and total urban ministry work hours per week.
- Controlling for these variables, ANCOVA yielded an  $F$ -ratio for group membership (teaching vs. other urban ministry work) of .403,  $F(1, 255) = .403$ ,  $p > .05$  on Emotional Exhaustion.
- An ANCOVA revealed that urban teachers were not significantly experiencing different levels of Depersonalization than other urban workers, after controlling for the confounding variable of age,  $F(1, 258) = 1.038$ ,  $p > .05$ .
- ANCOVA identified that teachers actually experience significantly more personal accomplishment than other urban ministry workers,  $F(1, 240) = 9.663$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### Question 3: Urban Teachers: The Relationship Between Teaching-Specific Chronic Stress and Burnout

- The hypothesis that urban teachers with more teaching-specific chronic stressors will experience higher levels of Emotional Exhaustion than teachers with fewer teaching-specific chronic stressors was not supported.
- Demographic variables controlled for in the analysis were: age, whether the participant currently lives in the neighborhood in which he or she works, and hours per week in urban ministry. The overall model was significant, Adjusted  $R^2 = .115$ ,  $F(4, 95) = 4.229$ ,  $p < .05$ . However, only predictor that was significant was the total hours per week in urban ministry.
- The hypothesis that urban teachers with more teaching-specific chronic stressors experience higher levels of Depersonalization than teachers with fewer teaching-specific stressors was not supported.
- Age was controlled as a confounding variable, and the overall regression model was significant, Adjusted  $R^2 = .078$ ,  $F(2, 100) = 5.320$ ,  $p < .05$ . Age was the only variable contributing significant unique variance.

- The hypothesis that urban teachers with more teaching-specific chronic stressors experience lower levels of Personal Accomplishment was not supported.
- Confounding variables controlled included: ethnicity, age, hours worked per week in urban ministry, and paid versus volunteer status of the participant. The overall model was significant, Adjusted  $R^2 = .176$ ,  $F(7, 89) = 3.935$ ,  $p = .001$ . Only age, and status of paid versus volunteer work type were significant predictors. The teaching-specific chronic stressors variable was not a significant predictor of the Personal Accomplishment variable.

## Discussion

The results indicate that:

- Urban teachers, who understand their work to be a type of ministry, are not statistically different from other types of urban ministry workers in the amounts of general chronic stressors, or teaching-specific chronic stressors that they report.
- Urban teachers, in the context of ministry, are not significantly more burned out than other urban ministry workers.
- However, teachers reported greater Personal Accomplishment than other urban ministry workers. This may indicate that urban teachers have unique opportunities to experience accomplishment in their work.
- Hypothesis 3 was not supported, however the following demographic variables were found to be significant predictors of burnout for the teacher subsample:
  - Emotional Exhaustion: total hours in urban ministry per week
  - Depersonalization: Age
  - Personal Accomplishment: Age & Paid ( $M = 36.46$ ,  $SD = 6.99$ ) versus Volunteer ( $M = 32.80$ ,  $SD = 9.85$ ) status

### Implications for Practice and Future Research

- A variety of urban ministry types are susceptible to chronic stress and burnout, not just teachers.
- Urban ministry workers in general are quite susceptible to chronic stress (most reported one or more emotional exhaustion items, one depersonalization item and to be experiencing burnout).
- Examine the overall chronic stress and burn out levels of urban ministry workers compared to other non-ministry workers in urban settings or of rural ministry workers compared to workers in other contexts.
- Examine the relationship between urban teachers and other urban workers to identify the sources of chronic stress.
- For Clinical and Social Service agencies: Consider utilizing instruments which monitor burnout and stress in urban workers .
- For School Administrators: Consider the impact of stress and burnout when formulating policy.

### Limitations of the Study

- Generalizability limited to urban ministry workers.
- Possible sample confounds: Many part time tutors were included in the sample survey with full time teachers. It is possible these individuals did not experience the full range of stressors and burnout of the full time teachers, which may have impacted the results.
- Data Analysis: Constructing the teaching-specific chronic stressors scale after the initial data collection may have limited the type of data that could be utilized for this study.

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