

## PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG INDONESIAN NATIONAL ARMED FORCES PERSONNEL ATTENDING MILITARY LAW EDUCATION

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### Abstract

This study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the level of psychological distress among students at the Military Law College (STHM) who are active members of the Indonesian National Army (TNI), as well as to explore perceptions of academic stress and map 28 sources of stress in military service education. Using a descriptive quantitative approach with purposive sampling on 107 participants, psychological distress was measured using the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21), while perceptions of academic stress were explored using the Law Student Perceived Stress Scale (LSPSS). The analysis results show that the level of psychological distress is in the low category, with the stress dimension being the most dominant component compared to anxiety and depression. This reflects an emotional and physiological tension response as a form of adaptation to academic and work demands. Perceptions of academic stress were also in the low to tend-to-be-low category, although academic demands were the highest source of pressure. The Pearson correlation test ( $p < .01$ ) showed a significant positive relationship between psychological distress and perceived academic stress. Additionally, mapping 28 stressors identified five main pressures: policy uncertainty, financial pressure, academic competition, the volume of learning materials, and living conditions, indicating that psychological distress is the result of a complex interaction between academic demands, organizational dynamics, personal factors, and the environment.

**Keywords:** academic stress perception, academic stressors, active military students, psychological distress



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## INTRODUCTION

The military environment is often associated with high levels of psychological pressure (Edmondson et al., 2025). Reports have shown that suicide cases among military personnel have continued to increase over the years, indicating serious mental health challenges within the military community (Buga et al., 2024). Globally, a significant proportion of active military personnel experience depression, highlighting the vulnerability of this population to mental health problems (Fagel et al., 2019). Similar conditions are also found in Indonesia, where studies on Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) personnel have identified various risk factors affecting their mental and emotional well-being.

The Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) play a crucial role as the state defense institution responsible for safeguarding national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Aamodt & Brewster, 2021). The TNI consists of three main branches: the Army, Navy, and Air Force, each tasked with defending land, sea, and air domains against external threats (Valsecchi et al., 2019). These responsibilities are carried out through a structured development system that includes education and training to prepare soldiers for diverse military situations (Güler et al., 2023). One important specialization within the Indonesian Army is the legal corps, which functions as legal advisors and ensures compliance with the law in military operations, while also contributing strategically to national legal governance.

As part of efforts to enhance the professionalism of Army personnel, the Military Law Higher Education Institution was established to provide specialized legal education for active-duty soldiers (Andreiev et al., 2023). This institution not only equips students with academic legal knowledge but also prepares them as professional soldiers with competencies in military law (G. S. Gordon, 2022). However, the educational process is highly demanding, requiring students to face various pressures in academic, physical, and social aspects (Benno, 2024). Students remain active-duty soldiers during their studies, which subjects them to strict military discipline, influences student-lecturer relationships, and creates social hierarchies among students based on rank.

The psychological pressure experienced by students at the Military Law Higher Education Institution can be assessed through the concept of psychological distress (Lawrence, 2025). Psychological distress refers to a state of emotional discomfort resulting from specific stressors that may lead to short-term or long-term psychological disturbances (Khorram-Manesh et al., 2021). Anxiety commonly experienced by these students is closely related to academic performance, which has a direct impact on their military careers (Shkarevsky, 2025). Research findings indicate that a substantial proportion of military students experience severe anxiety and depressive symptoms, reflecting high levels of psychological distress (Kartapolov, 2023). Stressors within the military education context include academic, physical, social, and organizational factors that interact and collectively influence distress levels.

This study aims to measure the level of psychological distress experienced by active-duty military students at the Military Law Higher Education Institution and to map the stressors contributing to these experiences (Shkoliar et al., 2025). Psychological distress is assessed using standardized instruments to measure symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress, as well as perceived stress related to legal education adapted to the military context (Fleischhacker et al., 2020). By identifying contextual stressors within military education, the findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for the development of more effective personnel development policies, support the psychological well-being of military students, and strengthen their mental resilience and professionalism in carrying out military duties.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The following sections detail the systematic approach used to investigate psychological distress and academic stress within the specific context of military legal education.

## Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach with a descriptive survey design to map the level of psychological distress among students and to identify factors contributing to the pressure they experience (Putri & Mahajudin, 2024). The design was selected to provide a structured overview of the mental health landscape within a specialized educational environment (Kozak et al., 2024). By utilizing a descriptive survey, the researcher could systematically quantify the prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression, allowing for an objective assessment of the challenges faced by military law students during their official training.

## Research Target/Subject

The primary objective of this research is to identify the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among STHM students and to explore the correlation between these psychological conditions and their perception of academic stress. The study targets the creation of a baseline data set that can inform the institution's leadership about the mental well-being of their personnel. By identifying specific academic stressors through the LSPSS framework, the research aims to provide recommendations for enhancing the support systems within military legal education to ensure both academic success and psychological resilience.

The research subjects consisted of STHM students who had completed at least one semester of education and were between 20 and 40 years old. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who held a minimum rank of Second Sergeant (SERDA), ensuring that they had direct experience with the rigors of official military education. Exclusion criteria were applied to participants who did not complete the questionnaire or those with pre-existing mental health conditions that might skew the results, thereby maintaining the internal validity of the data.

## Research Procedure

The research procedures were structured into three main phases (Segal, 2022). The preparation stage involved developing the methodological design, obtaining necessary permits from the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Head of STHM, and adapting the instruments for a military context. The implementation stage consisted of the online distribution of questionnaires, which took approximately 10–15 minutes for participants to complete. Finally, the data processing stage involved using SPSS for reliability testing, normality tests, and subsequent correlation analysis to link academic stress with psychological outcomes.

## Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using two primary standardized instruments. Psychological distress was measured using the DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale), while academic stress perception was assessed through the LSPSS (Law Student Professional Stress Scale), which was adapted to ensure cultural and professional relevance to the military legal context (LeardMann et al., 2022). These instruments were distributed online to accommodate the participants' schedules, providing a systematic data collection technique that captures multi-dimensional aspects of the students' mental health and professional pressure.

## Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to ensure a systematic and transparent result (Dawkins & Cheesman, 2022). The analysis techniques included descriptive statistical analysis to map the distribution of distress levels and the Kolmogorov–Smirnov normality test to determine the data distribution (Palacz, 2023). Furthermore, correlation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between the

DASS-21 scores and the LSPSS dimensions. This statistical approach allowed the researcher to determine the strength and direction of the association between academic professional stress and the overall psychological well-being of the military law students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the research process, it was found that in the depression dimension, the highest total score obtained was 11 and the lowest total score was 0, with an overall average total score of 1.59.

Table 1: Overview of Participants based on Depression levels

Level Category	N	Percentage (%)
Normal	102	95.3
Mild (Ringan)	4	3.7
Moderate (Sedang)	1	.9
Severe (Berat)	0	0
Extremely Severe (Sangat Berat)	0	0
Total	107	100.0

In the anxiety dimension, the highest total score was 10, while the lowest total score was 0. A total of 87 participants (81.3%) were classified in the normal category. Nevertheless, the score range reaching up to 10 indicates the presence of a small number of participants who experienced higher levels of anxiety symptoms, although their proportion was relatively low.

Table 2 Distribution of Participants Based on Anxiety Levels

Level Category	N	Percentage (%)
Normal	87	81.3
Mild	7	6.5
Moderate	12	11.2
Severe	0	0.0
Extremely Severe	1	0.9
Total	107	100.0

In the stress dimension, the highest total score was 14. This score distribution indicates that the stress levels of STHM students are generally in the low category, considering the maximum value is still within the moderate category range based on DASS-21 categorization norms. Aligned with this pattern, this study found that 78 participants (72.9%) were in the normal category, indicating that the majority of students did not report stress symptoms.

Table 3: Overview of Participants based on stress levels

Level Category	N	Percentage (%)
Normal	78	72.9
Mild	11	10.3
Moderate	13	12.1
Severe	4	3.7
Extremely Severe	1	.9
Total	107	100.0

The results of this study indicate that the level of psychological distress among STHM students undergoing education within the TNI environment is categorized as low. Using the DASS-21 instrument, the researcher identified that the majority of participants were in the normal category across all three dimensions of distress: depression, anxiety, and stress. This is consistent with the findings of Hansen et al. (2020), who studied psychological distress in active military members in Australia and found that mild to moderate distress is a common form of psychological adaptation in military populations before developing into more severe disorders. This study strengthens the argument that strict disciplinary structures, repetitive

routines, and social support in a military context can function as protective factors against more serious psychological disorders.

The subsequent analysis was conducted based on gender to examine whether there were differences in the experience of psychological distress between male and female students at STHM. This categorization is important because gender is often associated with variations in emotional responses and coping strategies, thereby providing additional context for a more comprehensive understanding of students' psychological conditions. The mapping results indicate that both male and female students were predominantly in the normal category. Overall, these findings suggest that the majority of STHM students are able to maintain adaptive psychological functioning despite facing high academic and service-related demands.

Descriptive analysis further revealed that there were no marked differences in levels of psychological distress based on students' demographic characteristics, including gender, age, and marital status. This indicates that distress among STHM students is relatively homogeneous and stable. The study therefore highlights contextual factors, such as academic pressure and the dynamics of military education, as the primary sources of variation in psychological distress.

In terms of perceived academic stress, the findings show that most STHM students perceived their academic stress levels as low to relatively low. Among the four dimensions of perceived academic stress, academic demands emerged as the most dominant dimension. These results indicate that academic pressure plays a central role in shaping students' stress experiences. Similar patterns have been observed in studies conducted in different educational and cultural contexts, suggesting that unmanaged academic stress may contribute to psychological difficulties.

The study also identified a significant positive relationship between perceived academic stress and psychological distress ( $r = 0.524$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that higher levels of perceived academic pressure are associated with higher levels of psychological distress among STHM students. This finding underscores the importance of monitoring academic stress within military education settings, as prolonged academic stress may increase the risk of psychological problems if not adequately addressed. Furthermore, these results emphasize the influence of psychosocial factors and institutional environments on psychological distress within military populations.

This pattern indicates that perceptions of academic stress generally fall within minimal to moderate levels, with only a small proportion of students showing a tendency toward increased stress. These findings provide an initial indication that the academic workload experienced by the majority of students remains within adaptive tolerance limits.

Mapping the sources of stress experienced by STHM students was conducted to identify potential factors triggering psychological pressure during the educational process. Stressor identification was carried out using six open-ended items representing everyday situations in academic and official training life. The categorization of stressors referred to the LSPSS dimensions, which were then specified and adapted to the military cultural context based on informal interviews with three students. The analysis was performed by mapping the frequency of selection of 28 stressors (N), where higher frequencies indicate stronger assumptions that these factors are widely experienced by students and potentially constitute the most prominent sources of psychological pressure. Based on the distribution of data at the stressor aspect level, the academic (N = 136) and organizational (N = 109) categories emerged as the stressor groups with the highest frequencies. These results suggest that the primary pressures perceived by STHM students originate from educational and structural systems. Moderate levels were also found in the external (N = 81) and social (N = 72) aspects.

The analysis results indicate that the stressor with the highest frequency was policy uncertainty (S19; N = 42), followed by academic competition (S4; N = 35) and financial pressure/economic responsibilities (S22; N = 33). These findings suggest that structural and

academic factors constitute the most dominant sources of pressure. Meanwhile, physical and interpersonal stressors, such as physical training (S6; N = 3) and access to communication with family or partners (S24; N = 6), contributed relatively less to overall stress levels.

Table 7: Overview of STHM Student Stressors

Code	Stressor	N
S1	Sequential workload and exams	29
S2	Volume of material to be studied	31
S3	Grade pressure	20
S4	Academic competition	35
S5	Strict and tiered evaluation system	21
S6	Physical activities/training	3
S7	Sleep/rest time	13
S8	Daily schedule density	23
S9	Changes in body rhythm due to night activity schedules	9
S10	Health conditions (minor injuries/illness but still attending activities)	16
S11	Relationships with fellow students	11
S12	Relations with seniors or superiors	14
S13	Interaction with instructors	17
S14	Time for socializing outside the campus/dormitory environment	18
S15	Adjusting to group norms/unit culture	22
S16	Strict discipline and rules	13

Code	Stressor	N
S17	Maintaining reputation	21
S18	Role conflict between work and academics	10
S19	Policy uncertainty/sudden rule changes	42
S20	Evaluation system	13
S21	Family/partner conflict	9
S22	Financial/economic burden	33
S23	Living conditions/campus facilities	24
S24	Communication access with family/partner	6
S25	Loss of personal direction/purpose	6
S26	Shift in values/meaning in undergoing education	15
S27	Conflict between personal values and institutional demands	12
S28	Maintaining religious motivation amidst routines	24
-	None	6

In the academic stressor domain, this study indicates that the greatest pressures experienced by STHM students originate from organizational and external factors, such as policy uncertainty, academic competition, and economic demands (Milasheva & Samoilov, 2020). These factors constitute significant stressors in students' lives, given the complexity of official education that involves high academic demands and close integration with a rigid military system (Ovchinnikov et al., 2019). Such external factors often contribute to the uncertainty experienced by students, which in turn intensifies their psychological pressure (Bekmagambetova et al., 2024). Therefore, it is crucial for military educational institutions, particularly STHM, to better understand these sources of stress and to develop effective mitigation strategies to manage these factors in order to minimize their negative impact on students' mental well-being (Yonge et al., 2023). Effective management of policy uncertainty, improvements in more transparent evaluation systems, and support for students' economic

conditions may serve as important measures in creating a more stable academic environment that supports psychological well-being.

This study also identifies several methodological limitations, particularly related to data collection, which was conducted entirely online (Kirsch et al., 2022). Although efficient, this approach limited contextual understanding, as the researchers were unable to clarify instrument items that may have been interpreted differently by participants (Khine Zaw et al., 2022). In addition, the scope of the population was limited to active STHM students. Although the entire population was successfully reached, the findings cannot be generalized to broader military or official education institutions due to the unique characteristics of STHM, which has a distinct educational structure (McDougle, 2020). Furthermore, this study did not consider other potential variables, such as family social support, personality factors, and mental health history, which may influence levels of psychological distress within military populations (Turner et al., 2019). Therefore, future research should incorporate more comprehensive additional variables to deepen the understanding of factors influencing psychological distress among official education students.

Based on these findings, the researchers recommend that official education at STHM and similar institutions develop programs that place greater emphasis on psychosocial support to reduce academic burden and enhance students' mental well-being (E. Gordon, 2025). Moreover, efforts to create a balance between academic demands, official duties, and personal recovery space are essential to reduce the risk of more severe psychological distress (Fraser, 2024). Further studies involving a broader range of variables and employing more holistic methodological approaches are expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of psychological well-being among students in official education settings.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the descriptive analysis of 107 participants indicate that the level of psychological distress among STHM students is generally low, with stress emerging as the most dominant dimension compared to depression or anxiety. This finding reflects students' ability to adapt to academic and official training pressures, although a small proportion of students demonstrated higher distress scores. On the other hand, the analysis of perceived academic stress revealed low to moderate stress levels, with the academic demands dimension falling into the high category, indicating that students experience substantial academic pressure. Correlation analysis further demonstrated a significant positive relationship between perceived academic stress and psychological distress.

The mapping of 28 stressors revealed that the primary sources of pressure stem from academic, organizational, and external aspects, as reflected in the highest frequencies of stressors such as policy uncertainty, economic pressure, and academic competition. These findings indicate that psychological distress among STHM students is not solely caused by academic demands, but is also influenced by institutional dynamics and external factors that holistically affect their psychological well-being.

This study contributes theoretically by expanding the understanding of psychological distress among students in military official education, who possess unique characteristics compared to students in general education settings. The findings highlight the need to develop theoretical models that integrate academic pressure, military disciplinary structures, and psychological adaptation strategies. Future research is recommended to explore protective factors such as resilience, coping styles, and social support. From a practical perspective, students are encouraged to develop adaptive stress management skills, utilize counseling services, and strengthen social support networks. Educational institutions should enhance student development systems, ensure proportional management of academic workload, and implement clearer communication policies. Meanwhile, the government is encouraged to

support policies aimed at strengthening the psychological resilience of military personnel by allocating budgets for mental health services and training military counselors.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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