

**Police Work and Its Effects on the Family**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Police work and how it effects the family is an extremely complex subject. The role of a police officer is ambiguous and requires one to use discretion to perform their duties.

While researching this paper it was found that there is minim to no education for officers during their training to guide them in the use of discretion or how to handle stress. Nor is there education offered after assuming their professional role as a police officer on effective techniques to use discretion or handle stress. This in turn causes stress to the officer. The stress that officers incur in their profession can be transferred to or shared by his/her family.

Stress can be thought of as a state of extreme difficulty, pressure or strain. To be more precise, stress can be a mentally or emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences and can be capable of affecting physical health (Merriam and Webster, 1980).

This paper will exam conditions that can lead to and cause stress to officers and their families, both directly and indirectly. It will discuss cases demonstrating extreme difficulties, pressures and strains on individual police officers and their families that make it adamantly clear why there are so many negative consequences. It will exam the effects these stressors have as well as preventive measures with both negative and positive outcomes.

## **CAUSES OF STRESS ON THE FAMILY**

### **The Role of a Police Officer**

The role of the police officer, in itself, is one of the most basic sources of stress for police. There is no clear-cut definition of exactly what their functions are (Goldstein, 1977, 21). The police officer's role ranges from protection of life and property, prevention of crime and enforcement of laws and ordinances to safeguarding the rights of individuals (Niederhoffer, 1969). The way in which officers approach and handle these tasks, is where discretion comes into play. Here, too, is the source of stress. When the citizens' own interpretation of what actions they believe the officer should use and the officer's actions do not compliment each other, officer stress follows. Everyday activities of police officers are constantly under scrutiny. This basic source of stress, the police role and the officer's response to it, also effects the family. Constant aggravation follows the officer home, where the family falls victim to a father or mother who is short fused and has the potential to become abusive.

### **Shift Work**

The role of the police officer, in itself, has already been acknowledged as a form of stress that effects the police officer's family. Another source of strain placed on the family of police officers and probably one of the most significant is that of shift work. Shift work disrupts family life and interferes with holidays and special family events. Single parents are particularly affected by the struggle to provide adequate child-care and a family life while working rotating shifts. Shift work can exact a physical toll on the officer that is manifested in emotional changes such as irritability and increased tension at home

(Scrivner and Reese, 1994). Kroes (1975) gives us an example of what a police officer's wife has to face on a normal day. He observes:

The [police officer's] wife must maintain two households, the normal daytime schedule for herself and the children and a separate schedule for her husband.

This is quite taxing on her as she must prepare separate meal schedules, coordinate separate sleeping schedules, try to keep the children from making too much noise during the day when her husband is asleep, jumping to answer the phone on the first ring so as not to disturb her sleeping husband, and so on.

Further she must often be alone at night, a condition which can be very unsettling for many women.

Police officer's families, at one time or another, will have to go on with everyday living without Mom or Dad. One of the hardest times for a police officer to be away from the family is in the evening, missing dinner and tucking the children into bed. One way for an officer parent, working the three-to-eleven or mid-watch shift, to stay involved with the family at this time is to make a nightly phone call home. The spouse who is at home can speak with the kids and they can discuss what they want to say to Mom or Dad when they call. The parents may want to set a one or two minute limit on the call and explain to the kids that there will be times that the officer parent may not be able to call. Another way to stay involved with the family at bedtime is to have the children write Mom or Dad a note of what they would like to tell them about the past day. Then, have them give the home parent an extra kiss goodnight to be passed along to the officer parent when they get home. An idea of an officer Mom was to videotape a nightly message for her kids when she would not be home. This doesn't replace Mom but with a small amount of thought,

creativity and a little extra work, the absent partner can always be present in one form or another (Goldfarb and Aumiller, 1999).

Disruptions in sleep patterns for the officer, spouse and other family members seem to be the major cause of stress due to shift work. A study conducted on police officers and shift work found that sleep quality and sleep hygiene improved after changing from rotating to permanent shifts. The study found that absentee rates fell from 1,400 hours in the six months prior to the change to 883 in the six months after the change (Phillips, Magan, Gerhardstein and Cecil, 1991). Other studies have found that rotating shifts causes chronic fatigue syndrome (up to 80 percent affected), depression and mood swings (5 to 15 times more than the general population), chronic sleep problems (up to 80 percent affected), and GI ailments (4 to 5 times more likely to occur) (Nicoletti and Spooner, 1994).

Relationships between officers and their families are considered to be high risk because of the stressors of the job, as well as the stress created by shift work. In order to have the family survive such pressure, the officer and his or her significant other must structure time and interaction. People require a balance in all areas of their lives. The structure developed within law enforcement families must involve both time together and personal time. Officers and their families should make an agreement related to hours of sleep, waking time and interpersonal time. This agreement should also allow for the officer and his or her significant other to both have individual time without defined responsibilities. A positive family life is able to relieve stress and improve tolerance for shift work. The officer should be as meticulous about planning for social and family time as he or she is about sleep and work time (Nicoletti and Spooner, 1994).

Shift work is certainly a problem for the law enforcement family and there seems to be no satisfactory solution. There will always be shift work as long as there is police work. Law enforcement is a twenty-four hour a day career, this will never change. Therefore, officers must learn to plan time to spend with the family and have an agreement with family members so that the officer family member has time for uninterrupted sleep. Such actions as making a phone call to children while on evening shift, writing notes or even leaving video taped messages for children can work wonders for staying close to family members even when you have to be away.

### **Undercover Work**

Undercover duty is another area of law enforcement that causes stress for the police officer's family. There are long, uncertain hours and concern for the officer spouse due to the secrecy of the assignment. Also, undercover duty is hard on the spouse, who is left at home with children, when the assignment keeps the officer away from home for an extended period of time.

Undercover duty can be a potent, effective tool for law enforcement. Few crime-fighting opportunities can equal the promise of gathering credible intelligence and evidence as can placing a trusted police officer in the midst of targeted activity. Yet undercover duty also has a potential for destructive personal consequences for law enforcement personnel. This is duty that affects their lives and all who share life with them. Neglect is the most common problem, but abuse occurs as well. It simply isn't a family if the law enforcement parent is so consumed by commitment to undercover work that he or she has too little energy left to sustain an effective role in the home. Preparation for undercover work should include marital and family issues. Police officers must

recognize that the work can be very involving, so much so that they might neglect their loved ones. Police officers need to balance all of their roles, especially those as spouse and parent. If an assignment will require extended time away from home, there should be a point of contact for the family, someone, who already shares a close, friendly association with the family. Also, there should be planned breaks that allow the undercover officer to return home frequently (Hibler, 1994).

Some police officers that are assigned to undercover work unintentionally get caught up in the role and forget about the family. Officers need to realize when undercover work is over for them, as individuals, and it is time to get back to "routine" police work. Returning to regular duties must be in every undercover officer's sights right from the start.

Kaufmann, Smith, and Palmatier (1994) recruited, from two basic narcotics officer training programs, twenty-four police officers currently working undercover assignments for a study. Officers were asked to complete the Hilson Relationship Inventory for Public Safety Personnel (HRI-P) and its associated data sheet. Officers were also asked to take the Hilson Spouse/Mate Inventory (HSMI) home and have their spouse/mate complete the instrument. The HRI-P and the HSMI are coordinated instruments for administration to police officers and their spouses/mates. The instruments independently measure the same factors in a relationship, but from each partner's unique perspective. The HRI-P contains three main scales that measure Stress Symptoms, Communication/Relationship Difficulties and Police Issues. The survey focuses on the relationships between police officers and their spouse/mates.

In general, undercover work was viewed as producing only a slight to moderate negative impact on respondents' relationships. The major finding of the study was that

officers and not their spouse/mate, report a greater negative effect on their lives of some job-related factors inherent to their chosen assignment. Undercover officers reported that their "Rotating Shifts," their "Spouse/mates being left alone at night," and the "Politics of their job" had significantly greater negative impact than that reported by their spouse/mates.

This study conducted by Kaufmann, Smith and Palmatier does not totally reflect the undercover officer work force nor could any study. But, one should remember that the study took into account only twenty-four undercover narcotics officers, resulting in a major finding of officers, not their spouse/mates, reported a greater negative effect on their lives of some job-related factor. Undercover work was viewed as producing only a slight to moderate negative impact on relationships of respondents.

### **Critical Incidents**

Police officers are exposed to severe trauma more so than most any other career, which creates a major source of stress. Just like other issues they are faced with during the workday these incidents follow the officer home whether they realize it or not. Williams (1987) states:

While there are remarkable similarities between the types of stresses on and the responses of [veterans and cops], there is also one crucial difference: for cops, the "war" never ends--they are out there 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to "protect and serve," to fight the criminal--our peacetime enemy. The police officer is expected to be combat-ready at all times while remaining "normal" and socially adaptive away from the job. The psychological toll for many is great, unexpected and not well understood. Their families and

friends have been adversely affected and emotionally wounded, as well (p.267).

Critical incidents which can result in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are situations requiring use of extreme force (shooting a suspect), observing another officer or innocent person being killed, working with victims of severe child abuse or rape or being victimized (being shot, kidnapped or threatened). These are only a few incidents which may trigger PTSD, it should be noted that every officer is different, what may effect one officer may not effect another in the same way (Ryan and Brewster, 1994).

Nielsen (1986) reviewed four key factors determining the traumatic stress of the event:

1. The event will be sudden and to a large degree unexpected.
2. The event may result in a serious threat to the officer's existence and well-being.
3. The event may include an element of loss such as the loss of a physical ability.
4. There may be an element of disruption of the officer's values or assumptions about his/her environment or those who live in it. (The disruption of values or belief systems may be especially relevant in determining the traumatic stress of an event for officers with strong religious convictions.)

Disaster work for police officers is another area of his or her job that may cause PTSD. Disasters are overwhelming events, which effects both the officer and the family. When disaster strikes the area in which the officer lives, whether it may be tornadoes, uncontrollable fires or mudslides, there is concern for the safety of the officer's family. When the officer spouse is away, he/she may not know the status of his/her family and just

the same the family is worried about the officer spouse. When the officer finally gets a break from the chaos, to go to their family, they will soon be called back to the street, leaving the family in a time in which they need each other (Wee, 1994).

The police officer post-traumatic literature suggests that approximately one-third of police officers who have been involved in traumatic incidents will experience long-term symptoms such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and irritability. The most prominent symptom experienced after involvement in trauma was recurrent and intrusive recollection of the event. It has also been noted that domestic violence may increase in some police families after a shooting incident (Swann and D'Agostino, 1994).

Some of the problems dominant in families of police officers with PTSD are extreme isolation, abuse of alcohol, family violence and low self-esteem. The women who stay in these types of relationships may stay for the same reasons as battered women: dependency upon partner, fear of failure of the marriage, hopes for improvement and low self-esteem. In addition, these wives most likely suffer guilt about their husbands' situation and thoughts of leaving him (Ryan and Brewster, 1994).

When a police officer is effected by a traumatic event the family of the officer play a key role in the recovery of the officer. But it is important to recognize that, at times, families may be so seriously overwhelmed by the stress response of their loved ones that they are unable to assume their appropriate roles in aiding with the recovery of the hurting police officer. They may be terrified by the event itself or by the powerful effects of the trauma that they perceive in their loved ones. Their fears may be widespread. They sense their own personal vulnerability as well as the realization that their loved one is more vulnerable than they have ever known him or her to be. They fear that the response to the traumatic event may become a permanent condition and that life as they have known it

will be negatively changed, forever. Families and loved ones of police officers may not know what to do or say and their own pain may cause them to withdraw from contact with each other (Mitchell, 1994).

Later this paper will cover ways in which the officer and their family can be assisted with the damaging effects caused by critical incidents.

### **Line-of-Duty Deaths**

An extreme cause of stress upon an officer's family is when the officer is killed in the line-of-duty. There is always the existence of danger in a police officer's profession but when this danger takes the life of a loved one; it becomes a horrifying reality to the family.

Officer-Parent Killed / Impact on Children. Death is a part of life that no one ever really welcomes. When an officer is killed in the line-of-duty it is sudden and there is no time to prepare, no time to say goodbye or tell the officer-spouse or officer-parent that you are sorry about something that happened just hours before he or she left for work. Death is final.

The impact on a child of an officer-parent being killed in the line-of-duty is overwhelming. Children of police officers who have died in duty-related deaths are direct victims of the trauma. These children suddenly learn that life is not permanent. In the case of duty-related death, mommy or daddy went to work, often at night, and suddenly was violently killed. The media respond and focus upon the death, as well as any coverage of future legal proceedings (Williams, 1994).

A child's understanding of the death of a slain police officer parent depends on several things, the age of the child, his/her level of reasoning or thinking, perception of death and events surrounding it and his/her previous experiences with death. The most common reactions to the death of an officer parent by the child is emotionally based and centered around feelings of fear, guilt, anger and confusion. The most common fears for children include fear of losing the remaining parent, fear of one's own death and fear of sleep (if sleep is associated with death, if the death occurred at night, which is often the case in duty-related incidents). Traumatized preschool children tend to withdraw as their anxiety grows and are prone to unlearn previously learned skills and behaviors. Elementary age children continue to show regressive symptoms associated with earlier stages of development such as excessive clinging, crying or behaviors previously out grown. Preadolescents and adolescents when traumatized may exhibit sleep and appetite disturbance as well as psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches. They may express emotions through aggressive, rebellious behaviors including sexual acting out or substance abuse and their patterns of reactions tend to resemble those of adults (Williams, 1994).

Immediate crisis intervention and debriefing for both parent and child is essential in the wake of a duty-related death (Williams, 1994). The child needs to be reassured that the officer parent who died loved him or her and did not want to die and it was nothing the child did that caused the death. The most important factor in helping the child to start accepting the loss is to explain to the child that death is final and that mommy or daddy will not be coming back (Gruher 1994).

Officer Killed / Impact on Officer's Parents. Death of an officer is devastating to the entire family, as we have just covered, but many times the parents are forgotten during this

time. The police officer has his/her own immediate family, the spouse and children, while they are grieving, at times, the parents of the deceased officer are left in the shadows.

When a child dies, no matter the age, the parents feel as if they, too, have died. A vital part of them has been severed, never to be whole again. Nor is the family ever complete again because someone significant is missing, the entire family structure is forever altered. Parents grieve for a lost child for the rest of their lives, grieving for what was and for what will never be. Parents also feel a sense of guilt, even though the child was an adult, because they did not protect their child, they failed as a parent. These are irrational feelings, yet at such times, these are true feelings. Most parents also have thoughts like, "Why didn't God take me instead? I've lived a full life, he was so young and had a family." (Gold, 1994).

In order for parents to heal, they need to tell and retell their story; this helps them through the grieving process. Because parents' worst fear is that their child will be forgotten, setting up some type of memorial for their deceased police officer child has proven extremely valuable in helping parents cope with their loss. A memorial reminds us that although not everlasting; their child's life will be eternal. Parents do not want to believe that their child died in vain and they do not want their child to be forgotten (Gold, 1994).

## **RESULTS OF STRESS**

### **Officer Overprotective of Family**

One of the most basic results of stress, which an officer incurs from the job, is being overprotective of their family. The officer's will to protect his or her family, is a behavior that is sometimes hard for the officer to detect. As Brandstreet (1994) explains:

The police profession contains norms for behaviors and traditions that have grown out of police service. While many of these norms contribute to effective job performance, they detract from healthy family life. Because the norms are assumed necessary for success in police work, many officers unconsciously adopt them as part of their personalities and act out the accepted behaviors in their private off-duty lives. This creates a negative impact on the officers' families, as many police behavioral norms conflict with the principles of healthy relationships and healthy families.

When an officer attempts to protect his/her spouse and children, her/she, may not realize they may be going overboard by wanting to know exact locations and times of when the spouse may arrive home. To the spouse, they feel resentful thinking the officer spouse does not trust them, when in reality the officer spouse really cares. The family also begins to get a feeling of being over-controlled.

Because police officers are exposed to violence, deception and victimization, they become more mistrustful and suspicious of others around them. This leads to overprotection at home, which is expressed in two ways. One form of overprotection is a police officer's decision not to "burden" the spouse with concerns or fears related to work issues. This refusal to discuss work avoids "hurting" the spouse and helps the police officer to not experience the emotional impact of work trauma. As a result, spouses notice and resent this withdrawal. The second form of overprotection is extreme restriction for both the children and the spouse out of fear that something will happen (Honig and White, 1994)

The everyday activities of police officers and the officer's role in society all add to the officer becoming a suspicious person. The duties of a police officer teach them to be

protective. When this behavior is carried home with the officer and used to the extreme on the family resentment will be the result.

### **Alcoholism**

When stress is high, many officers to combat this feeling and relax use alcohol. All too often this innocent activity turns on the officer and their family. Alcoholism can be found in police departments and law enforcement agencies no matter what the size, large or small. Whether it is an addiction or abuse of alcohol it effects the work environment by increased on-the-job accidents, absenteeism, poor and deteriorating job performance and excessive sick leave.

Stressors, which may be the basis for alcoholism, reflect back on several issues that have already been covered. Although much is being done today to adjust work schedules, shift work has been shown to be problematic in terms of stress, not only on the police officer but also on the members of the police officer's family, and affects the quality of family life in general. Being constantly exposed to personal injury or death due to direct acts of violence and other dangerous conditions takes its physical and psychological toll on officers. Another contributor to stress, seen by officers, is the exposure to critical incidents. The police officer is, at times, harassed by a hostile public that does not understand the nature of police work and has unrealistic expectations about the role of law enforcement in general. The police officer is expected to be at once each and all of the following: enforcer, problem solver, mediator, counselor, social worker, rescuer, advocate, and peace keeper. Trying to be all things to all people all the time can be frustrating, especially when we see how public perceptions and those of television and other media play further havoc with the image of the police officer. If police officers are responsible

for upholding the law of the land, the "image" implies that they are held to higher standards of conduct than the public they serve. In order for police officers to cope in these conditions there is no wonder that some officers tend to use and abuse alcohol or other substances (D'Angelo, 1994).

As with other stressors in the life of police officers alcoholism effects the family, but these effects are somewhat more complex. D'Angelo (1994) writes:

A significant breakthrough in the treatment of alcoholism and other addictions is the notion and the belief that alcoholism is a family disease, in that not only is the alcoholic affected but the family members are also adversely affected to a greater or lesser degree. Each alcoholic affects the lives of four other people in some fashion. The majority of the alcoholic's impairments are behavioral and have dramatic impacts on family members, who in turn become bewildered and confused, angry and fearful, guilt-ridden and shameful, when confronted by the alcoholic's behavior. No family member can be said to have caused the alcoholism, yet they may behave in a way that allows the alcoholic to continue the destructive addiction by "enabling" behaviors, such as covering up, making excuses, and protecting the alcoholic from painful consequences.

Officers often get caught up in a situation in which they may be ostracized if invited out for a drink after work and they decline the offer. In such an instance, most officers will succumb to the peer pressure and stay out for a late night drink. These officers are torn by the reality of wanting to get home to his personal family and yet also wanting to please his "police family." When the officer stays out with the other officers he is also

ridiculed if he decides not to drink to keep up with the group. Before long this "choir practice" becomes a routine for the officer.

Skultety and Singer (1994) give an account of one such "choir practice":

Hearing the sound of a siren, she rolled over; the clock showed 1:30 a.m. Her husband, a suburban Chicago Police Detective, was late again. Her feelings were confusing---hurt, abandonment, anger, and fright. At times she felt that if something did happen to him, it would serve him right, it would teach him a lesson not to drink again. And then she felt guilt, how could she even think things like this. What if something really did happen? Then who would be there for the family? "Oh dear God, please let him come home safe tonight." And it was now 1:45 a.m. and he still wasn't home.

In summary of Skultety and Singer's "choir practice", the account continued by the detective's wife finally hearing her husband return at 4:30 a.m., he was drunk again. An argument ensues, each placing blame on the other in voices so loud it wakes the baby. The night ended by the husband passing out on the couch, as many nights prior. Unbeknownst to the detective's wife, he had been on a stake-out that turned into a high speed pursuit that ended in a felony stop and a good bust. The sergeant then suggested that they celebrate by a few quick drinks, the 3-11 shift lasted until 4:30 a.m.

This example shows how the so-called "choir practice", or whatever terminology one would use, effects the law enforcement family. Not every police officer that goes out for a drink with other officers after work are going to end up drunk and five hours late getting home. The point is that officers, who already have the tendency to abuse alcohol, this

gives them the opportunity to continue the behavior. In the families of these officers, family roles, family rules and the family system as a whole are negatively affected.

In the past, law enforcement agencies often viewed personal problems, stress, and forms of addiction as the individual officer's own private business. This approach proved to be unsuccessful in assisting and retaining valuable personnel, reducing the hidden costs of addiction, or addressing other related problems within the police community. One of the most notable solutions that have come about in the law enforcement community is the establishment of the Employee Assistance Programs. These programs are a cost-effective, confidential and successful early intervention system designed to identify and assist police officers with problems that interfere with their ability to perform and function on the job. Programs like these were developed for police departments because of the recognition that police officers are a very valuable asset to the department, and that investments in treatment for an officer's health and retention is less costly than nontreatment (D,Angelo, 1994).

### **Domestic Violence**

For some officers, whether male or female, the pressures and stress of the job overpower them, to the point where they abuse the ones in their lives who mean the most, the family. The law enforcement career promotes physical force, compliance and suspicion; these are just a few of the factors, which increase the risk of domestic violence.

Working in a paramilitary environment can have two types of potentially negative effects on the home life of the police officer. The average police officer's understanding of the world is filled with "superior" police officers (supervisors) who give orders that the police officer (subordinates) obeys. Since most law enforcement officers have a more

traditional view of family hierarchy, it may seem like a natural extension to give orders at home and to expect family members to obey (Stratton and Stratton, 1982,8). The second effect of a paramilitary environment is often in terms of displaced anger and frustration. Police officers are just as likely to disagree with their supervisors or be angered by orders they do not agree with as any other civilian in their job. However, expressing anger or disagreement in a paramilitary environment is often seen as insubordination. Police officers often take this anger or frustration home, displacing it into their relationships (Honig and White, 1994).

Having a suspect comply with what an officer tells them is an everyday part of the job. Law enforcement academies stress the importance of gaining compliance and in fact often associate exact compliance with officer safety. Officers are taught if the suspect does not totally comply, they may be trying to conceal something or preparing an attack on the officer, therefore there is a loss of control. Failure to obtain complete compliance from a spouse may trigger that same fear of loss of control and result in some type of physical force being used. The use of force, for the police officer on the job, is a fact of life. It must be an option at work. Once physical force becomes an option, however, it may be chosen inappropriately as a solution to an altercation at home (Honig and White, 1994).

Police officers have the "us - them" mentality. Lies and deception are the norm in the field and it is hard for a police officer to "turn the trust back" at home, which can result in chronic jealousy and paranoia. As police officers are exposed to more and more deception, victimization and violence, they become more suspicious and mistrustful of the outside world. This can result in overprotection at home. The police officer may not want to trouble the spouse with concerns or fears related to work. The spouse notices this and is resentful, especially after they find out that the officer spouse shares problems with their

colleagues instead of the spouse. Another form of overprotection is extreme restriction for both spouse and children out of fear that something will happen to them. This can lead to the isolation of the family from the outside world. This kind of isolation can aid in the progress of domestic violence since it cuts the spouse off from information and support from the outside world (Honig and White, 1994).

Neidig, Russell and Seng (1994) found several work-related issues relating to marital violence:

We have found a significant relationship between work-related variables such as: 1) duty or assignment; 2) the shift; and 3) number of hours worked per week, and the rates of marital aggression. This suggests that marital violence in law enforcement families can be understood, in part, as a result of the demands of the profession and of specific working conditions and that there may be assignments within law enforcement that involve risk for marital violence as a unique occupational hazard (i.e., those assigned to narcotics report rates of severe marital aggression four times the overall law enforcement average).

Domestic violence is present in all levels or ranks of law enforcement, from the patrolman to the chief. It was also noted that, police officers who work excessively long hours and fail to take leave, show higher rates of physical aggression toward their spouse, suggesting that marital violence may be associated with increased job dedication rather than the converse (Neidig, Russell and Seng, 1994).

Johnson (1991) surveyed 728 officers and 479 spouses. The officers were asked if they had behaved violently in the last six months toward their spouse and/or children. The officers' spouses were asked about any abuse they had received by their officer-spouse or

partner. The study indicated that approximately 40% of the officers surveyed reported that they had behaved violently toward their spouse and/or children in the last six months and that 10% of spouses reported having been physically abused by their partner.

Police departments are currently using a screening process when selecting candidates to become police officers. The psychological examine is one such process. It is also suggested to gather information about an applicant's use of alcohol and his or her family origin. Alcohol consumption should be closely examined and evidence of difficulty should be considered an additional basis on which to screen out a candidate. According to the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women (LACAAW) some 80% of the perpetrators of domestic violence witnessed violence in their family of origin, any individual who has a history of violence in his or her family of origin may also warrant additional examination to ensure that this individual has developed better interpersonal skills (Honig and White, 1994).

Domestic violence is very detrimental to the law enforcement family. There is no room in any family for the destruction this situation brings. By identifying the problem early and seeking help through the department's assistance programs or, if the family prefers, a private counselor, the family can be saved from an unhappy and devastating life of physical and psychological pain.

### **Suicide**

The extreme result of officer stress is suicide. Police officer suicide is a tragic problem, a tragedy in which more and more families are being forced to deal with. Any time a death occurs within the family it is truly a tragedy for those who are left behind. With suicide the spouse and family members who are left alone try to find a reason why. They

are left with guilt feelings, wondering what they missed, what could they have done to prevent such an act of violence toward oneself.

Robert Douglas (a former Baltimore Police officer now a minister), who is on a mission to stop police officers in the United States from killing themselves, reported in a conference in Duluth, Minn. that, "We are losing 250 to 300 cops a year to suicide. It may be 500 a year, but we can document 250 to 300. There is a terrible, terrible problem with police officers and suicide. This number is growing." Robert Douglas' life was saved when his wife walked into the room just before he committed suicide, now he's trying to do the same for other officers. Today's officer's are one and one half times more likely to commit suicide than their predecessors only a decade ago, according to John Violanti, a leading police suicide expert and former New York state trooper. So many law enforcement officers are committing suicide that Violanti calls the situation an epidemic in need of radical action (Armstrong, 1999a).

Some officers use alcohol on a regular basis to try to relieve stress but in all actuality, they are making matters worse for themselves and their families. In nearly every case of police suicide, the officer uses his or her police-issued handgun, and alcohol is a factor. Boston Police Sergeant Richard Ross, who studied the suicides of twelve fellow officers who killed themselves in the past ten years, said guns were used in every case and alcohol usually was a factor as well. "Alcohol is a big-time factor, a common denominator," Ross said. "Alcohol is a crutch and a key to social life in the department." (Armstrong, 1999a)

There are many different reasons why officers feel extreme stress, related from the job, but B.L. Danto (1978) claims that marital problems are the single most important precipitating stress factor in police suicides (Ellison and Genz, 1983). A study by Janik and Kravitz (1994) found that marital problems and being suspended were important

contributing factors to a police officer's decision to attempt suicide. The study surprisingly found substance abuse (drug/alcohol) was not. For other officers, it is not the blood on the streets or marital problems, but the politics and conflicts in the department that can make a life miserable. The wife of a police officer told a U.S. Justice Department panel studying police stress in 1997, "My husband came home more screwed up with department problems than with anything he ever encountered on the streets." The perception of unfair promotional systems and arbitrary disciplinary procedures and the rigid requirements of military-like hierarchy were just some of the sources of stress cited by police officers. A 1981 FBI study of what makes police work stressful found that being passed over for a promotion was more difficult for police officers to deal with than pursuing an armed suspect or responding to a hostage situation (Armstrong, 1999a, 34).

One officer's wife, who found herself alone with four boys to raise, after her husband committed suicide, tells her story:

Sylvia Banuelos realized there was something different about her husband's death when she was told the police department would not provide a traditional gun salute at his funeral. A seven-year veteran of the Orange County Sheriff's Department in southern California, Ernie Banuelos shot himself in his car in March of 1997. Much of the traditional ceremony of police funerals was missing from his service. The sheriff didn't even attend. A spokesman said he was at a conference in Los Angeles at the time. Some of Banuelos's colleagues wore black cloth over their badges in tribute, but even that gesture was made over the objections of supervisors. Armstrong (1999a)

Mrs. Banuelos blamed her husband's death on his long-standing frustration at being unable to win a promotion while junior deputies, he believed were less qualified, rose above him. Many suicide survivors quickly find themselves cut off from the law enforcement community (Armstrong, 1999a).

McCafferty (1992) gives six "tell-tale" signs to look for when an officer starts to break down:

1. Becomes overly aggressive (goes out of his way to give tickets, harass certain classes of citizens, make physical arrests, and use excessive force);
2. Stays after work to drink with other police officers and uses alcohol to help with sleeping problems and to relax;
3. Buys the best bullet-proof vest and a better and more powerful pistol;
4. Puts his family into the background after his drinking and drug-using buddies;
5. Causes damage to citizens' property (cuts tires with knives, hits citizens' cars with police car bumpers, runs over animals or shoots dogs or other animals); and
6. Stays by himself, watching violent movies on video cassettes. These movies are military in nature and show police winning battles. The stressed-out police officer tends to read novels that become increasingly violent and brutal, with graphic description of violent acts.

Police suicide is the most devastating event that can happen to the officer's family. It leaves the family shattered, and wondering why and how something like this could have happened. They are also left with a sense of guilt, thinking that if they could have picked

up on what was troubling their officer spouse maybe they could have prevented the suicide. But suicide is very complex and there are no easy answers for the family. Maybe if officer families are more aware of the list of signs that was given by McCafferty (1992) they could possibly detect the on set of the officer spouse break down.

## **FAMILY THERAPY**

### **Professional Counseling**

As we have found, the complexity of the police officer's job can make it extremely stressful, whether unintentional or not, this stress is relayed to the family. At times, the officer and his or her family cannot handle the pressures which have mounted between them, in order to save the marriage and family they must seek counseling. Most police departments offer assistance programs where an officer and their family have access to profession help.

The professional counselor views the family as a system in which each member is an integral part of the functioning whole. The family system has been defined as an organizationally complex, open, adaptive, information-processing system (Kantor and Lehr 1975). In family therapy, the focus is not so much on the relationship between the therapist and the patient, but rather on the relationships between the various members of the family. Because the symptoms are viewed as byproducts of relationship events, the processes within the family unit become the ultimate importance (Reese, 1982).

Police psychologists are finding that when police departments let it become known that psychological services are available, calls for child and family evaluation increase. The extent of services offered to a police officer by a psychologist, either as a staff member or as a consultant, depends on a number of factors. The first is the issue of the psychologist's

background, training, and expertise. The clinical psychologist may be able to offer only limited clinical services. The generalist who is capable of working with a wide range of human problems will find many instances where a variety of skills are required for individual and family counseling. The second, and probably the most important factor, is the issue of trust and the degree to which the personnel of the police department accept the psychologist. The third factor is the general attitude about psychology, psychologists and mental health held by senior members of the department. Regular contact and positive interaction between the psychologist and police officers at all levels is essential for developing and continuing a relationship between a behavioral science unit and the police department (Blau, 1994).

The most common referral received by psychologists working with police officers has to do with unhappiness between the husband and the wife regarding the work situation, finances, the children and promises that have been made and not fulfilled (Blau, 1994).

Bell (1988) writes:

To the mates and children of police officers, regardless of the officer's rank, age, sex, or duty assignment, police work seems unfair. The officer who works shift hours; witness human pain and distress; carries a gun; and is subject to the frustrations of a convoluted court system, excessive paperwork, negative public feedback and unresponsive management is bound to carry the effects into the home. Police officers seem unique in the amount of daily frustration they experience and the reactions from which the family cannot seem to escape.

The effects of police work on the children of police officers can be great. Children and adolescent members of police families are caught between feelings of loyalty and pride in

their mother's or father's work role and anxieties about peer rejection because of popular, unappreciative attitudes toward police (Blau, 1994).

One approach to dealing with the negative effects of law enforcement on family relationships is the Officer/Spouse Workshop. When a workshop is offered information is provided to all police officers in the department. Letters are also sent home to the significant others. Attendance to the workshop is voluntary. In order to reach all the officers interested in the workshop, it is offered at a variety of times and days. In most of the departments where the workshops were held a meal or get together was held prior to the workshop for all of the officers and their significant others. The first goal of the workshop is to build a relationship with the audience. The second goal of the workshop is to provide techniques and information to the participants. Workshop participants consist of officers, their significant others, and adolescent children, where appropriate. During the introduction, the participants provide information about their relationship in terms of number of years of marriage or number of years being together and number of children. The next phase in the workshop involves discussing job stressors and their impact on the relationship. Audience participation and interaction is stressed throughout all phases of the workshop. The next phase involves dealing with the personality stressors. Specifically the officers' personality characteristics that help them survive on the job are discussed and related to how these characteristics create problems in a marriage or a relationship. The next phase involves identification of relationship difficulties, highlighting the specific problems that start to develop in the early phases. The last phase of the workshop involves suggestions for prevention and repair. The information presented in this phase attempts to match the techniques with the officers'/significant others' acceptance levels. Techniques, which are too "touchy-feely" are not presented.

This phase involves some basic communication techniques, as well as relationship check-ups and techniques on how to develop a shared mission. Feedback from the participants and administration within the departments has been extremely positive of the Officer/Spouse Workshops (Flatter, 1994).

Professional counseling is incorporated in the critical incident debriefing process. Critical incident defusing/debriefing is a process by which officers who have been involved in traumatic incidents are better able to cope with their feelings and emotions resulting from the incident.

Until recently, spouses had not been involved in the critical incident defusing/debriefing process. Attention to spouses was typically restricted to making sure that messages were carefully and sensitively delivered regarding their spouse-officers' having been involved in a critical incident, as a shooting, and the extent of their injuries, if any. At no time did the department or the department psychologist ever respond directly to the needs of the spouse (Trompetter, 1994).

In order for the police officer and his or her family to deal with the effects of critical incidents and PTSD they must attend debriefings where they are able to discuss the past events. Ryan and Brewster (1994) discuss debriefings in detail:

Debriefings have psychological and educational elements and include seven phases. The first phase is an **introduction** and is followed by four general discussion phases of **facts** of the incident, **thoughts** about the incident, emotional **reactions** to the incident and **symptoms** of distress. The sixth phase involves **teaching** ways to reduce stress. Finally, the seventh phase of **reentry** includes questions and a review. The value of critical incident stress debriefings for officers involved in critical incidents are being realized by

increasing numbers of police departments across the nation. In light of the known effects of PTSD on family members, an extension of the critical incident stress debriefing process should include officer's spouses/mates and children. In order to facilitate this support for family members, additional specialists such as chaplains, family counselors and school psychologists may serve a supporting role to the team supervisor when expertise with children/families is necessary.

When an officer is involved in a critical incident which is very traumatic or if over time the constant dealings with certain issues begins to show signs of extreme stress, this officer should seek counseling. In the case of a critical incident the police department should offer some type of debriefings. When given the opportunity to attend a debriefing session, officers should not forget to include their families.

### **Peer Counseling**

When police officers begin to have problems on the job and at home many times they do not trust just anyone to talk with. This is how the concept of peer counseling was started; police officers trusting in other police officers.

As Mullins (1994) writes:

Police families (like police officers) are often a "closed fraternity." There is hesitancy for police families to seek help when faced with a crisis situation. Fear of tarnishing the spouse's reputation, public chastisement, ridicule and loss of respect from other police officers and families, and even censure from other families are all factors that may preclude the family from seeking needed help.

Informal peer support groups started back with "choir practice", of course this is not the positive setting and support that officers and their families need but basically, officers talking with officers is the first step of stress relief (Klein, 1994). Without training peer support counseling can be as detrimental as the "choir practices" were.

Peer support teams are made up of volunteers who have an excellent work record and are respected within the police department. After a list of volunteers is compiled, officers from the department complete a survey on who from the list is most qualified. Three psychologists then interview the volunteers before they are chosen. The volunteers, who are finally chosen, receive three to five days of training in a variety of skills, including communication and listening skills, counseling skills in psychological problems (i.e., depression, suicide, etc.), alcohol and drug abuse, and stress and traumatic stress issues. They are also trained in family issues such as marital discord, lack of communication and "taking the job home" (Mullins, 1994). A major aspect of the training is to give peer counselors some guidelines and identify those situations where referral to a professional psychologist is necessary (Klein, 1994).

The peer counseling team can be a valuable resource for the families of police officer. With proper training and organization, the peer counseling team can resolve most family crisis that ultimately affect the performance and mental well-being of police officers, saving the department money in turn-over and potential litigation expenses and improving overall morale of the police department (Mullins, 1994).

## **CONCLUSION**

Police work and how it effects the family is an extremely complex subject. As we have covered, some of the stressors range from use of discretion, shift work, undercover duties, critical incidents and line-of-duty deaths. Each one of these areas presents a unique set of problems for the family.

We also looked at the results that these stressors have on the police officer's family, which included the overprotection of the family, alcoholism, domestic violence and suicide. No other issue can effect the family as dramatically as the loss of an officer spouse/parent.

Over the years the stressors that officers and their families experience have been identified, researched and addressed. This is exhibited by several different types of family therapy groups that may assist the officer and their family with problems they may encounter. Most police departments have assistance programs that will refer the officer and their family to a professional counselor. When officers and their families do not feel comfortable speaking with a professional, they may seek a peer counseling group, which allows them to speak with other officers about their problems.

Unfortunately these programs are not mandatory, with the exception of critical incident debriefings. Often these programs carry a stigmatism. Those who have not experienced or admitted to the daily stressors that the officer and their family face, view these programs as programs for weak or inferior individuals. Those who do not take advantage of these programs for whatever reason continue to hold a high-risk place in the work force.

As a final thought, we must remember that the stressors mentioned in this paper are only the most common. There is a multitude of other stressors each one carrying a varying amount of weight related to the reaction of each individual officer.

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