

Stress of Being a Detective in a Small Town

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10-10-2016

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Stress of Being a Detective in a Small Town

Unlike detectives in large cities, being a detective in a small town has a diverse set of problems. Imagine you are a detective working a homicide case. You have to process the crime scene and evidence, conduct interviews and interrogations and follow up on all leads. You do this while your boss and the public are constantly pressuring you for information and a solution to the case because there is a killer on the loose. To make matters worse, the local press is demanding answers or publishing their own theories adding to the pressure to make an arrest. Everyone in a small town knows each other intensifying the already pressures on the detective. All of this combined pressure on one detective is an enormous burden. This is one type of stress a small town detective deals with.

The stress of being a police officer is enough to handle, but having the pressure to solve cases is a whole new level of stress. When you add the stress of supervisors, administrators, public and media the stress level intensifies. Without proper support you become a victim of that stress. Management and treatment of detective and his environment are vital to the survival of any detective.

Officers Perspectives

According to the US Census Bureau, Russellville is a small town in Arkansas with a population of approximately 27,920 (Bureau, 2016). The Russellville Police Department is allotted 57 sworn officers. In comparison, Russellville is much smaller than surrounding areas such as Conway with a minimum population of 58,908 (Bureau, 2016) and 127 sworn officers.

The Russellville Police Department staffs six sergeants, six lieutenants, three captains, one Chief of Police and 42 patrolmen. Due to injury, illness and recruitment by larger cities the department is usually not fully staffed with mainly positions of patrolman missing.

The allocation of job duties are as follows. The rank of a patrolman includes quarter master, warrants officer and desk officer. One patrolman is assigned to the 5th Judicial Drug Task Force and four patrolmen are assigned to the criminal investigation division. Within the Criminal Investigation Division there is also one sergeant and one lieutenant.

The duties of a patrolman include controlling traffic and responding to calls for service. The desk officer is responsible for walk in reports and sex offender registration. The warrants officer is responsible for serving misdemeanor warrants and working district court as a bailiff. The quarter master is responsible for cataloging all evidence, transporting evidence to the Arkansas State Crime Laboratory, and ordering equipment as needed for officers.

Detectives are responsible for the investigation of felony and misdemeanor crimes, interviews and interrogations, crime scene processing, case data collection for the prosecution and any follow up investigations as required by the prosecuting attorney. With only four patrol detectives you can see that the case load for an entire city can be heavy. Add on a high intensity case and you are pulled even thinner. In large cities they have crime scene technicians to work the crime scenes. In Russellville, the detective works the crime scene as well as the rest of the case.

Detectives in small towns like Russellville deal with stresses other than working cases. Small town politics always play a role in a case. Often in small towns positions of power are held by the wealthiest in the community. A sense of entitlement is often a factor that must be dealt with by the administration to shield the detective so that he can perform his duties in a timely

manner. When this does not occur, the detective cannot be effective in his role. People in these positions often times put pressure to solve their case over other cases because they feel theirs is more important because of who they are.

While I was assigned to the Criminal Investigation Division, I was investigating an aggravated armed robbery of one of our convenience stores. The clerk was held at gun point. When he could not open the safe, he was struck in the head with the handgun. There was video of the event, however the suspects were completely covered from head to toe. There was no way to positively identify them.

A couple of days before the robbery a local bank manager had a Halloween decoration stolen from his front porch. Patrol officers investigated the claim and located the decoration. They notified him of what they had found and his wife drove to the residence and identified the decoration as theirs. The officers did not follow up the next day due to having the next three days off. The bank manager called and complained nothing was being done to return his decoration. The chief told my lieutenant he wanted something done on his case to pacify the man. My lieutenant called me to his office and assigned me the task. When I reminded him I was in the middle of a major investigation and had just developed a good lead, he reminded me that this was a request from the chief of police. Like a good “government mule”; as my lieutenant called me, I took care of the stolen decoration while solving the robbery. Even after recovering the decoration, they were still upset because the pumpkin was not the one that had been stolen.

This produced an enormous amount of stress in my life. I ended up working 18 hours that day. I missed an event with my children and caused two other detectives to work late as well. Yes, we made the arrest on the robbery and I recovered the decoration. Yes the chief and my lieutenant were happy with me. I still had the pressure to perform in a situation that could've

been handled by patrol when they came back on shift had the bank manager not felt entitled. After that investigation I was known for investigating the Halloween decoration theft, not for solving a difficult aggravated robbery. Detectives are pressured by administration, the public and media to solve every case and are accused of “failing” when they can’t solve or lose a case. When the case is solved with a conviction there is no praise. They simply did their job. The detective wants to do his job well. With all these added pressures and stress, it’s that much harder to get it done.

Types of Work

Detectives in small towns do not have extra staff to work crime scenes like larger cities. They do not have crime scene technicians or secretaries to put a case together for them to give to the prosecutor for prosecution. They must respond to the crime scenes, process it, collect evidence, process the evidence or submit it to the Arkansas State Crime Laboratory. Afterwards they must follow up on all leads, conduct all interviews and interrogations, and complete all the necessary paperwork required to present the case to the prosecutor for charges and trial.

At the Russellville Police Department all detectives are trained to complete these tasks. Some of the detectives attend training provided by the Criminal Justice Institute (CJI) in Little Rock, Arkansas (Institute, 2005). While I was in the Criminal Investigation Division, I attended numerous crime scene courses provided by CJI. I also attended the Crime Scene Technician Certificate Program (Institute, 2005) and the Advanced Crime Scene Certificate Program comprised of Crime Scene Management/ Crime Scene Photography, Latent Print Processing, Biological and Trace Evidence, Impression Evidence, Crime Scene Sketching, Note Taking and Report Writing and Crime Scene Investigation. These classes are spread out over six months

with a test each week and a final exam, both written and practical. Once a detective has attended these advanced courses they return to the police department and are then expected to train not only other detectives but also patrolmen. Detectives are given additional training in digital photography, crime scene investigation, and interview and interrogation. You may say, well it is their job, and you would be right on most occasions.

Detectives are not limited to just working felony cases. They also work misdemeanor cases, such as the one I referenced to earlier. Although those cases are not extremely common they do tend to happen at the most inopportune times. This brings unnecessary stress for detectives. The detectives know this type of situation will happen. It is still a stress that needs to be managed in some way to assist the detectives in prolonging their career. Additional stressors are expectations by management, along with the stress applied by the detective himself, pressure from the media and the public. A detective usually puts additional stress on himself to get the case solved and get as much satisfaction as possible for the victim in the case he is working. In short, he takes pride in his work.

Generally, in small towns, the major crimes are sporadic at best. In larger cities such as Little Rock, major crimes occur more often. With larger numbers of personnel, detectives are assigned a specialty field. Due to stress associated with more difficult cases, some detectives have requested to be removed from their position and placed at a lower stress position within their department. I had a friend who was a homicide detective in North Little Rock. I was in Little Rock to arrest a visiting Arena Football player when I saw Officer Strayhorn working security. I knew he had been a NLR homicide detective but now he was in uniform. I asked him if he was working security as overtime. He told me he was on duty. When I asked what happened to put him back on the street, he said the stress of working homicide for three years got to him.

He was not able to cope with the intense stress that came with working homicide cases. It got to be too much so he transferred back to the patrol division.

As with Officer Strayhorn, if a detective does not realize he is under stress he will bottle it up until it is unmanageable. The type of work detectives do is very important as well. In large cities such as North Little Rock a property crime detective will be under different stress than a homicide detective. You will still have the self-imposed stressors as well as victims or family members of victims. With different crimes you will endure additional stressors from administration. In small towns there is not enough man power to divide the detectives up by crimes so the detective is left to do it all. Because of this, they feel all the pressure and stress that is spread out among detectives in a larger city but do not always have the ability to go to an easier position, and should not be expected to do so.

Expectations of Administrators

Sometimes administrators put pressure to solve cases on their detectives without realizing it. Administrators have outside pressures to get the cases solved and that sometimes trickles down to the detectives. Chiefs of police sometimes lose sight of the amount of pressure and stress they put on their detectives. They are under an enormous amount of stress from the mayor, city council, public or even the media. When the Chief becomes less of a buffer for the detective and more of the problem, it increases the amount of pressure and stress the detectives feel.

When I was a detective at the Russellville Police Department, I was under constant stress to solve cases by my administrators. Over the years our division had numerous major cases that we were able to solve within a week or two, some within days of the crime. Administrators began to expect this type of production on all cases. When a major case came in, the

administration would ask why no arrest had been made after a few days. When detectives have the stress of working the case for an expecting victim while adding the expectations of their administration, the public and the press, it makes working cases that much harder.

Administrators are needed. They need to be the support staff and to protect the detective from outside forces. They have responsibilities that sometimes adds stress to detectives working cases. Where administrators fail is when they pass some of that stress onto the detectives. There is nothing wrong with an administrator wanting to know where the detective is in working the case. On the contrary he should want to know, but how he goes about getting that information is occasionally the problem.

Communication within a police department is vital. How and what you say from a supervisor standpoint is critical. The same can be said about an administrator. The administrator seldom comes to a detective who is working a homicide case and asks how the case is going just for conversation. Usually it is because the mayor, a councilman, or the media want to know. His motive in asking is sometimes the problem in small towns. This is reflected in how he/she asks for the information.

How Other Departments Handle the Stress of Their Detectives

According to the website suburbanstats.org, the city of Dardanelle has a population of approximately 4,693 (Bureau, 2016). The Dardanelle Police Department has nine officers. One of those officers is Detective Sergeant Thurman Lunsford. Sergeant Lunsford has been with the Dardanelle Police Department for fourteen years. He has been a detective for that department for four years.

Sergeant Lunsford, in an interview on September 26, 2016, said he was the only detective in Dardanelle. When asked what his most stressful case worked was, he referenced a case of rape that was 10 years old. He felt the normal stress of a rape case but the additional stress arose from a lack of resources. His administration didn't pressure him to solve the case quickly but they placed unrealistic expectations on him. He was denied overtime or comp time to work the case and not given any personnel resources to compensate for the difference.

Sergeant Lunsford is required to get cases worked during his shift. This adds additional stress. Sometimes in working cases, leads come at the end of an assigned shift. Sometimes those leads are time sensitive and need to be dealt with immediately. When your administrators are confined by a budget that doesn't accommodate overtime, some leads are lost. When you are the only detective that department has, some cases could go unsolved due to these restrictions.

This is an issue all small departments face. They can't pay the overtime so they expect the detective to get the case worked on their assigned shift. As the detective, the pressure to get the case solved for the victim is extreme, yet they feel handcuffed in their efforts by the department's budget. The department administrators recognize there is an issue but cannot afford to go over budget. Sometimes this leaves the detective to work over "off the clock" to get the case solved. I know from my experience, I have worked numerous times without pay just to get the information to get the case solved. Sergeant Lunsford was asked if his department had any plan in place to address the stress he feels while working cases. He said to his knowledge they did not.

Detective Scott Harper is a detective for the Atkins Police Department. Atkins is a small community on the East side of Pope County. With a population of 3,016 (Bureau, 2016), the Atkins Police Department has 7 full time officers and 4 part time officers. One of the full time

officers is Sergeant Harper and he has been with the Atkins Police Department for 17 years. 15 of those years has been as a detective for that department. From 1986 to 1989, prior to working for Atkins Police Department, he worked for the Russellville Police Department assigned to the Russellville Police Department's Criminal Investigation Division.

In an interview with Detective Harper, on September 26, 2016, he was asked what case he worked that caused him the most stress. He cited a rape case in which he had no physical evidence from the victim or the crime scene. He placed a lot of stress on himself because the victim was a troubled child and the mother did not believe her. He knew the suspect was guilty but could not get the confession. He felt like he let the victim down. When Detective Sergeant Harper worked this rape case he held himself to such a high standard that failure was not an option. In the end, evidence was obtained from the hospital and a conviction was obtained.

Detective Sergeant Harper was asked how his administrators worked with him. Did they provide support or pressure to get cases cleared? With no hesitation he said they supported him. They did not ask him what the status of his investigation was. Instead they asked what they could do to help. He says this made his working environment much easier.

He was also asked about crimes in his small community, more to the point, does the small community help or hinder his investigations. He responded in saying that they mostly hinder. Because the community is so small, they can sometimes interfere with his investigations. When asked if that adds stress to clearing his cases he said it most certainly does. Sergeant Harper was asked if his department had any plan in place to assist him with dealing with his stress. He said they did not.

In comparison between Atkins and Dardanelle, you see two different points of view. In Atkins overtime is not a problem however in Dardanelle it is. Overtime is a source of unneeded

stress. You also see that neither department has any plan to help their officer deal with stress. Both officers deal with their stress somewhat the same. They spend time away from the job with people they trust. One may seek guidance or just someone to talk to. The one thing both departments did have in common was neither has a notable way of helping their officer deal with stress.

How to Minimize and Treat Stress

In the Criminal Justice Institute's School of Law Enforcement Supervision, Dr. Sterling Claypoole teaches a course titled "Stress Management for Law Enforcement Supervisors" (Claypoole, 2016). He states that there are three levels of stress. The first is eustress which is positive, motivating stress. This would be the type of stress a detective puts on himself to get the case solved. The second type is distress. This is excessive stress. In small towns this would be any case that would gain local, state, or even national media attention. In a situation such as this the added stress causes the detective to feel excessive stress to solve the case. The third type is dysfunction. Dr. Claypoole's definition of dysfunction is impairment. In this case the detective feels the stress and will not be able to cope with it causing him to be unable to function and shut down.

As a supervisor you should do what you can to keep the stress levels low for the officers you supervise. Officers will do a better job with low levels of stress. If you see an officer having trouble dealing with the stress you should talk with them and try to help. This can be done by anyone not just a supervisor. The sooner stress is identified the easier it is to treat.

Detective Sergeant Harper was asked how he dealt with the stress of his job. He smiled and replied, "Grandkids." He went on to say, "As odd as it sounds I really enjoy spending time with my grandchildren." (Harper, 2016). This is not an uncommon stress reliever. I know from my own experience my biggest form of stress relief was coaching my girls in their respective

sports. Spending time with my family after working a hard case was the best kind of relief I could get. Knowing the innocence of my children was at stake made me know my job was worthwhile and recharged me to go right back the next day.

Sergeant Lunsford said he handles stress by talking to other detectives. He has a friend that is a detective with a larger department. He talks with him when he has a stressful case. He feels talking to a friend who understands the job is a good stress reliever “because there are some things we see you can’t tell your family.” (Lunsford, 2016). The other method he takes to relieve stress is talking with his wife. He does his best to protect her and doesn’t tell her everything but she is able to encourage him and give him the emotional support he needs thereby relieving his stress.

As a detective working any major case, you don’t always see the stress you are under. Only when you get the case worked and move on to the next case do you start to understand the toll the previous case has taken. If there are outside stressors working against you while working the case, you will feel this even more. Sometimes it takes a person on the outside to notice the stress and address it. When I was spending time with my children or my wife, I was treating my stress and did not even know it.

In my career I have worked allot of major cases, at least what is considered major for Russellville, Arkansas. I have worked numerous robberies and homicides. These type of cases seem to be the hardest to work and produce the most stress. I was under an enormous amount of stress working a homicide a few years ago and I thought it was just work. Only after the case and trials were over a few years later did I realize the effects of that stress. I was lucky enough to have an administrator and family who recognized the effects of my stress. They made me seek help from not only a physician but also gave me access to advisors with more knowledge and

equipment than I had. Even after getting help I still did not cope with the underlying stress because I did not believe I had a problem. Everyone has trouble sleeping. Right? Once I recognized the cause of the stress then I was able to cope with it.

This is the same with most detectives in similar situations. There is an enormous amount of pride that goes into the job of being a policeman / detective. As a detective you are held to a higher standard than a patrolman. Because of that standard, you have to take more pride in what you do. Just like a teacher or professor takes pride in their class when they do well, the same is said when all goes well with an investigation. When the pieces seem to fit and the investigation comes together the stress is lower. Just like teaching, when the class doesn't get the concept you are trying to teach, the pressure intensifies. When a case is difficult and multi layered the stress is multiplied.

Administrators need to understand the pressure their officers are under. Not all officers are the same. Some handle the stress very well, others not as well. The stress that officers / detectives feel could be from two types of events. One could be a single immediate traumatic event. In the traumatic event, administrators and supervisors need to keep an eye on their officers. Because all officers are unique and have different needs, the stress can affect them in different ways.

The second type of stress is less studied. A cumulative number of traumatic events can have a devastating effect on detectives. Unfortunately, administrators are either not trained to notice or don't care to notice changes over such a large period of time. I like to think it's a lack of training, however, limited study has been done on this type of stress.

Departments should have a stress coping mechanism in place for their officers. I have worked in both the patrol and criminal investigation division at the Russellville Police

Department. In my department, the criminal investigation division deals with more stress on a daily basis. A lot of stress has been placed on the detective. They must answer phone calls from the public demanding answers and justice and from other officers wanting to know how to work cases. If there is no relief mechanism in place by the department then it is left up to the detective himself. Very few detectives acknowledge they have a problem. They will continue to work never realizing there is a problem until it's too late. Neglecting to handle stress can be damaging to their physical well-being. Not knowing how to cope with stress leads them to seek out other sources of relief such as alcohol etc. These other sources can cause them not only physical harm but emotional dependency that are counter-productive to their job and their families.

It cannot be over stated that supervisors or fellow workers in this field need to keep an eye on each other to help minimize the stress and help fellow officers to cope with the stress. All officers and supervisors need to understand how stress works and how to manage it and minimize it. Once this is done the working environment can improve and productivity will increase. The old saying "A happy employee is a good employee" is true. Recognizing and minimizing stress that they feel is a good start.

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