



October, 1998

## **“Shots Fired; Officer Involved”**

By Audrey L. Honig, Ph.D., Director,

[ALHonig@lasd.org](mailto:ALHonig@lasd.org)

and

Jocelyn E. Roland, Ph.D., Assistant Director  
Employee Support Services

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department  
Monterey Park, California

Over the past 20 years, there has been an increasing amount of research examining the impact of stress and trauma on law enforcement personnel. [1] Police administrators and psychologists alike have come to acknowledge the importance of early intervention as a way to reduce the negative responses and symptoms that may accompany exposure to critical incidents such as officer-involved shootings and other life-threatening confrontations.

Development of a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be a costly outcome in terms of both human suffering and the organizational loss of a valued and productive employee. Critical-incident debriefings have become an accepted and necessary tool for assisting emergency personnel in reducing the long-term effects of these traumatic events. The simple act of expressing, venting and discussing traumatic events can greatly reduce negative effects. [2] With mandated debriefings for officer-involved shootings, personnel can receive the benefits of psychological assistance without the stigma often associated with seeing a mental health professional.

In 1986 Solomon and Horn [3] provided a springboard in their pilot study that identified the most salient issues faced by officers involved in critical incidents (i.e., perceptual distortions, heightened sense of danger, flashbacks, depression, etc.). Their study, as well as subsequent research, typically relied upon either officers currently involved in treatment or those attending trainings on topics such as “Reactions to Officer-Involved Shootings” as their subject pool, likely skewing findings. In addition, the time lapse between responding to the study questionnaire and the incident in question typically ranged from several weeks to over a decade.

The present study was designed to update our knowledge of officer-involved shooting reactions while controlling for the possible effects of self-selection, time delay and/or memory distortion. Additionally, focus was on more fully evaluating the types of reactions encountered, the extent of impact on officer functioning and the actual prevalence of acute stress disorders among officers involved in shootings.

### **Methods**

An anonymous five-page survey was administered to 348 officers involved in shootings or other life-threatening events between June 1995 and April 1998. The vast majority of the data was obtained within three to five days of the incident, just prior to the officer's participating in a mandatory debriefing.

Participation in the study was voluntary; however, none of the subjects declined. Unlike prior analyses, the current study addressed not only whether or not the officer experienced the symptom in question, but also to what extent it was felt (i.e., mild, moderate or severe).

## Results

Only the more significant results from the data are presented here. It should be noted that overall, less impairment was found among this group of officers than has been previously reported. Less than 14 percent were experiencing distress at such a level as to result in impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning (i.e., met the criteria for acute stress disorder) as assessed by either the officer or the debriefer. This is in contrast to prior studies, which reported that one-third of all officers are likely to be severely affected. [4] This may be due to the fact that self-selection, which may have previously favored traumatized officers over those who were not significantly negatively affected, was controlled. It should be noted, however, that while only a small percentage reported experiencing significant distress or impairment in functioning, a significant number did experience at least some distressing symptoms immediately following the incident.

**Perceptual disturbances.** Ninety percent of the officers surveyed experienced some perceptual disturbance. The types of perceptual distortions identified are in line with prior findings; however, differences were observed in the rate of occurrence, which in this study was significantly less than previously reported.

Sounds were quieter 51%, Tunnel vision 45%, Increased attention to detail 41%, Time slowed down 41%, Memory loss for part of the incident 22%, Time sped up 20%, Sounds were louder 23%

One of the more notable findings in this area of perceptual distortions was that 22 percent of the personnel reported memory loss regarding some part of the incident. While other studies have reported even higher numbers, at 22 percent the results are still highly significant given that the officer will be expected to testify regarding his actions sometime in the future. What appears to be a relatively common perceptual disturbance following involvement in a critical incident has the potential of opening the officer up to accusations of either outright lying or withholding the truth. This is particularly relevant should subsequent interviews result in additional observations and/or clarifications, as is often the case.

**Sense of helplessness.** Of the 45 percent who experienced a sense of helplessness, 55 percent (N = 87) felt a little helpless, 24 percent (N = 38) felt moderately helpless and 21 percent (N = 33) felt completely helpless at some point during the incident. Nine percent of the total number of officers involved in a shooting reported a period of time during the incident when they felt completely helpless, as if the suspect definitely had the upper hand.

**Reactions.** Questions making up the reactions section can be grouped together to form seven content areas: visual, control and security, cognitive and behavioral, emotional, departmental and legal concerns, impact on job performance and impact on home life. Responses to this section were scored on a Likert scale of one to eight, with a “not applicable” option as well. For ease of comprehension, the Likert scale was converted to mild (a score of one, two or three), moderate (a score of four or five), and severe (a score of six, seven or eight).

Almost half of all personnel reported experiencing flashbacks, or feeling as if they were reliving the event, with 21 percent of those reporting severe reactions. In addition to flashbacks, 41 percent reported the intrusion of unwanted images, sounds and/or feelings connected with the event, with a quarter of this group reporting experiencing these intrusions as being severe.

A number of questions addressed the areas of control and security. More than half of all officers acknowledged a sense of vulnerability and/or a heightened sense of danger, with approximately 38 percent classifying their reaction as moderate to severe. Forty-one percent also reported fear about future situations, with 32 percent describing the fear as moderate to severe. It should be kept in mind that these figures may reflect an underestimate as officers may be less likely to acknowledge these types of reactions or feelings. This defense mechanism of denial may to some degree be adaptive, allowing an officer to confront danger when his natural, survival response may be to freeze or flee. Anecdotally, it appears that the issue of vulnerability, and the officer's ability to regain his sense of safety and security, is key to whether or not he will be able to ultimately return to the job with the least amount of negative, residual effect.

Forty-one percent reported experiencing anger/rage following the event, with almost one-third classifying the reaction as moderate to severe. While the officers themselves typically deny any change in their actual approach to the job following involvement in a shooting or other life-threatening event, future research should examine this issue empirically.

**Most common reactions.** The top six reactions experienced by officers were legal concerns (55 percent), heightened sense of danger (56 percent), second-guessing of oneself (57 percent), sense of vulnerability (53 percent), flashbacks (48 percent) and sleep disturbance (40 percent). It is significant to note that besides legal concerns, which are a reality-based fear in our increasingly litigious society, the next three most commonly experienced reactions relate to the officer's perceptions of control and security.

**Peer support and coping.** In terms of post-incident behaviors, it appears that there are three key coping skills: talking to peers (89 percent), reviewing the incident in their minds (87 percent) and talking to family members (78 percent). Clearly, then, availability of peer support personnel - especially peers who have been involved in past shootings - should be considered as part of the department's policy for assisting officers involved in shootings.

**Perceived value of the debriefing.** Ninety-nine percent of the respondents considered debriefings valuable. However, when asked on the initial survey, "Would you have come to today's debriefing if it was voluntary?" only 40 percent said yes. This must be interpreted as providing further support for mandatory debriefing policies.

**Post-incident job satisfaction and style of law enforcement.** To gain a better understanding of what impact critical incidents have on perceived future performance, there were two questions on the post-debriefing form to address these issues. The first asked whether or not there had been a change in job satisfaction, with 84 percent reporting no change, 7 percent reporting increased satisfaction and 6 percent reporting decreased satisfaction. In response to the question, "Has your style of law enforcement changed since the incident?" 82 percent reported no change, 4 percent said they were less aggressive and 14 percent reported being more aggressive. Although this final figure represents a relatively small percentage of officers, given the nature of the response and the large number of respondents, it may still reflect an important finding.

## Summary

The widely held belief that one-third of all officers involved in a shooting will experience mild reactions, one-third moderate reactions and one-third severe reactions is not supported by this study. Rather, it was found that fewer than 14 percent of all officers involved in a shooting experienced significant distress and/or impairment in social or occupational functioning, with an even smaller percentage predicted to ultimately develop either an acute stress disorder or PTSD.

This differing finding may be due to a combination of factors, including greater use and acceptance of debriefings as a preventive intervention. The differences may well be due to the fact that the current study examined all officer-involved shootings occurring during a period of approximately three years, rather than only self-selected officers; the size of the agency involved; and the frequency of occurrence of these types of events. On the other hand, prior methodologies may have unwittingly tended to focus on those officers who continued to have difficulties, excluding the vast majority who returned to productive careers. Future research should attempt to address these issues further, along with whether or not the factors of agency size and frequency of officer-involved shootings are significant in terms of predicting outcome and, if so, what smaller agencies can do to maximize the probability of a positive outcome for their personnel.

It appears that, overall, today's officers feel a great deal more support from supervisors, investigators and peers following an officer-involved shooting, which also potentially affects the extent to which the incident is experienced as traumatic. Identification of predictor variables that could differentiate personnel at risk for developing either delayed symptoms or an exacerbation of current difficulties could greatly aid in focusing resources and preventing the development of problems. Given that this questionnaire was generally administered within five days following the event, longitudinal follow-up research is needed to evaluate whether these findings hold true over time, particularly in terms of the prevalence rate for development of either acute or post-traumatic stress disorders.

Anecdotal evidence tells us that officers who experience a strong sense of loss of control, coupled with high levels of vulnerability, are at greatest risk for developing future problems. Further research, however, is needed to better assess and identify those individual officers and determine the most effective interventions. Likewise, it appears that there exists a significant positive correlation between involvement in a shooting or other life-threatening event and subsequent involvement in additional incidents. Again, further research is needed to validate this observation and attempt to identify any contributing factors.

We have come a long way in the past decade in helping officers survive the potentially career-threatening effects of involvement in these types of incidents, and we continue to make great strides. Sadly, however, these types of incidents are on the rise rather than the decline, thereby ensuring future challenges for those of us dedicated to helping those who put their lives on the line.

#### **Notes:**

1. R.D. Fell, W.C. Richard and W.L. Wallace, "Psychological Job Stress and the Police Officer," Journal of Police Science and Administration, 1980, 8 (2): 139-144; B.R. Johnson and P. Nowak, "Stress and Officer-Involved Shootings: The Agency's Responsibility," Police Chief, [month unk.] 1996, 63: 42-44; and W.C. Terry, "Police Stress: The Empirical Evidence," Journal of Police Science and Administration, 1981, 9 (1): 61-75.
2. J.T. Mitchell and G.S. Everly, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing: An Operations Manual for the Prevention of Traumatic Stress Among Emergency Services and Disaster Workers (2nd ed.) (Elliott City: Chevron Publishing Corp., 1996).
3. R.M. Solomon and J.M. Horn, "Post-Shooting Traumatic Reactions: A Pilot Study," in J.T. Reese and H.A. Goldstein (eds.), Psychological Services for Law Enforcement (pp.383-393). Papers presented at the National Symposium on Police Psychological Services, FBI Academy Quantico, Virginia. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).

4. J. Stratton, D. Parker and J. Snibbe, "Post-Traumatic Stress: Study of Police Officers Involved in Shootings," Psychological Reports, 1984, 55: 127-131.

---

© Copyright 1998, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Inc.