

**The Bill Blackwood
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Police Work and Divorce Rate

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**By
Dougan B. Caruthers**

**Humble Police Department
Humble, Texas
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the misconception that police work is a direct cause of divorce and how educating the public, as well as police officers can assist in removing the myth that the men and women in the field of law enforcement are predestined to have failing relationships. The rate of divorce among police officers, though perceived as being considerable high is no greater than that of any other occupation involving executives and businessmen in and out of the public eye.

In order to assess whether or not the profession of law enforcement is a definite cause of divorce, a survey was conducted with officer and spouses from several different law enforcement agencies throughout the state of Texas, as well as the research of certain literature and data. The results of the surveys revealed that though the job of a police officer is not relationship friendly, no officer or spouse could honestly state that the profession of law enforcement caused their divorces. In addition, it was found that many officers and their spouses have sustained very strong marriages throughout the officer's law enforcement career.

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INTRODUCTION

Police work and divorce rate. Many have an opinion on this subject, but are there any documentations or physical evidence to establish a connection between the two? Are there any divorce cases that actually state, "This divorce came to pass due to one or both parties being in the profession of Law Enforcement?" Maybe we associate high divorce rates with law enforcement because the effects of divorce can be seen in the attitude of the police officers during the commission of their duty. High divorce rates among police officers plague just about every police department in the country.

Industrial psychologists agree that the effects of unsatisfactory marriages on police officers are undoubtedly costing individual police departments dearly in the way of unsatisfactory public encounters with "socially disabled" officers. In an article on the effects of divorce on executives, author Thomas J. Murray points out that typically job deterioration can be observed in the following forms; 1) Judgment and power of concentration become hampered; 2) The executive becomes dissatisfied with his own performance; 3) He finds fault in the performance of associates and subordinates; 4) He becomes less trusting and more suspicious in outside social relations; 5) He begins to question his own ability to do his job; and 6) a sense of uncertainty, which seriously undermines his ability to make decisions. These same six forms of Deterioration, in the field of law enforcement can lead to sever problems for the officer and the department.

The plight of the officer's marriage affects everyone; the officer, family, offspring, and society as a whole. In her book, *I Love a Cop*; author Ellen Kirschman; Ph.D. stated that a police officer and his or her family's ability to survive the profession of law enforcement depends on many things.

- The job itself – meaning the physical, intellectual and emotional demands of the work.
- The amount of control an officer can exert over these demands.
- The organizational culture and the leadership of the officer's agency.

- The absence or presents of opportunity for career development.
- The relationship between the police department and the community.
- Individual factors such as the officer's personality and style of coping with stress, the quality and availability of family relationships and support systems, health concerns, and financial stability.
- And last but not least, Luck.

A common myth is that there can be no balance between a law enforcement career and an officer's family life. In any career, the stress of the job can spill over into the personal life of any person. And, at any time relationship problems can spill over into a person's professional life. But balance between police work and family life can be obtained and maintained by the use of communication and understanding on the part of both the officer and his spouse.

The author intends to examine why the rate of divorce in law enforcement is so high, and determine what options are available to assist officers and their families in relationship maintenance and problem resolution. There by lowering the divorce rate for police officers. The author also intends to determine that in many cases the divorces that occur among the law enforcement community are not due to the stress of the job, but due to the character of the persons involved. Several wives and husbands have positive and negative variances in rating each other, as to the causative factors leading to divorce. An explanation of these factors will be given to show that many of the marital problems would still exist regardless of the occupation.

The author will research this topic, by issuing a survey to the officers of the Humble Police Department, and to fellow students of the Leadership Command College, review literature on police stress and law enforcement marital relationships, The anticipated finding is that the law enforcement profession itself has very little impact on the marital problems of police officers.

Findings will result in the law enforcement community being able to dispel the myth that police marriages are destined for failure and individual officers will have a better understanding of his or her role in their marriages or relationship. The officers will also understand that just as training and studying in their profession makes them better officers; the same diligence is necessary in bettering their relationships and marriages. This information will also provide officers with an understanding of relationship problems that can be used in resolving domestic dispute cases

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Divorce in America is as common and accepted as bankruptcies and wars. They are always going to exist. Almost everyday there are stories of marriages that last about as long as the honeymoon. Your friends and relatives are joined together “until death do us part,” however they are very much alive when they part company. The fact is that no matter the age, religion, occupation, etc., people change and life happens. No marriage is destined for failure because of a job. Marriage and family life are never easy to sustain. There are times when we are amazed at how families function – how two or more human beings from different backgrounds, values, biological and sexual needs, communication styles and so forth can form an enduring partnership. Even those of us who mate with someone quite like ourselves know that there are still differences between us. And those of us who are attracted to our opposites may come to regret that very thing that drew us to that person in the first place.

What we bring into our adult relationships is as important an influence on family life as the work we do. **“Police families and police psychologist often forget this and blame too much on the job!”** It’s true that habits learned at work; particularly

police work can be hazardous to home life. And certain “givens” of the job, such as long hours, are not family friendly. But, perhaps the most damaging factor is that police work provides a ready – made scapegoat for a troubled marriage and an easy out for avoiding the task of managing differences with loved ones and learning positive ways to build, strengthen, and manage a family.

Statistics about divorce in police work are very hard to pin down and are inherently unreliable. Even if these statistics could be pinned down, they are only meaningful when compared to other occupations, other locales, and other cultures. Several police – specific studies suggest that seventy – five percent of police officers will get divorced within the first three years of being on the job. (The rate for female officers is twice as high.) Some researchers even go as far as to say that second marriages for police officers are as strong if not stronger than comparison groups. Quite simply, there are too many variables to infer a cause – and – affect relationship between police work and divorce.

For the general public, the perception that all those involved in police work are prone to divorce is as common as the broken marriages of movie stars and entertainers. Anyone in the public eye is perceived as being on a totally different level in the area of morals, ideals and ethics. In the mid – 60’s, famed columnist Paul Harvey wrote in the San Diego Union newspaper, Quote: “Policeman is the Public’s Most Tested Individual.” A policeman is a composite of what all men are; a mingling of saint and sinner, dust and deity.

Culled statistics wave the fan over the stinkers, under – score instances of dishonesty and brutality because they are “news.” What that means is that they are

exceptional, unusual, and not commonplace. Buried under the froth is the fact: less than one – half of one percent of policemen misfit that uniform. That's a better average than you'd find among clergymen.

What is a policeman made of? He, of all men is at once, the most needed and the most unwanted. He's a strangely nameless creature who is "sir" to his face and "fuzz" behind his back. He must be such a diplomat that he can settle differences between individuals so that each will think he has won. But, if the policeman is neat, he's conceited; if he's careless, he's a bum. If he's pleasant, he's a flirt; if he's not, he's a grouch. He must make in an instant, decisions that would require months for a lawyer. But, if he hurries, he's careless; if he's deliberate, he's a lazy. He must be first to an accident and infallible with a diagnosis. He must be able to start breathing, stop bleeding, tie splints, and dry tears. The police officer must know every gun, draw on the run and hit where it doesn't hurt. He must be able to whip two men twice his size and half his age without damaging his uniform and without being "brutal." If you hit him, he's a coward; if he hits you he's a bully. The policeman must, from a single hair, be able to describe the crime, the weapon and the criminal – and tell you where the criminal is hiding. But, if he catches the criminal, he's lucky; if he doesn't, he's a dunce. The policeman must chase bum leads to a dead end, stakeout 10 nights to tag one witness who saw the crime happen, but refuses to remember. The policeman must be a minister, a social worker, a diplomat, a tough guy and a gentleman. And of course he will have to be a genius...because he'll have to feed his family on a policeman's salary, (unquote) (Harvey, 2002).

The myth that police have higher divorce rates than any other occupation is not sustained due to the lack of evidence to prove it. Often reports and statements claiming higher divorce rates are based on supposition rather than fact (Stratton & Stratton, 1982). What many fail to understand is that police officers and their families are people too. As members of society, police possess to a higher degree than most, traditional American values. Dedication to improving society, commitment to family, and freedom for all law abiding citizens. People in various occupations, whether they be doctors, lawyers, businessmen, or construction workers, seem to have as many problems, divorces, and permanent marriages as those in law enforcement (Stratton & Stratton, 1982).

A priority in any relationship is communication. To have communication there must be time to be with each other. In our busy world, finding time to be together can be almost impossible. Unless communication and time to be together as a couple, and time together as a family is made a priority, it may not happen. Communication is very important for many reasons. The most important being that the way we are today, our thoughts, values, wants and needs are different now than when they were a year, five years, or ten years ago. And, they will change in the future. Unless these changes are communicated, a couple can grow apart and become strangers to each other. Consider the normal course of relationships. Initially there are two completely separate and unique human beings who, for a variety of reasons, are attracted to each other. After the initial attraction, each person still possesses his own individuality, but they began to share more of themselves and get to know each other better through their communication of feelings, thoughts and ideas. As their relationship grows and they

continue to spend more time together discussing values, attitudes, beliefs, likes and dislikes, the two either become more interested in each other or they grow apart. If they stay together, they began to talk more in terms of “we” or “us,” while still staying in touch with their own individuality. After further communication and time together, the couple may feel that they know each other totally and understand each other in all ways. This closeness and deep understanding are the result of the communication between the two. Because they understand each other so well, the couple decides to marry.

However, after the wedding day, the amount and level of communication may decrease, and after a period of time, become nonexistent. At times it appears that their knowledge and understanding of each other will stay the same forever. They forget that their values that were similar at the beginning of the relationship changed for a variety of reasons. These important and very different changes must be communicated to the spouse or there is a tendency for the relationship to grow apart and be dull, unfulfilling and lifeless (Stratton & Stratton, 1982).

Another major component of life and relationships is the attitude with which we approach them. An approach that sees relationships like life, with ups and downs, good and bad, happy and sad times, emphasizing the belief that the relationship is important and can be successful is much more positive than the position of “if it doesn’t work, I’ll get out-it’s not important anyway” (Stratton & Stratton, 1982). One’s attitude and view of relationships greatly affect the end results.

Clearly, the law enforcement profession can be quite stressful on any marriage. But, it is the character of the individual that is the determining factor. If our car is not functioning properly, we take it to a mechanic. If our body is injured or sick, we go to the

doctor. Why then are we reluctant to seek assistance if our relationships are failing? Some departments have implemented "Family Life Orientation" programs that consist of the active participation of the police officers and their spouses in a series of scheduled lectures and discussions whose primary goal is to instruct the spouses and spouses-to-be in the realities of police life. Another avenue for the officers is the appointment of police department psychologist. This is for the purpose of counseling police officers regarding those conflicts that affect job performance. Some departments have even implemented a ride-along program for police officers wives, prospective wives, relatives, and personal friends (Durner, Kroeker, Miller, and Reynolds, 1975). These programs help to remove many of the misconceptions and myths about police work and police officers. In addition these programs assist in creating support groups among police families within the departments.

"All happy families are like one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." (Leo Tolstoy, "Anna Karenina-1877"). We contend that all police families- happy or unhappy- are like one another, patterned by the lathe of the police occupation. They dwell in the shadow of the job. The ringing of the telephone and the implacable schedule of the duty chart meter the rhythm of their life. Police department imperatives supersede the most cherished family occasions; fundamental family relations take second place "(Niederhoffer & Niederhoffer, 1978).

METHODOLOGY

Is the presumed high rate of divorce among police officers due specifically to police work? To answer this question, a broad geographic survey was conducted by the use of a questionnaire. This survey examined the relationships and lifestyles of law enforcement officers and civilian personnel from twenty-eight police agencies within the state of Texas.

Of over one hundred questionnaires soliciting information for this research, only forty-one questionnaires were returned. The officers and civilian personnel that responded to the survey were from various ranks and duty positions within their departments. Not all are married or have experienced divorces.

The questions chosen for this questionnaire were meant to stir deep contemplation of the incidents that lead to the subjects and their spouse's decision to divorce. More importantly, these questions were intended to get the subjects to take an honest look at themselves and their lifestyles and finally determine if the profession of law enforcement is the prime factor that caused their divorces.

The information obtained through this survey will be examined for specific causes, differences and similarities in the relationships of each subject and what could have been done to avoid divorce. That information will be examined for causes that are directly related to police work.

The researcher is confident that upon analysis of the questionnaires, the specific factors that contributed to the subject's divorces and failed relationships have very little or nothing to do with police work.

FINDINGS

Of the forty-one subjects that responded to the survey, the number of times they have been divorced ranges from one to four times.

Twenty-six of the surveyed subjects state that law enforcement has affected their marriages in positive and negative ways. The negative effects were in the way of missed family functions, long hours, working holidays and weekends and extra jobs to assist the family finances. Some subjects even state that because of the irregular hours,

the subjects and their spouses are forced to become independent of each other. Some subjects state that it's very hard to plan any outing other than their day off. This is because they never know when they may have to work over.

One subject stated the following, quote; Women are attracted to men of authority, even if the man is not the most handsome, unquote. Though it is true men and women in uniform catch the eye of the opposite sex, this in no way means that the officer has to act on the temptation. The positive effects are that some of the subjects state that their spouses are very proud of their law enforcement careers. And, that dealing with the stressors of the job and the sharing of experiences has actually brought them closer. Other subjects credit their successful marriages to their spouses having an understanding of the law enforcement function and that they put their family first.

Of the subject that have experienced divorce, only two stated that their spouse placing their job ahead of their relationships caused their divorces. Twelve subjects contributed their divorces to matters of religion, money, immaturity and infidelity. The other twenty-eight subjects elected not to comment.

These subjects when asked if in their opinion law enforcement caused their divorces, either stated no or elected not to comment. The subject of long hours and shift work came into play again. However, one subject interjected the macho attitudes, Particularly in some male officer that leads to a lack of communication between the officer and his spouse. This lack of communication can lead the spouse to feel taken for granted.

When I readdressed the question of whether the subjects believed that the profession of law enforcement causes divorce, fifteen of the subjects stated yes. These

subjects state that the officers are put in situations where the temptation of infidelity is hard to resist. Again this is where the character of the officer and the spouse are tested. Not all officers gives in to this temptation.

The researcher posed the question of weather the subjects that have experienced divorce would have done so regardless of the profession. Thirteen of subjects stated yes, one subject stated no and twenty-seven were unsure.

The researcher then posed the question of why the subject's marriages ended in divorce. The subjects answered this question with reasons such as they and their spouse having different desires, lack of communication, lack of commitment, lack of maturity, etc. However not one of the subjects stated, "Because my spouse was in law enforcement".

On the subject of shift work, the researcher was advised by several of the survey subjects that working shift hours is very stressful. Particularly, spouses and family members find it hard to understand why the subjects are on many occasions unable be at family outing and special family events. All of the surveyed subjects stated that shift work, working holidays, working late and extra jobs have had a negative effect on their marriages in varying degrees. However these police related matters were a small factor in their divorces.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

This research and study was conducted to determine if the occupation of law enforcement is a definite cause of divorce among police officers and if so, what can be done to combat what most believe to be an alarming rate of divorce. It was hypothesized that the job of the police officer is in no way a cause of divorce. In every

divorce case, the factors that lead to the decay of the relationships stemmed from the character of the people involved.

The investigation of the inclusive literature revealed that many people truly believe that the occupation of law enforcement is a definite and direct cause of divorce. However, statistics in the area of police divorces vary and the cause of police divorces vary from case to case. Many of the causes stated in literature and in researched cases were found to stem from individual changes in desires and unrealistic perceptions. All people have their personal beliefs that if or when a certain action, event or achievement comes to pass, their life will be perfect. This in itself is unrealistic due to several external and internal factors. First, life happens; no matter how hard we try to predict and guard against the possible mishaps that may or may not enter our lives, everyone learns that no plan A, B, or C can accomplish all aspects of our lives. Second, "every hour, every minute, every second changes us all. We are not the same person we were yesterday nor a minute ago. In that we cannot even possess ourselves, how then can we expect to possess someone else" (David Carradine – *The Blind Man of Circle of Fire*, 1978) This is to say biologically, morally, mentally and spiritually everyone changes. No one plans to change and many times are not consciously aware that they have changed, but change has occurred.

The findings of this research supported the researcher's hypothesis that thought some aspects of the law enforcement profession are a symptom of divorce, they are not the cause. Many, if not all, law enforcement officers sustain different levels of stress daily through the execution of their duties. Some of which are so subtle that several days, weeks or even months pass before some officers' exhibit symptoms. The

responsibility falls on the law enforcement profession and departments to know and understand the causes and effects of police stress, and to educate officers and the families of the officers. The individual officer needs to understand how to recognize the signs of stress, not only in his or herself, but in other officers as well. More importantly, the signs of stress needs to be reported so that some type of intervention or evaluation and treatment can be performed. Perhaps periodic officer examinations by a licensed psychologist or other mental health professional would assist in the early detection of post traumatic stress disorders.

In any law enforcement department, in any city, it can be found that there are officers who are reluctant to talk to people who are not in law enforcement. And even among officers, some subjects are just not discussed or even thought about. During the solicitation of information for this research many officers elected not to participate. Of the officers that did, many of the answers given were short and vague. Even those approached by this researcher who were willing to give their opinion on this subject changed the willingness once specific information about their own divorce was requested. To even begin to implement some type of preventative measure in combating post traumatic stress disorders in the law enforcement community, officers have to be willing to talk and express what they are feeling.

A great number of people in society are quick to point the finger at any thing or anyone other than themselves for any unpleasantness in their lives. If they are fired from a job, it was because their boss didn't like them; if their computer crashes, it's because someone sent them a virus; and this list goes on. The fact is; no-one was promised an easy ride through the journey of life. There are several things we can do to

protect ourselves from any of life's unwanted surprises. This is not to say that a person cannot prepare for everything, but understanding that we do have a choice of how we handle what comes into daily life. The first step is to take full responsibility for our own life. The law enforcement officer, though being a human being, is looked at as being above average. But the law enforcement officer, like all humans, is not perfect – just trained. And no amount of training can cover every situation that occurs in life.

Common sense must be depended on, Every person from all occupations, walks of life, etc., must strongly consider the facts of each divorce case before determining a cause and effect. Only then will the myth that police work causes divorce be removed.

To quote R. Ruddock(Six Approaches to the Person) “ If under stress, a man goes to pieces, he will probably be told to pull himself together. It would be more effective to help him identify the pieces and to understand why they have come apart.”

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