

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Divorce: The Law Enforcement Effect**

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**An Administrative Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Required for Graduation from the  
Leadership Command College**

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July 2013**

## **ABSTRACT**

The link between law enforcement and divorce is relevant to contemporary law enforcement given the high divorce rate among couples where one or both have a career in law enforcement. Awareness of some of the warning signs can lead to intervention and possibly prevention of divorce, which will help stabilize the career field of law enforcement. This can result in a decreased loss of personnel and an increase in healthier, more focused personnel.

The purpose of this research is to identify some of the warning signs associated with the high stress levels in the field of law enforcement. These increased stress levels may lead to divorce and disruption of the family environment, which can lead to an officer's need to take excessive leave from work for health and personal reasons. Reducing one could lead to the reduction of the others in some cases. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of books, articles, periodicals, and journals. A survey was distributed to 35 survey participants who represent several different agencies from around the state of Texas .

The discovery a connection between the high divorce rate and work related stress. Of the 35 officers surveyed, 59% were married, 33% were divorced, and 8% were single. Of the officers that had been divorced, none had been married more than twice. One of the contributing factors of this high divorce rate was found to be alienation of family and friends. Lack of communication with family and friends was found to result in an increase in alcohol use and/or other signs of stress, such as smoking or loss of appetite. Though the officers surveyed did not know the exact numbers for their various

sized departments, they all estimated the rate of divorce as being better than 50% within their department.

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## INTRODUCTION

The problem or issue to be examined considers whether or not the career field of law enforcement plays a substantial role in the dissolution of marriages for those in that field. Many individuals who choose to enter the career field of law enforcement only see the positive side of the job. They have no idea of the negatives and the toll it plays not only on them personally, but their families and friends as well. The relevance of this is that the negative side of the job can lead to divorce for individuals engaged in a career in law enforcement unless warning signs are seen in a timely manner, thus saving their family and lowering the rate of divorce in the field of law enforcement.

The purpose of this research is to examine some of the stressors and stages an officer may go through during a career in law enforcement and the role it may play on his or her family. Law enforcement stressors have been broken down into five major sources of psychological stress the officer may experience. The stress may be from inter or intra organizational practices and characteristics or from criminal justice system practices and characteristics. It may also be from public practices and characteristics or general police work (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

The research question to be examined focuses on some of the causes of divorce in couples where one or both are engaged in a career in law enforcement. Findings included the fact that there is a delicate balance of a career in law enforcement and having a family and the effects of one on the other. The everyday stress of life is high, and when in the law enforcement field, this stress can be overwhelming if an officer or their family does not know the signs of potential trouble that can result in families breaking up or even ending in divorce.

The intended method of inquiry includes: a review of published books on the subject matter, magazine articles, and journals addressing the topic in question. The intended outcome or anticipated findings of this research is to identify some of the signs of stress due to a career in law enforcement that may lead to divorce. Coping mechanisms and other techniques are often the only avenues that helps the family learn to deal with these stressors in order to preserve their quality of life and lessen the chances of divorce within the family unit.

The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research by the conclusions because no one wants to enter a career that will result in a divorce and break up the family unit. By identifying some of the warning signs and stressors that may lead to divorce, one can make it possible for the individual and the family or friends to intervene and possibly save the family unit. Identification and action on these warning signs may lower the rate of divorce in this field of public service and change the belief that all law enforcement officers end up divorced.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

When a person becomes a police officer, they enter a world that is filled with excitement and challenge as well as one that offers a variety of stimulation. They will often be dealing with the best that society has to offer but will spend the majority of their time confronting the worst elements of society. Battered wives and children, violence, blood, juvenile delinquency, and death will become a large part of their daily activities. If he is to survive in such a position and be able to deal effectively with the demands that are placed on him, he will need a strong character as well as resilience and adaptability. In addition, there will be unique demands that the officer may bring home to his family

without realizing the toll on them. Therefore, it takes a special individual to become a police officer and special type of family to be able to adapt to these conditions.

According to Booth and Edwards (1992), more than 50% of today's marriages end in divorce, with remarriages facing an even higher risk of divorce (as cited in Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Until recently, little attention has been focused on the specific stresses of police marriages. The idea of being married to a police officer was highly romanticized, and little attention was focused on what really occurred within a police family and what the daily stresses and strains were that the family experience (Besner & Robinson, 1982). A spouse should remember that a police career is typically a twenty-four hours, seven days a week job, and, frequently, job responsibilities must come first, while family responsibilities are second. While this is a difficult to accept, it is a reality of a police career (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

A police officer usually feels very proud of their chosen occupation and feels they have a tremendous amount to offer others. Generally, they are committed to upholding the law and have a somewhat idealistic view of their capabilities. They tend to believe that they can make a strong impact on the community by making it a safer place to live as well as by helping make people's lives easier. At the beginning of their career, they are very confident and feel very positive towards the legal system they are working for. They are often energetic, full of ambition, and strongly dedicated to succeeding no matter the cost to them personally or their family. It is this kind of enthusiasm that the rookie brings to the police academy when they begin the rigorous training. As a result of the strenuous physical demands and challenges to their intellect in learning the law and how to more effectively enforce it, the rookie officer frequently finds themselves placing

their job ahead of their family obligations in an attempt to succeed in their new career. In the beginning, this may seem a short-term sacrifice for success, but this pattern can become a permanent lifestyle (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

Law enforcement stressors have been broken down into five major categories of psychological stress that the officer may experience. They may experience stress from inter or intra organizational practices. The stress may stem from criminal justice system or public practices and characteristic. Finally, it their stress may be influenced by the nature of police work (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

Intra-organizational practices may include positives like promotional advancement or recognition of work well done, but it could also include poor supervision, lack of career opportunities, or poor pay. Additionally, offensive departmental policies, excessive and unnecessary paper work, and poor and inefficient equipment may be a part of this. Inter-organizational stressors include lack of career development and little room for future growth and development, limited potential advancement, and lack of cooperation between neighboring departments, which can result in frustration over a duplication of efforts or lack of healthy coordination between departments. Criminal justice system stressors include the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the correctional system, unfavorable court decisions, misunderstood judicial procedures, and reoccupation with street crime. It is this source of frustration that may provide the police officer with the most stress, as they feel that they have no control over it. They may find that the criminal apprehended is a continual offender who is repeatedly released by the judicial system, and no matter what they do, it will have little impact on affecting any type of significant change (Besner & Robinson, 1982).



Public services stressors can include distorted press accounts, unfavorable minority and majority attitudes, criticism from neighbors, adverse local government decisions, and ineffectiveness of referral agencies. The final stressor, police work, brings with it an inordinate amount of stress, but, often, the officer feels more prepared to cope with these stressors since they can affect some type of control over it. Police work stressors include role conflicts, irregular work schedules, sense of uselessness, absence of resolution on cases, continually watching people's distress, repeatedly needing to respond quickly to situations, and the cumulative effect that police work takes on the individual. In addition, an officer can become obsessed with solving crime and apprehending criminals, and they may become a workaholic in an effort to help lower the crime rate (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

In a response to this stress, the officer may find that their job takes a strong toll on both them and their family. The officer may exhibit a tight rein on emotions and may become cold and unfeeling. The rule of being able to suppress their emotions on the job in order to be able to function effectively may not be acceptable to their spouses once they get home. Similarly, if the officer does not experience a release of their pent up emotions, they may find themselves later faced with the problem of psychosomatic ailments. They may feel that, ultimately, they are faced with the decision of having to choose between their family and their career. When confronted with this choice, the officer feels that they are in a no-win situation. If they choose the job over the family, they may leave a relationship that was personally rewarding at one point and one they had a large emotional investment in. Similarly, if they choose their family, they may miss a career that they found personally gratifying (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

The suppression of emotion has been proven to be a stressor for law enforcement marriages. Law enforcement officers tend to be overly protective of family members from the negative environment officers face on a daily basis. They have displaced anger and frustration from working within a criminal justice system that is failing to protect the innocent. An officer's ineffective coping mechanisms for dealing with the carnage that an officer experiences during the course of their duties. The unspoken fears of being killed or having a family member killed as revenge for something the officer did in the line of duty. The officer may also feel a strong need to be taken care of by his spouse and family. The officer develops effective defense mechanisms to help them cope with much of the unpleasantness they will be faced with on the street. Most often this includes the development of a tough exterior that does not reveal much emotion or feeling to others. It is this lack of emotion that allows the officer to deal with child abuse, auto accidents, or homicides and to react quickly and in a clear and concise manner.

Unfortunately the officer brings this same personality trait of lack of emotion home with them and appears relatively unaffected by what is going on around them. The spouse who is expecting an emotional reaction from the death or illness of a relative, or simple emotions at home, only to find the hardened shell their spouse has developed a defense to working the street (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

Oftentimes, in periods of duress, it is easier to vent tensions and frustrations on people who are closest to the officer, rather than to direct the emotion where it belongs. This is precisely what happens in police marriages. The officer is faced daily with situations in which they are called upon to make snap decisions, yet their authority and

judgment may later be questioned by someone who was not there to witness what occurred. In these situations, it is not easy to argue with a supervisor or private citizen. Again, the officer is required to speak to the citizen in a professional manner; therefore the officer has to suppress their emotional response. Consequently, when they get home, they may feel the need to release many of their pent-up emotions on family members. Unfortunately, this may result in an argument between the officer and their spouse (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

Instead of telling their spouse that they are frustrated and angry over events on the street or within the department, the message that is relayed is that "I'm angry with you." A more effective way of releasing the same pent-up emotions is by physical exercise or by telling your spouse "I'm frustrated with my job today. I have some things that I'd like to share with you". This enables the spouse to know what to expect and to react appropriately to the stressors put on the officer. Many officers develop unique ways of coping with their stress. Unfortunately, some of these mechanisms may be maladaptive. As a result of their prolonged exposures to the negative side of life, the officer may develop a negative attitude towards people in general and may find it difficult to communicate with anyone outside the profession. Consequently, they may feel more alone and isolated.

One means of coping with their loneliness and the stresses that they may be feeling is to search for solace and relief from alcohol. Drinking alcohol is often viewed as a socially acceptable way to release pent-up emotions. Unfortunately, however, for many officers this may just be another obstacle they will need to overcome (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

Another source of tension amongst law enforcement couples is the spouse's complaint that the officer shuts off sharing. The spouse would like to be more involved in knowing what their significant other does on a daily basis. Unfortunately, because of the nature of police work, many officers are reluctant to share any information with their spouses for fear that knowing what they do may only serve to heighten their anxiety level and make them worry even more. Stress has cumulative effects upon a person. The toll can be seen in the officer's personality, interpersonal relationships, health, and job performance. Some of the warning signs of stress include the following: abrupt change in typical behavior pattern, rapid mood changes, excessive use of alcohol, hostility and overreacting to situations, sleep disturbance, decrease in work performance, depression, and use of excessive violence. Some of the most common stress symptoms are headaches, depression, sighing, and a desire to strike out physically (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

Ways of coping with stress and working off tensions include: finding an exercise that is enjoyable as well as discussing problems with others. The officer must learn to take control over emotions and learn to accept what cannot be changed. They must also take control over the things that can be changed. Finding a balance between play and work, without becoming overly immersed in play or work, and getting sufficient rest are also important. Most adults need seven to eight hours of sleep. They must take charge of their physical and mental health. Communication is the key word in the maintenance of good relationships among couples (Besner & Robinson, 1982). Many people believe that communication is a simple process that anyone comes automatically. This is a fallacy; good communication is an art. It takes practice to make

sure that the point is clearly heard and understood and that it is being delivered in a manner that is not going to be perceived as threatening or confusing (Besner & Robinson, 1982).

The law enforcement profession has, in the past, been primarily considered a male-oriented profession. Women began to enter the law enforcement field during the 1970s. A natural consequence from this trend was marriage within the ranks. Thus, the percentage of dual-career law enforcement marriages increased in prevalence and acceptability. Law enforcement couples must confront the professional and domestic issues just as other dual career couples do.

Laws enforcement officers soon find that maintaining a relationship while performing as expected in their jobs becomes increasingly difficult. Jones and Jones (1980) found that of 415 officers surveyed, with an average age of 36, who participated in this study: 45% (187) were married, 25% (103) were separated, 20% (83) were divorced, and 10%(41) were single (as cited in Scheibe, M. 1994). Couples frequently encounter role confusion when they try to preserve traditional family roles and dual-careerism. Campbell (1987) stated, "The divorce rate for dual-career couples is high due to possible conflicting demands, stresses, and work overloads" (as cited in Scheibe, 1994, p. 20). According to Aldous (1982), both must find time and energy to balance career, home, family, and their marital relationship. Work schedules of dual-career couples involve scheduling days off, work hours, and work week demands to either complement or match the other spouses' schedule (as cited in Scheibe, 1994). The scheduling considerations of both spouses are the "strongest determinant of an individual's level of work-family conflict" (as cited in Scheibe, 1994, p. 20). As stated by

Jones and Jones (1980), marital satisfaction is a product of a couple's efforts. They must decide what is most important and establish priorities. The couple must decide whether they want more prestige, leisure, financial resources, time together, family time, and work together to achieve their goals (as cited in Scheibe, 1994).

Many stressors can be linked to separation, divorce, and/or extra marital encounters. Critical incident stressors, such as killing a criminal or participating in a pursuit and general work stressors, like working child abuse cases, an officer being injured on the job, or losing control of a police situation, contributed more to marital conflict than all of the other variables tested (Stevens, 1999). Stevens (1999) found that alcohol abuse resulted in being the most common of the tested stressors effecting officers. Critical incident stressors of killing or harming another officer and general work stressors of poor supervision and shift work contributed to alcohol abuse. Based on further examination, killing or harming another officer was most often directly related to alcohol abuse. The findings showed that everyday policing activity produced most of the stress an officer has and that stress leads to negative conduct. Nonetheless, when both critical incident stressors and general work stressors are neglected, the results implied that the quality of police service is compromised, causing the well-being of an officer and the community they serve to be at risk (Stevens, 1999)

Officer stress plagues policing despite the best efforts to improve the conditions; yet some people fail to understand that the police organizational structures could aid in reducing police officer stressors by taking a proactive approach. Policy makers seem to overlook the importance of the organizational context in which officers must work. It is fair to say that human service issues in society tend to wait for victims rather than

prevent them, and society-at-large overlooks the importance of the organizational context in which police officers must work (Stevens, 1999).

Emotion-related variables are consistently identified by marriage and family researchers as being highly predictive of a range of outcomes for individuals and couples. These include intentions to quit ones job, psychosomatic symptoms, decreased involvement in children's activities, and spouse's emotional stress. Officers and the family members of the officers may go through a variety of symptoms, which may lead to emotional exhaustion: "a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion that results from excessive job demands and continuous hassles" (as cited in Roberts & Levenson, 2001, p. 1053). This is cited as one of the strongest predictors of negative outcomes for individuals in and out of the work environment. Qualitative reports stated in a study by Repetti (1987) revealed the salience of the physical and emotional drain of work, showing that anger, impatience, and other negative feelings engendered at work are expressed later at home (as cited in Roberts & Levenson, 2001). Additionally, Jackson, Zedeck, and Summers (1985) found that spouses' satisfaction with the quality of family life was more closely related to the emotional interference from work (e.g. tension, irascibility) than to the structural interference from work (e.g. hours spent at work) (as cited in Roberts & Levenson, 2001).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The topic of this research paper is the effect of law enforcement on divorce. A review of the literature showed that an officer can undergo a variety of destructive symptoms related to stress from exposure to traumatic situations and the everyday wear on an officer's physical and emotional being. If not addressed by the officer or the

officer's family, these symptoms can cause the break down of job performance as well as the officer's personal life, including his family. Identifying these symptoms is vital to intervening and saving the career and family life of the officer.

The method of inquiry will include: the review of published books on the subject matter, magazine articles, and journals addressing the topic in question. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of divorce, the law enforcement effect, will include a questionnaire. The blind study will consist of twelve questions, distributed to law enforcement personnel from various parts of the state of Texas. Thirty-five officers responded to the research questionnaire.

## **FINDINGS**

Job related stress plays a substantial role in divorce in the law enforcement field. The inability to keep the stress from spilling over from the work environment to the home environment without adequate means to cope or relieve the stress causes the inability to communicate with the spouse, which can lead to divorce. Of the officers surveyed, the results found that 59% were married, 33% had been divorced, and 8% were single. None of the officers surveyed were separated. None of the officers that had been divorced had been married more than twice. The average amount of time in the second marriage was 15 years. The number one stress related factor that the officers experienced during a divorce was alienation of family and friends. Every officer surveyed estimated that the divorce rate within their agency was over 50%, but none of them could give an exact number or percentage.

It is well documented that the stress of the job does eventually make it home, even with officers that attempted to shield their families and friends. Officers develop a



shell or protective barrier to safeguard themselves from the ugliness the world places on them on a daily basis. As a result to this shield, the officer develops coping mechanisms, which are usually bad habits like drinking alcohol, excessive smoking, insomnia, or a vast variety of other health depleting habits. Of the officers that were married and had been married during their law enforcement career, the survey showed that all of them had some sort of stress relievers like exercising, hobbies, some of which included the family and friends.

## **DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSIONS**

The issue examined considers the effect of being a law enforcement officer on divorce. The purpose of this research was to identify some of the habits that may be signals of a law enforcement officer on the borderline of needing intervention in order to protect his family and his career. The research focused on the stress signals an officer or an officer's family may go through that results in divorce and complete dissolution of the family and possible loss of career. The researcher hypothesized that by identifying the signs of stress and habits to cope with the stress of a career in law enforcement, intervention strategies can be put in place so a spouse or co-worker may not only save the person, but the co-workers family, and career.

The researcher concluded from the findings that though many cope with stress in a variety of ways, there are always common factors or signals that can be identified to alert co-workers of an officer in need of help to deal with the stress of the job and the negative side of law enforcement that every officer deals with on a daily basis. The everyday citizen usually does not have any idea of this negative side of the law enforcement officer's job. Citizens may blindly believe their small town and the law

enforcement departments' lack of publication of information is an indicator of the lack of criminal activity in their area. This information is generally not released due to the citizens' perspective being that law enforcement is not doing an efficient job.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reasons the findings supported the hypothesis are possibly due to not being able to effectively compare the divorce rate in the career field of law enforcement to other career fields. There is very little documentation on divorce and a chosen career field. Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because the officers surveyed were of a small number, not giving a true representation of the overall law enforcement field. Many officers who have been through a bad relationship have developed a "thick skin," which is spoken about in the literature review. Officers also see it as a sign of weakness and are not willing to admit to having some of the signs that might indicate that intervention is needed.

The study of divorce in law enforcement is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because society stands to be benefited by the results of this research through intervention programs. Whether or not an officer and his/her family are having difficulties, they could still benefit from an intervention program, as a preventative measure. Not only can the officers themselves benefit from this research, but the departments that they work for as well. When an officer has adopted bad or unhealthy habits as a way of coping, it not only affects his family life but his whole department and career. Officers who are stressed can develop bad habits like sleep deficiency, alcohol abuse, and even drug use, lose their focus of helping society, and will be less efficient than officers that have good habits and avenues of dealing with stress. Their department can suffer through a decline of work efficiency and reliability on the officer,

which can cause budget strains through abused sick leave and all around lowering of officer moral and effectiveness. It would be nice to see a study conducted throughout law enforcement, with the results available for officer review. A more in-depth survey from seasoned veterans to first year rookies could result in finding a possible burnout point during and officer career. Programs could then be set up for officer training at these junctions to help identify those at risk or on the border of needing intervention. Department demographics would play a role as well; larger city departments are exposed to more traumas in a shorter period of time then a small town department. This would most likely change the point in an officer's career for burnout or need of intervention.

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Stevens, D.J. (1999, September) *Police under stress*, Law & Order, 77- 81.

Law and Order

## APPENDIX i

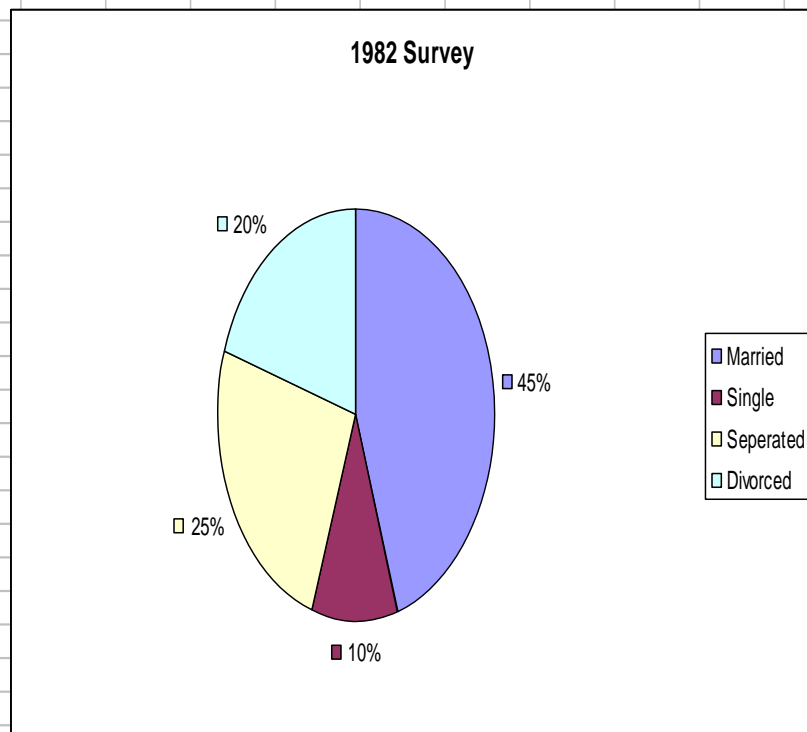
This Questionnaire is for survey purposes only and will be compared to the documentation found in my Literature Review in completion of an Administrative Research Paper.

- 1) Have you ever been divorced? Yes / No
- 2) How many times have you been married?
- 3) How long have you been married?
- 4) Would you contribute your work in Law Enforcement as one of the contributing factors in your divorce? Yes / No
- 5) Did you experience any of the warning signs, i.e., depression, irritability, insomnia, alienation from family and friends, drinking in excess, smoking, etc. Yes / No
- 6) If yes to question five, which warning signs?
- 7) How many of your co-workers have been divorced?
- 8) How many officers work for your department?
- 9) Does your department offer any type of Marriage Counseling?
- 10) Does your department offer any type of Stress management or Counseling?
- 11) What do you do to manage your stress?
- 12) What age group are you in? <30, >30<40, >40<50, >50.

Thank you for your participation,  
Gerald Hall  
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**APPENDIX ii**

Married	Single	Seperated	Divorced
45	10	25	20



**APPENDIX iii**