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"A Case Study of Eight Slain Police Officers in Rural America"

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ABSTRACT

Homicides are not random. Our research suggests that police officers killed while on-duty are not random samples of their departments. Using in-depth interviews with fellow officers and family members, we reconstructed the lives of eight slain officers in one rural state. The findings show that these officers exhibited personal characteristics, family difficulties and occupational dynamics quite different from average members of their departments. While no individual fit the emerging profile perfectly, these slain officers generally were: (1) verbally and physically aggressive, (2) meticulous and rigid, (3) preoccupied with handguns and competitive shooting, (4) having marital problems or divorced, (5) experiencing departmental clashes, and (6) unhappy with their police careers. Five knew their killer, all died within seven blocks of their office and within one minute of leaving their patrol vehicle, and five died in communities smaller than 3,500 people.

INTRODUCTION

When an on-duty police officer is killed, officers from other agencies converge to mourn, pay respects, realize their own mortality and question, "Why did this happen?" Civilians also appear at these funerals to mourn and shake their heads in disbelief. For ordinary citizens, a symbol of peace and order is gone. They find such deaths

hard to explain. While these deaths gain national attention, little is known about their causes. Our research task is to shed light on eight police officers killed in Montana over the past eighteen years. None of the eight expected to die and certainly not in the manner that they did. The officers had no chance because each was purposely, and with clear forethought, shot and killed by an assailant. Yet each death helped reveal a pattern making these seemingly disassociated slayings more understandable.

Our only perceived notion about these deaths was that they probably followed a homicide pattern similar to that for all citizens, i.e., most murders in America are not random. In other words, not all Americans have the same probability of being killed in any given year. Data indicate that national subgroups have varied victimization rates. The same holds true for the police. It is likely that not all officers have the same probability of being killed, that there may be police subgroups more prone to victimization.

By reconstructing eight slain officers' lives, we sought to explore possible variables that identify what officer types might be at risk and be killed while on duty. To do this we created a composite profile of the slain officers through re-enactment and reconstruction of the officers' occupational and personal lives. This included their personal characteristics from which we were given revealing glimpses of how they were seen by people around them, both on and off duty. We solicited from friends and family members detailed and intimate accounts of these officers. Slowly, a collective picture emerged. While some officers did not fit the entire collective profile, each clearly displayed most of the characteristics of the profile. These eight officers were a remarkably homogeneous group. Time and time again, in isolated conversations involving no collaboration between interviewees, people told us remarkably stories. In the excerpts that follow, similar images, common perceptions, and even identical metaphors and analogies were consistently presented.

The excerpts that follow have not been altered except to disguise the identity of specific officers and their friends and family. Since one slain officer was a woman deputy sheriff, we only used the male gender throughout to disguise her identity and protect the

privacy of her family and friends.¹

METHODOLOGY

Since our interest was police officer slayings in rural settings, we only researched those eight officers killed in Montana by firearms over the last eighteen years. Officers dying from heart attacks, suicide or traffic accidents were omitted because no purposeful perpetrator was involved. Data was collected from several sources: (1) a review of existing research, (2) Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reports, (3) verbal and written reports taken from officers and investigators who investigated the incident or were part of the incident itself, and (4) interviews with family and friends. Attempts were made to interview relatives of the killers but they refused. Of the seven killers involved in these eight deaths, only two remain alive. We have not talked to them because their cases remain on appeals. With all interviews, open-ended questions were asked and free dialogue was encouraged. Twenty-eight interviews and thirty-eight hours of recorded tapes were transcribed into 300 pages. Portions are found throughout this paper.

The death scenes were scattered across Montana, involving 4,500 miles of travel over a seven month period. We visited seven communities ranging in population from 80,000 to as few as 1,200 people. In one location we interviewed two people at the same time, but the remaining taped interviews were conducted individually².

As part of our initial research we compared and contrasted our data with national statistics on police fatalities. This did not prove particularly informative. First, utilizing the F.B.I. Uniform Crime Report of 1989, we found it difficult to generalize and compare our eight in-depth case studies with the 800 police officer deaths found throughout America in the 1980's. The F.B.I. summarized police officer fatalities by percentage variations found in victims' rank, age, sex, race, work assignment, length of service in law enforcement, homicide weapon used, body armor worn by victims, and month, day and hour of the slayings. With our in-depth analysis of only eight police officers killed over an eighteen year

period, percent comparisons were not particularly useful³.

Our small sample did not vary significantly from national averages except in four important ways. Five of the Montana deaths took place in communities of 3,500 or less. The rural nature of these deaths, even by Montana standards, is quite dissimilar from national data, suggesting a more urban oriented fatality rate for officers. Additionally, unlike national data, all eight Montana officers died within seven-tenths of a mile (approximately six or seven city blocks) from the nearest police station or sheriff's office. In several cases you could actually see the station from where the officer died. Since many officers in rural Montana travel great distances when responding to calls, in some cases in excess of forty miles, these observations are significant. Being killed so close to their offices reveals three possible states of mind: (1) officers do not have time to mentally pre-plan their actions or reactions in these rapidly escalating incidents because they have just left their office. (2) being just a short distance from their assigned station, they develop a false sense of security that "help" or "back-up" is just a short distance away, or (3) their familiarity with the environment immediately surrounding the police department lulls them to complacency. Since we cannot interview the officers, these states of mind are only conjecture.

Also out of sync with national data was the quickness with which these deaths took place. Two officers were slain before they could exit their vehicles. Four died immediately upon leaving their vehicles and the remaining two officers died from wounds received within thirty seconds to one minute after exiting their vehicles. Lastly, five of the eight slain officers knew the person who killed them. None of these findings fit the national data.

Besides the difficulties of comparing Montana data to national samples, a second important issue surfaced. We recognized how superficial or nonuseful the F.B.I. data was when it came to understanding the deaths themselves. Since assailants were dead or not talking, we realized that any effort at understanding police officer fatalities would have to come from fellow officers, families and friends of the slain officers. It was from these people that we learned of the officers' personal characteristics and their family and

occupational dynamics. The following excerpts from transcribed interviews illustrate the similarities of these eight slain officers.

SLAIN OFFICERS' PROFILE: PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Our primary task was to develop a profile of slain officers. The reconstruction of these officers lives at the time of their deaths showed many shared common personal characteristics, some not held by most officers in rural Montana. In consistent fashion, a mixture of six or more slain officers were: (1) verbally or physically aggressive, (2) extreme gun enthusiasts, and (3) excessively rigid and/or meticulous in their daily behavior. Each of these three issues is discussed below.

Verbal and Physical Aggressiveness .

Through interviews obtained, comments indicate these officers openly exhibited their temper. Even though three maintained an even temper publicly, collectively the evidence shows most openly displayed their tempers via verbal and/or physical aggressiveness. The following excerpts from our interviewees illustrate this difficulty in clear fashion.⁴

[He] was very, very cocky . . . He was wrong for this business . . . the kind of guy that would use his nightstick. I think he probably would have flown off the handle faster than most normal people . . . But you got a guy that enjoys hitting somebody . . . In my opinion, somebody like him is more apt to be killed in our business because they are more mentally aggressive. He could have been the cause of another officer getting killed because of his aggression . . . They [aggressive officers] cause us grief . . . They should be selling shoes . . . They shouldn't be cops.

[He] was a heavy goddamn gorilla . . . He didn't have a short fuse, he had no fuse . . .

[He would] come off short and abusive . . . He didn't really have a good way of handling people so we [the department] had complaints about him . . . Some

citizens had filed complaints against him because he was too abrasive . . .

[Did he have a temper?]. Yeah. He had a hell of a temper . . . I would rather go in [to a bar fight] with a different officer personality-wise . . . He's going to set people off a little . . . He's too stiff . . . and I'd rather go in with somebody that is a little more bending in that kind of situation.

[His] temper got the best of him to be perfectly honest with you . . . He didn't like hurting people but by the same token, he had a short fuse . . . He would be so polite but when he was done taking crap off somebody he was done.

[He] was a calm and quiet kind of guy but occasionally he'd get ticked off and be ready to take the badge off and duke it out with somebody.

[He] was told [by the administration] never to slap him [the citizen] around or some damn thing . . . You get a hot-shot [officer] you know.

I saw [him] take his badge off once and he started to take the guy on but then stopped . . . Like I say, he had a hot temper.

If they [citizens] would cuss at [him] and get mad at him, he'd get mad right back. . . . He'd be calm for a while but they'd keep it up and he'd tell them where to get off .

[He'd] blow off steam at you [other cops] and get upset. He'd blow steam for 20 minutes and then a couple hours later he'd have coffee with you and everything would be hunky dory.

These illustrations show that six or seven officers were prone to asserting power and dominance over others [excessively when compared to other Montana officers]. It is difficult to determine what role these attitudes played in these deaths. But knowing the intricate details of these incidents as we do (i.e., one officer left his vehicle without obtaining vital information from dispatch because he was impatient with the system, another officer's dominant behavior escalated as a number of minor incidents accumulated, and yet another officer verbalized his indignation when responding to the third call-back to a family disturbance), the officers' similarities in demeanor are important and consistent portions of our profile. Other illustrations of aggressiveness, assertiveness, power and dominance are shown below.

[He] did come home upset one night because he had lost his temper with a prisoner in the elevator . . . He said, "I hit him" . . . He was pretty upset . . . He said, "I shouldn't have done that" . . . I think that was when he was a new officer and I think that made him realize that he was going to have to really watch his temper.

[He was an] "I can do my job type" . . . an aggressive personality and he didn't mind the rough and tumble part . . . He could mix it up if he had to. [On a continuum of aggressive behavior, where would you put this officer?] More aggressive . . . He has always been more of an aggressive person but would be more aggressive at work . . . More ready to step in the middle of everything . . . If the jailer was being intimidated or if anybody needed any assistance, he was right in the middle of it.

[He] wasn't afraid to throw a punch where I [a fellow officer] would try to talk them [the angry person] out of being ornery. . . He was more aggressive, strong, extremely strong . . . I'd choose him for a backup, not only was he physically able to hold up his end of it,

but he could think on his feet too . . . [Comparing him to the rest of the department, where would you rate him on aggressive behavior?] Well if you want to know the truth, I would put him in the area where he has more confrontations.

[He] never wanted to hurt anybody, but he felt like sometimes he had to . . . I could name a bunch of people that didn't like him.

Cops get their way . . . Sometimes cops die in the process of trying to. [He] was real confident of his physical abilities, his strength . . . I think that's probably what got him in trouble.

[On a scale of one to five concerning aggressive behavior, where would you place him?] On a scale of one to five he'd be a five . . . He'd go in and do it . . . and he'd go in and do it by himself . . . He would probably wade right into it . . . Yeah he would do it alone . . . He had to, he was that kind of law enforcement officer.

Because there are different levels or degrees of verbal and physically aggressive behavior, these accounts are difficult to assess. The sometimes subtle and not so subtle training that officers get, the organizational peer pressure experienced, and the inherent militaristic socialization process, acquired all affect the level of aggression displayed. All police officers are taught to be aggressive. Yet nearly all our sample of dead officers were clearly perceived by fellow officers and family members as more aggressive than the norm for their departments.

Firearms and Lifestyles

As our research progressed, another variable emerged, giving a fuller or more comprehensive picture of the slain officers. All but one had an obsession or extreme fascination with firearms which again surpassed the norm for the average officer. Seven of eight

slain officers were excellent or superior marksmen. One even planned an early retirement to open a gun shop. Another worked in a gun oriented sporting goods shop prior to becoming an officer. The following quotes illustrate the overall importance of firearms in the lifestyles of these officers.

The many guns that he owned were expensive . . . If there was one [he] wanted, money was no object . . . He'd pay \$1,200.00 for a gun, turn around and six months later sell it. "I've got to have that one." That's just the way he was . . . [He] would immediately send the gun off to have custom work done on it. He was crazy about guns. He shot a lot and was very proficient. He was always saying you have to be impervious to the elements [the officer must have better quality firearms and be more proficient than the criminal element]. He said, "I don't think I'll live to be very old and when I go I want to go out in a blaze of glory" or something like that. He thought he should have been born a French Legionnaire cause he always likened himself to shootouts and shit like that⁵.

[He] was a handgun nut . . . He had a house full of guns . . . I would say once a month he was making or dickering up another deal . . . [Where would you rank him within the department in handgun proficiency?] He would probably be in the top third of the department . . . He liked weapons and he liked to keep himself in physical condition . . . He was a good shot and very active in that [shooting firearms] . . . He belonged to the rifle club, he was always out there . . . He liked weapons.

[He] read Guns and Ammo and all those magazines. I'd say if he would read The Wall Street Journal, he could get us into stocks and bonds. He knew everything about every gun that came out.

[He] was an excellent shot . . . He reloaded his own duty ammunition with just the right load . . . He said, "I want the first shot to killen". . . He just enjoyed shooting . . . He was an excellent shot, expert class . . . Whenever a new gun came out on the market, or a new bullet, or some kind of ballistic change or recommendation, he would be the first guy to know about it . . . He said, "If I'm going to be in this business, and I have to carry one, I'm going to have all the knowledge I can [about firearms]."

[He] worked at a gun counter [at a local sporting goods store] before he came here . . . His ability to shoot would be in the top percentage [compared to the rest of the department] . . . His knowledge of weapons would be at the top . . . [Did he own a lot of guns?] He did buy a lot of weapons, guns.

He knew what he was doing in terms of firearms and he was extremely proficient . . . While we were in [police] basic training he got a 99 or 99.6 . . . [out of a 100% proficiency score on the firing range].

[He] was one of the best competitive shooters in the region . . . He liked guns to shoot . . . He was an excellent marksman.

The issue here is not police officers and firearms as a duty weapon. Every police officer is required to carry a firearm and become proficient. The issue is one of obsession or preoccupation with guns beyond the norm for a gun oriented occupation. Collectively, nearly all of these officers were obsessed with the sport of firearms. However, as we reviewed the death scenes, we clearly recognized they could not translate this knowledge of their weapons quickly enough to react and survive these fatal incidents. This was particularly evident in the three cases where officers, in fact, had no chance to draw their weapons. Only two of the eight officers

actually killed their killers. Equally, unlike the killers who fired first round mortal wounds in seven cases, only one officer fired the first mortal round. Finally, we would be remiss if we did not mention two cases where the officers wounded their killers before they collapsed and died. By reflex action, they wounded their killer while in the process of dying themselves.

Meticulousness and Rigidity

Finally, concerning officer characteristics, a pattern of meticulous and rigid behavior was evident from the information obtained. Six of the slain officers, to a greater or lesser extent, incorporated into their daily lifestyles meticulous and rigid behavior. These rather compulsive traits are summarized in the following quotes.

His dress was immaculate. He did it because that's the way he was . . . He wouldn't go outside if his uniform, [didn't look perfect]. He broke starch [had a new uniform on] every day .

[He] was very meticulous, his uniform was perfect, his traffic stops were by the book [he followed the rules and regulations to the letter]. He quit wearing his vest and he was in the process of trying to reduce the weight back down to where he could comfortably wear his vest again . . . He wanted his uniform to look just proportionately perfect.

[He] didn't think he looked good with a vest on. It made him sweat . . . Everything he did was scheduled. He washed his car on a certain day at a certain time. He worked out several hours with a specific routine. He was so regimented . . . If he missed [his schedule] it was a catastrophic thing. He had a time for everything.

Really neat, clean, well-groomed and [his] uniform had to be spotless and pressed. I had real mixed,

feelings about it because on the one hand, I was getting tired of pressing his shirts that I didn't think needed to be pressed and on the other hand, I was proud that he was that kind of person because some of the officers were real slobs. And I was proud that he wasn't like that. I admired that a little more than I minded the extra ironing.

[He] even tailored his levis and had them pressed.

Coupled with the descriptions of aggressiveness, these illustrations depict the officers' compulsion to present a certain image. These quotes show how officers became accustomed to responding and handling people in a certain manner. However, their rigid and meticulous pattern of dealing with their daily lives prevented them from perceiving the impending danger that resulted in their deaths. Compared to the "average" Montana police officer, their general confrontational manner coupled with a love of firearms, especially hand guns, and an overall tendency to be excessively rigid played a major role in unraveling why these specific officers were killed in the line of duty. However, other very important characteristics also emerged that set these slain officers apart from the majority of their colleagues in Montana law enforcement.

SLAIN OFFICERS' PROFILE: FAMILY DIFFICULTIES

As with any occupation, an individual's personal life has an effect on his/her job performance. Equally, one's occupation can greatly impact one's personal life. A police officer's personal life alters perceptions of the surrounding world and influences reactions to most social situations. Concerning the officers in our study, each possessed family similarities and patterns of interaction that were uncanny in uniformity and consistency. In each case studied, marital difficulties or family problems (some severe and some which could be considered as "normal to a cop's life") are evident. We feel that no matter how well hidden these difficulties were, they had an impact on the officers' actions and reactions to the threat at the time

of death.

The Spousal Perspectives

We include the following quotes because they clearly illustrate how the slain officers' personal lives affected their job performance. Again, these thoughts come from surviving spouses or close personal friends and suggest why five officers were having marital problems and another had already recently divorced. The following accounts were very difficult for spouses to make in our presence. We sincerely thank them for their honesty!

I threw [him] out of the house because he wasn't pulling his load . . . He had a very hot temper when we first married and over the years, it really mellowed out . . . When he got mad, he got mad ! He was known to throw things occasionally . . . not at me, but just, you know [just throw things] . . . Underneath he still had a good temper . . . The main problem was I was working two jobs, keeping the house, paying the bills, parenting the kids, and he wasn't doing shit [to help me at home]. And so I asked him to leave. He packed a suitcase with some stuff and went to a motel. He was back in 24 hours wanting to know what we should do to put this together again.

[He] went and spent the night in a motel just to let the thing [this marital spat] cool down and I thought it was kind of a drastic action for him because that wasn't his character to do.

The phone [at home] would ring day and night . . . [He] was on call twenty-four hours a day . . . He was so tired all the time . . . He asked for more help but the city commission would not give it to him [it strained our marriage].

[He] would be out somewhere, heaven only knew where . . . and I'd get this phone call from this woman who would tell me what a wonderful, handsome man

my husband was . . . She probably did this to the other wives too . . . There were times when I could have simply killed him myself but I didn't want anyone else to do it . . . I wanted to do it . . . But yeah, we had been married just about [--] years when he was killed and probably [--] of them were probably arguments . . . The man had a lot of [personal] faults, but he was a good law enforcement officer.

I was financially conservative. I didn't think we should spend the money for [so many expensive guns]. I'm just not into guns and I never was. Somehow this got into the conversation at dinner. I made a comment that I didn't think we could afford the guns or something to that effect. He stood up and he used profanity. He said "fuck you" and walked out. He walked out of the house, and I had been married to him for a couple of years so it wasn't like we were newlyweds of two weeks. That completely took me by surprise. He didn't talk to me for 24 hours. Literally. He came home and slept beside me, although I had to get up early in the morning and I didn't hear anything from him--nothing--for 24 hours. And I had this feeling that my marriage is failing.

I don't think we had the best marriage or the worst. I mean, he wasn't an abusive person, physically, mentally or verbally. I think that his meticulousness was creating more and more problems for me. My own family was up in [another city]. I don't think that's very far to drive. But in terms of going up to see them on a weekend, he absolutely refused. "Go ahead and go if you want to but I'm not going to go." [Why not?] "Because it disturbs my workout schedule." . . . When he had Friday, Saturday, and Sunday off, in my opinion, I had to work and he should take care of [the kids] on Fridays. Absolutely

not. That was his workout day and he wasn't going to give that day up . . . It was more of who is going to give more in a day, I will and I did.

While only one officer was divorced, nearly all of the remaining officers experienced varied levels of marital discord ranging from the normal (if there is such a thing) husband/wife disagreements to "I threw [him] out of the house." Various research suggests factors that contribute to police officer marital problems (Lawson, 1982; Terry, 1983; Robinette, 1987; Reese, 1989; Bonifacio, 1991). These include constant shift changes, being on call twenty-four hours a day, continual worries about danger and violence, haphazard holidays off and exposing ones's spouse and family to constant criticism from non-police community members. While such issues combine to make all police family life difficult, we found more than an average amount of discord expressed in the interviews we conducted with surviving spouses.

Fellow Officers' Perspectives

As stated, most married officers (and we would suspect those living together or dating) experience some level of relationship discord. But as we continued our interviews, additional elements of marital discord in these officers' lives were revealed by fellow officers. At least five of the slain officers were seen by colleagues as openly exhibiting such difficulties.

I think, my personal opinion is, just my personal opinion, I think [he] would have went the way a lot of us would have gone . . . divorce . . . There were some real family problems starting up with [him] and something would have happened . . . The only thing I can think of that may have bothered him [at the time of the incident] is his personal life . . . Spouses call [you up at work] and start you thinking about that [family problem] crap . . . He probably didn't have his full mind on [the job].

[He] was divorced and had difficulties adjusting to being single.

Yeah, and there was violence in the [officer's] family, against even their small child, so I was told.

The duration and levels of hostility over an extended period of time are unknown. Yet we know that at the time of death there was obvious domestic discord in five of the eight cases. We cannot state that most officers have marital or domestic difficulties, but the majority of our sample did. Such a variable needs further exploration because as one fellow officer stated, "[He] probably didn't have his full mind on [the job]."

SLAIN OFFICERS' PROFILE: OCCUPATIONAL DYNAMICS

Another important variable surfaced as we reconstructed the lives of these slain officers. Clearly there were difficulties faced by these officers as they interacted with their administrations and dealt with departmental expectations. Somewhat akin to marital discord, it is impossible to ascertain the exact role difficulties with the administration played in the demise of these police officers. However, it is clear that such agency difficulties weighed heavily on their daily police and personal lives.

Officer/Agency Clashes

As a co-author of this study previously stated, "We must recognize the high price that officers pay when they perceive themselves as caught between a system of [departmental] authority they sometimes question and a public they sometimes despise" (Lawson, 1982). It is quite normal for all police officers to experience occupational strain associated with agency and community clashes. The very nature of police work creates officer ambivalence concerning departmental obligations and community sentiment/hostility directed their way.

. . . few occupations create more potential ambiguity, frustration, and subsequent immobilization of spirit for workers than police work. . . Being trapped between the state and the public causes police to gradually lose flexibility when performing their duties . . . Officers lose tolerance as they gain years of law enforcement

experience. . . Recruits lose their idealism and enthusiasm and become entrenched in inflexibility and cynicism (Lawson, 1982).

Understanding this transformation process that most officers experience rests with the interface between organizational pressures placed on officers and the negative consequences of constant antagonistic encounters with some of the public.

Throughout most of his career, in fact, the police officer lives in a world of power, yet one in which he himself has no power. The patrolman has not helped to formulate the policies he is required to enforce, and he is given little latitude in interpreting them (Fink and Sealy, 1974).

While all police officers experience frustrations living in a world of organizational power without actually possessing much of it, the slain officers in our study illustrated much more than an average amount of difficulty with their departments. In fact, six of the eight officers constantly clashed with departmental superiors or city/town governing bodies. Without identifying specifics in such a way as to breach anonymity or confidentiality, the following interview excerpts characterize the type of officer/agency clashes going on at the time of most officers' deaths.

[He] and the administrator had several run-ins . . . He carried a high-powered magnum and loaded his own rounds . . . The administrator didn't like that, but did not push the issue . . . They had several go-rounds about that and other department operations . . . There was turmoil in the department. There was a constant pissing match going on between [a supervisor] and him . . . he [the supervisor] was always on his ass.

The [political] situation there was just something that affected [him] so deeply that it affected his judgement . . . There was conflict with the administration no matter what he did . . . He was very burned out and

I've often wondered if that had something to do with it [his death] . . . The department was just so ill-run that many of [his] friends were pushing him to run for sheriff the next time around . . . At the time he died, he was in a real turmoil personally. In fact just several nights before he died, he told me that he had reached the point where he had to decide if he was going to be the sheriff or run for sheriff and try to get in [office] and improve things or he was going to get out of law enforcement . . . It had come to that point for him.

The administrator arbitrarily changed his shift and duties just to show the officer who was in charge . . . [The administrator] took little things and blow them out of proportion and it was sometimes off the wall . . . I mean, if you talked back to him or if you backed him in a corner where it turned out he was saying something that wasn't true, then he'd come down on you.

Nearly all officers studied had such conflicts with their administrators, commissioners or senior officers. In fact, it was clear that two officers had been severely reprimanded by their departments on several different occasions just prior to their deaths. As the above interviews suggest, just prior to their deaths two other officers were at the point of quitting or running for sheriff to alter the difficulties they experienced. Like the earlier issues pertaining to marital difficulties, perhaps the departmental clashes played a role in influencing the daily judgments made by these slain officers.

Officer/Agency Irregularities

One last issue continuously surfaced as we reconstructed the slain officers' lives. This issue was the most difficult for us because it suggested an understanding of these fatal events which clearly involved a possible victim-blaming ideology. As Ryan has suggested, it is easy to explain tragedy by reverting to what the victimized party did to cause their own victimization (Ryan, 1971). For example,

vacationers who have their homes burgled while away get blamed because they forgot to cancel daily newspapers, women who get raped are blamed because they dress too seductively, men get robbed and are blamed because they flash money around in cavalier fashion, etc. All illustrate victim-blaming tendencies. One always risks victim-blaming when an attempt to shed light and understanding focuses on the deeds or actions of victims themselves. This was the dilemma we faced because each officer fatality did involve systematic errors or irregularities that played a direct role in the deaths of all eight officers. However, such errors did not cause the deaths. Obviously, each police officer was intentionally killed by someone wishing the officer dead! Nevertheless, we must complete our profile by identifying procedural irregularities even if it suggests victim-blaming on our part.

Three officers were killed responding to domestic disturbances. Two of these officers died, in part, because they responded without officer backups. One refused help and the other was not furnished any by the dispatcher. The third officer was killed moments after responding to the domestic fight where the initial officer had refused help. In this tragic event, the first officer was already dead and the second walked into an unsuspected fatal trap. All three officers died because departmental policies were not followed or in fact did not exist at the time of the killings.

The remaining five officers died in situations where the following irregularities existed: (1) failure to follow departmental policy regarding routine traffic stops, (2) improper parking of the patrol vehicle to provide the officer with a safety zone, (3) failure to handcuff the arrestee while transporting him to detention, (4) failure to adequately respond to a person clearly known to be mentally unstable and a threat to the specific officer slain, and (5) failure to follow departmental policy governing the serving of arrest warrants. Acknowledging such errors or irregularities does not detract from the cold fact that some of these officers would have died doing everything "perfectly." Yet some died because they made mistakes!

CONCLUSIONS

This project was limited to police officer deaths by firearms

in one rural state. We have presented descriptive information indicating basic similarity with F.B.I. national data. Although this comparative data is valuable, it should be considered as inconclusive. Clearly, further research contrasting rural and urban variations should be conducted on a nationwide basis.

More specifically, the reconstruction of slain Montana police officers' lives has led to some similar scenarios. All died within seven city blocks from the police department. All died within one minute of initiating the encounter with the killer. Seven of eight died within ten yards of their patrol car. In fact, three either never exited their vehicle or died trying to exit it. Six officers, directly or indirectly, died at the hands of someone who personally knew them or one of the other officers involved in the situation. Several of these slain officers had long histories with their killer. One killer actually worked for the dead officer in a previous official capacity.

Finally, detailed reconstruction of these officers' lives suggests several important characteristics shared by nearly all. While many police officers can be expected to possess these characteristics, the frequency or intensity associated with these variables is quite consistent for these eight slain officers. Compared to fellow officers in their own departments, most were overly aggressive both verbally and physically. Nearly all were excessively involved in recreational hand gun shooting and firearm collection as a hobby. Six of the eight were excessively rigid, bordering on being compulsive about many facets of their personal and professional lives. Nearly all displayed more than the average amount of marital difficulties. One was recently divorced and perhaps two others were close to divorce when killed. Equally, all had varied levels of difficulty with their departmental supervisors or city officials. At least two could be characterized as prime candidates for job termination. Two others were seriously considering job termination by their own choice. Finally, all did some things (with our perfect hindsight) that we could consider improper, foolish, or even outright violations of departmental policy or procedures. To what extent these actions promoted their deaths we can only guess. Obviously, all police officers do improper, foolish and inappropriate things while on duty. Yet, why did these eight people die?

In sum, we present this initial profile of the slain officers with two important objectives in mind. First, police officer killings are not random. Hopefully we have identified variables which provide clues concerning risk levels of dying on duty. Further research may indicate that officers who think and behave as our sample did have greater probability of being involved in violent confrontations, either as victims or perpetrators. The direct opposite may also be true. Perhaps officers possessing none of the characteristics mentioned here have significantly less chance of violence-inducing confrontations.

These questions lead to our second objective. For both theoretical and practical reasons, these initial findings should be further researched and explored. Homicide research should pay more attention to the lives of the victims and perpetrators at the time of deadly confrontations. Equally, within law enforcement circles, especially among those who spend their professional lives training police officers, the profile we have presented should be considered as groundwork for preventive training/education. Without victim-blaming and without excessive accusations being directed at some types of police officers, we must continue our search for knowledge which gives clues about such tragic situations.

NOTES

1. This project was partially funded by the Montana Board of Crime Control to determine if illegal drugs were used by the officer or the killer at the time of the incident. We found only one case of an "unknown" drug in an officer and one case of an "unknown" drug in a killer. In both cases, steroids were suspected. However, a more definitive conclusion could not be accomplished because of the inadequacy of previously existing medical records (Alpert, Dunham, 1989:17). Alcohol may have been used by two slayers, but there was no evidence of alcohol use by any officer at the time of death. Additional funding was received from the Montana State University, Sociology Department and the Montana Law Enforcement Academy.
2. The settings included law enforcement agencies, motel rooms,

patrol cars, a university lounge, a hospital, an FBI office and two private homes. Information confidentiality was maintained. Only the researchers, the person interviewed and our typist knew what was discussed during the interviews. Over three hundred pages of transcriptions, pictures and related crime scene diagrams were collected. The end result was a comprehensive understanding of officer deaths in one rural American setting.

3. Any reader wishing copies of this percentage comparison between our small sample of eight and FBI data, please write Paul Lawson, c/o Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717.
4. Endnote explanation: (1) [He] replaces the actual officer's name or agency identification, (2) [Verbiage] encased in brackets indicates researcher comments or explanations, (3) "quotations" when the officer is quoted by the interviewee, (4) . . . (dots) denote intentional omitted verbiage, and (5) a line space denotes a different speaker.
5. For at least two, there was evidence that indicated a strong premonition of their death. One even remarked prior to his own death that "he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory." Another commented to his wife the night before he died that he knew he was going to die soon.

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