

Psychological Consequences for Police Officers doing Death Notifications After School Shootings

Deon Allen, M.S., & Kristine M. Jacquin, Ph.D.

Abstract

The United States has experienced a great deal of tragic and traumatizing experiences due to school shootings, stemming back to 1966, in the University of Texas shooting in which 15 people were killed. Since then we have experienced shootings in various settings, for instance, Columbine High School in 1999 (13 killed), Virginia Tech University, 2007 (32 killed), Sandy Hook Elementary School, 2012 (26 killed), and more recently, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, 2018 (17 killed), and Santa Fe High School, 2018 (10 killed).

Introduction

- ❖ Sharing this tragedy with families of victims is an arduous, tedious and anxiety-provoking task for the police officer or officers designated as death notifier(s).
- ❖ Law enforcement is an occupation often involving exposure to trauma, stress, and more than likely death situations daily (Soomro & Yanos, 2018).
- ❖ Moreover, police are four times more susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than the general population (Soomro & Yanos, 2018).

Introduction

- ❖ Whether the stressors faced stem from organizational or occupational properties, the frequency and/or severity associated with these stressors might lead to adverse physical and psychological consequences (Soomro & Yanos, 2018).
- ❖ Some psychological consequences include suicide, anxiety, PTSD, and emotional challenges (Carlan & Nored, 2008).

Relevant Research

- ❖ According to Rutherford (2008), the death notification task is one of the hardest jobs to be handed to any law enforcement officer.
- ❖ Further, many are thrust into the position of delivering this traumatizing news to the victims' family (Rutherford, 2008).
- ❖ Performing death notifications can be both physically and emotionally exhausting.
- ❖ Officers are expected to possess the ability to express the right words, envision and grasp the family emotions fully, and react empathically and sympathetically towards the survivors (Stewart, Lord, & Mercer, 2000).

Relevant Research

- ❖ The conveyance of the notification will more than likely remain engraved in the memory of the family members (Stewart, Lord, & Mercer, 2000). It likewise remains with the officer; most can recollect their first notification, in detail, years later (Stewart, Lord, & Mercer, 2000).
- ❖ Death notifiers providing notification in homes are often apprehensive about the family reactions and safety of those involved (Stewart, Lord, & Mercer, 2000).
- ❖ Family members after receiving notification might display a myriad of reactions, for example, "dissociative episodes with disconnected words and inappropriate behavior; lack of facial expression and emotions; feelings of being detached from own body (depersonalization); or feelings of living in a dream or an unreal world (derealization)" (de Leo, Anile, & Ziliotto, 2015; p. 706).
- ❖ In this process, notifiers who identify emotionally with the family members might develop feelings of helplessness and/or ineffectiveness making the tasks more arduous, inadvertently increasing stress levels (Stewart, Lord, & Mercer, 2000).

Conclusions

- ❖ The emotional ramifications linked to providing adequate notification to survivors especially in cases of school shootings is an area of concern that few studies have explored.
- ❖ Because death notification is physically and emotionally exhausting, the possibility of police officers experiencing compassion fatigue or secondary traumatic stress increases.
- ❖ Asking someone to bear the burden and suffering of others is in and of itself a very challenging task.
- ❖ Research suggests notifying survivors of an incident involving natural death is less emotionally demanding than notification of a violent, preventable, or untimely death (Stewart, Lord, & Mercer, 2000).
- ❖ This presentation aimed to highlight psychological consequences for the police officer(s) doing death notifications after a school shooting.

