

United States Probation/ Pretrial Officers' Concerns About Victimization and Officer Safety Training

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RESEARCH ON victimization and safety concerns for probation and parole officers is sparse. Parsonage's (1997) literature review concluded that research on the topic was nonexistent prior to 1987. Both Parsonage's (1997) research and Bigger's (1993) victimization study combined numerous jurisdictions of probation and parole officers. The hazardous incident reports submitted to the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts by U.S. Probation/Pretrial Services officers have often been reviewed for trends in victimization rates. These statistics, however, represent only those hazardous incidents reported, and the current study shows inconsistent reporting practices and policies. This research focuses on U.S. Probation/Pretrial Services officers' concerns for job safety, rates of victimization, satisfaction with the safety training received, high-risk activities performed, and the relationship between these issues and ideological orientation.

On-the-job safety has become a growing concern of U.S. Probation/Pretrial Services officers. Officers are currently expected to perform more intrusive activities while supervising a more dangerous population than in the past (DelGrosso, 1997). The war on drugs and numerous crime control acts passed during the mid-eighties and early nineties have changed the face of federal offenders on supervision. Officers now supervise three times as many drug offenders as in the past and twice as many offenders who have histories of incarceration (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

Paul Brown, formerly of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, noted that the traditional role of U.S. Probation/Pretrial Ser-

vices officers was that of social workers. Accordingly, their education, training, and background were in line with treatment models. Officers were viewed by both the offenders and the community as social workers. Their predominate activities were providing counseling and brokering referrals to various social service agencies for offenders and their families. These referrals often included substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment, employment, welfare, and an endless list of other social services (Brown, 1994).

Monograph 109, the Supervision of Federal Offenders manual (first published in 1991), addressed supervision of more difficult caseloads by requiring more intrusive activities to verify compliance with court-ordered conditions and to ensure protection of the public. These activities include inspections of offenders' homes, searches, seizures, surveillance, monitoring criminal associations and other intrusive activities. The role of the U.S. Probation/Pretrial Services officers has changed from predominately that of a social worker to an enforcement agent of the court (Lindner and Bonn 1996). The shift to a more dangerous caseload and new intrusive activities increases the risks to officers; however, the monograph did not include national policies and standards for officer safety training. Officers should not have to go to work each day uncertain of how to protect themselves from serious bodily harm, personal liability, or death. Officers who do not receive adequate safety training have the undue burden and stress of knowing that their safe return home each day may be left to the discretion and mercy of an attacker rather than to their

own ability to protect themselves.

This research clearly indicates that both officers and administrators have expressed significant concern about safety issues. Many individual districts provide substantial training to their officers, while others do not. The reasons that some districts lack training range from limited resources to the heated philosophical debate between social work and law enforcement ideological orientations (DelGrosso, 1997).

Methodology

In 1999, a national survey was conducted by the District of Nevada to study U.S. Probation and Pretrial Service officers' concerns for on the job personal safety, experiences with victimization, levels of satisfaction with the training they currently receive, and effects of orientation to these issues. The research involved a systematic random sample of 539 names from the officers listed in the national directory, which includes all 94 districts of the U.S. Courts. Of the 539 surveys sent, 300 were returned for a response rate of 56 percent. The respondents ranged from chief probation/pretrial services officers to probation/pretrial services officer aides. The survey questions were tailored from new officer safety issues identified and partial wording from questions used in prior studies, by Parsonage (1997), Bigger (1993), DelGrosso (1997), and Lindner and Bonn (1996).

Analysis

The responses were loaded into the SPSS statistical research program for analysis. The key variables in this study were measures of victimization experiences, concern for personal

safety, training satisfaction, high-risk activities performed, and officer orientation (law enforcement vs. social work). The analysis involved the examination of univariate and bivariate relationships between these variables. All of the relationships discussed in this study were found to be statistically significant to an accuracy level of $p < .05$.

Results

The research revealed that 96 percent of all respondents are concerned for their personal safety when making field contacts and over 75 percent of all respondents believe that field work has become more dangerous in the past five years. Over 60 percent of all respondents reported that they have been intimidated by the threat of violence or by other means during their careers. Of those respondents, 75 percent reported being threatened on more than one occasion.

Due to the changes in our offender population, no threat can be taken lightly. Threats may be a major source of stress for an untrained officer. Since any threat can quickly turn into a life or death situation, the numerous incidents reported by officers show that their concerns about safety have merit. Equally significant, 46 percent of all respondents reported that the lack of safety training and equipment has a negative effect on their productivity. These findings substantiate both that officers are concerned for their personal safety while performing their duties and that the current lack of training reduces work productivity. This research did not measure the negative effects that undue stress may have on the officers' personal lives.

Respondents' levels of concern were compared to the types of training being provided, ideological orientation, and high-risk activities being performed, to determine whether they would reduce or increase officers' concerns or perceptions of danger. No type of training was found to reduce officers' concerns for personal safety or reduce levels of perceived danger. Scenario-based training was actually associated with greater perceptions of danger. This relationship is probably because most safety training develops a heightened sense of awareness (Brown, 1994).

Levels of Victimization

The survey results revealed that almost 9 percent of all respondents were victims of physical assaults during their careers as U.S. Probation/Pretrial Services officers and over one-third of those were victimized on more than

one occasion. Over 60 percent of the respondents were victims of threats of violence or intimidation and more than two-thirds of those being victimized reported multiple incidents. Bivariate comparisons were made between the frequency of officer victimization and the types of training provided, ideological orientation, and high-risk activities performed. We expected that training would reduce victimization, and that law enforcement ideology and high-risk activities would increase victimization. The study revealed that training, ideological orientation, and high-risk activities have no statistically significant relationship to victimization or threats of violence.

The levels of assault victimization in this study are somewhat lower than those found in previous national studies. Parsonage, for example, found that half of all probation officers were assaulted during their careers (Parsonage and Bushey, 1988). Several factors may explain this difference. The drastic differences between the national average of victimization and the lower rates for federal officers could result from how recently enforcement duties have been performed by federal officers. In time, research may find that the performance of high-risk activities will increase victimization, but this has not been the case thus far. State or county probation officers have greater chances of victimization because they often have double or triple the caseload of federal officers. They often have a higher percentage of drug and violent offenders, though these are now becoming more prevalent in federal caseloads. State or county officers are often more likely to perform law enforcement activities, while federal officers have a more balanced approach between law enforcement and social work activities. This balance between enforcement and social work may also explain lower rates of victimization among federal officers. The recent growth in the number of officers in the federal system could also have reduced officer victimization rates. This study revealed that the longer officers are on the job the more likely they are to be victimized. Each of these possible explanations will require future research.

The level of officer concern revealed in this study may diminish in time, or it may be validated if victimization rates increase. Officers do not want to be among the 9 percent who are physically assaulted, nor do they want to be part of any future increase in victimization resulting from changes in offender population or enforcement activities. Both prior

research and the current study show that Probation/Pretrial Services officers risk victimization during their careers. The Federal Probation and Pretrial Officers Association's National Committee on Safety Training noted that between 1984 and 1997, there was a 237 percent increase in hazardous incidents reported. This information further validates officer's concerns for on-the-job personal safety.

Reporting Practices

Respondents were given a list of words and asked to select those that best describe the common reporting practices for hazardous incidents in their districts. The respondents described their districts' reporting practices as about 65 percent mandatory, 40 percent encouraged, with only 12 percent of the respondents indicating that reporting of critical incidents in their districts is consistent. This information further complicates the issue of accurately assessing officer victimization. It appears that hazardous incidents are under-reported and victimization rates may be higher than currently estimated.

Treatment of Victimized Officers

As a side issue, the survey asked respondents how officers who have been victimized are treated. About 69 percent of respondents reported that victimized officers are supported, about 20 percent thought victims were treated as if they had done something wrong, and about 11 percent thought victims are treated like everyone else. These responses indicate that over 30 percent of victimized officers may not receive the support they need. It is hard to get a concrete measurement on issues like these; however, some districts have taken precautionary measures to ensure that their officers feel supported by forming critical incident response teams. These may provide peer counseling to victims and even refer victims to professional counseling services if necessary. Of the respondents, 36 percent reported that their districts currently have such teams available to officers, with 64 percent reporting they do not have support teams available. The number of districts with teams available may be even lower than the response rate indicates, because some respondents who report that their districts have teams are actually referring to officer-involved shooting response procedures. Use of force policies and procedures often do not include counseling for officers involved in critical inci-

dents. We hope this lack of victim support is an unintentional oversight due to the rapid changes in the job and not the result of the philosophical debate between social work and enforcement approaches to carrying out our job responsibilities.

Officer Satisfaction with Training and Equipment

Almost half of all respondents reported that the lack of safety training and equipment has a negative effect on their job productivity. In addition respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of the training they received as U.S. Probation/Pretrial Services officers for dealing with altercations or threats of altercations. Approximately 20 percent rated their training as excellent, about 44 percent rated their training as good, and close to 36 percent rated their training fair or poor. When respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the safety training/practices in their districts, over 27 percent were very satisfied, slightly over 45 percent were satisfied, about 21 percent were dissatisfied, and approximately 7 percent were very dissatisfied. Respondents were asked to note the types of training provided by their districts. The table below indicates the percent of respondents who received each type of training.

73.8	Defensive Tactics
65.8	Judgmental/Scenario
20.5	Search Tactics
30.9	Escape Tactics
53.7	Firearms Simulator
20.1	Safety Academy (one week)
38.6	Fitness Program
85.2	Firearms
26.5	Crisis Prevention
4.7	Suicide Prevention

Comparisons were made between the different types of training provided and officers' satisfaction ratings for safety training. Respondents who received scenario training, safety academy training, and defensive tactics training were significantly more likely to report being satisfied or rate their training as excellent, and less likely to report being dissatisfied or rate their training as poor. The following are ten specific descriptions of statistically significant relationships uncovered by the research questions of this study.

Scenario Training

1. Among respondents who received scenario training, almost 11 percent believe field work has become more dangerous over the past five

years. Some might say that the training increased paranoia, but the main theme of safety training is heightened awareness for personal safety (Brown 1994). Officers who received scenario training seem to be more conscious of the dangers that exist around them.

2. Respondents who received scenario training were almost three times as likely to rate their training as excellent as those without the training. Those who did not receive scenario training were almost three times more likely to rate their training as poor.

3. Respondents who received scenario training were over 20 percent more likely to report being satisfied with their district's training/practices. Officers without scenario training were more than twice as likely to report dissatisfaction with their districts' training/practices.

Taken together, these findings suggest that scenario-based training increases officers' awareness of danger, increases ratings of satisfaction with training practices, and reduces negative evaluations of training. The Administrative Office and Federal Judicial Center have provided districts with a how-to course on scenario-based training. Our research indicates that scenario training has resulted in increased officer satisfaction with the training they receive, but the system lacks a national policy standard that would ensure that all officers are provided with such training. According to the survey results, over one-third of the officers in the nation do not receive this type of training.

Safety Academy Training

Safety academy training significantly increased respondents' ratings of the training they receive.

4. Respondents who participated in safety academies were over three times as likely to rate their training as excellent for dealing with altercations as those without the training. Those without training were over four times as likely to rate their training in dealing with altercations as poor.

5. Respondents who received safety academy training were approximately 25 percent more likely to report being satisfied, while respondents without the training were about four times as likely to report being dissatisfied with their district's training/practices. These results reveal that safety academy training significantly increases officer satisfaction ratings for the training they receive.

Defensive Tactics

The next type of training examined was defensive tactics.

6. Respondents lacking defensive tactics training were about 15 percent more likely to indicate that the lack of safety training had a negative effect on their work productivity. This suggests that defensive tactics training can increase job satisfaction and work productivity.

7. Respondents who received defensive tactics training were about 20 times more likely to rate their training in dealing with altercations or threats of altercations as excellent, and twice as likely to rate their training as good, compared to those who did not have the training. Those without defensive tactics training were twice as likely to rate their training as fair and over eight times as likely to rate their training as poor. Defensive tactics training significantly increases respondent's positive ratings of training.

8. Respondents who received defensive tactics training were approximately 45 percent more likely to report being satisfied with their districts' training/practices. Those without the training were approximately four times more likely to report being dissatisfied with their districts' training/practices.

Defensive tactics training appeared to be the most significant in raising ratings for training satisfaction. As noted above, respondents who received defensive tactics training were about 20 times more likely to rate their training in dealing with altercations as excellent. Defensive tactics training reduced the number of respondents who reported that the lack of safety training had a negative effect on their work productivity. Finally, respondents who had defensive tactics training were over twice as likely to report being satisfied with the safety training/practices of their districts, while those who did not have the training were four times more likely to report being dissatisfied.

This research identifies which types of prevalent training increase satisfaction with safety training and job productivity. Officers' high levels of concern for personal safety and increased ratings for these types of training indicate a substantial need for the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts to provide national standards and training in this area. A significant number of officers report that the lack of safety training has a negative effect on their work productivity, and this supports the need for national standards and training.

During August 1998, Chief Larry P. Wiley of the Western District of North Carolina surveyed the 103 chiefs of the federal system about creating a national defensive tactics policy. Of the 65 respondents, 92 percent supported the development of a national defensive tactics policy and training. These findings support the need for a national defensive tactics policy and training, especially because defensive tactics are mandated as part of the national firearms policy (Wiley, 1998).

Ideological Orientation

For years there has been heated debate over the proper role of probation officers. Many believe that the officer should be an offender's friend and that the primary goal is rehabilitation. Others believe that protection of the community should be the first priority of officers (Lindner and Bonn, 1996). In 1852, when John Augustus began his probation services, he attended court hearings and chose the clientele that he felt could be rehabilitated (Abadinsky, 1982). Today, a majority of offenders supervised by Probation/Pretrial Services officers have extensive criminal histories and drug abuse problems. Chief David Sanders of the District of Nevada affirms that officers today face the difficult challenge of managing risk to the public and providing correctional treatment with a more difficult offender than in past decades.

This philosophical conflict appears to have hindered the advancement of training. To some, officer safety training is a guise for law enforcement training, which offends those from the social work school. Others contend that officer safety training has nothing to do with one's philosophy about the primary role of officers. Safety training simply provides officers with a practical plan for surviving threats of serious bodily harm or death during the normal course of duties (Kipp, 1996).

As a component of this research, officers were asked where the primary role of U.S. Probation/Pretrial Officers should lie between law enforcement and social work. They were given a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the extreme for law enforcement orientation and 10 being the extreme for social work orientation. The variable scale of law enforcement and social work orientation was coded into three groups, with law enforcement comprising 1-4, the middle between both orientations 5-6, and social work 7-10. Based on this coding, 34 percent of the respondents fell on the law enforcement side, 50 percent fell in the

middle group between both orientations, and 16 percent were located on the social work side.

These three categories of officers were compared to the variables that represent concerns for on-the-job safety, victimization and training satisfaction. The results revealed no statistically significant relationships between these variables. These findings refute arguments by those who oppose officer safety training on the basis that safety training is a guise for law enforcement training. Often the assumption is that this type of training will result in increased "cowboy" or "cop" mentality, therefore increasing the possibility of violence. This is poor justification for not providing officers with a tactical plan and equipment to escape altercations without serious bodily harm or death. A possible explanation for these findings is that the vast majority of respondents became probation officers to be involved in a helping profession and few possess a pure law enforcement mentality. It is probable that officers only want safety training to avoid injury or death while performing intrusive activities with dangerous offenders.

Some who oppose safety training say that officers should run at the first sign of trouble and that many types of safety training will only increase the risks officers take. The survey results revealed that 72 percent of all respondents have been taught that they are to withdraw from any hazardous situation they encounter, yet only about 31 percent receive training in escape or withdrawal tactics. In addition, no prior types of safety training were shown to increase officer victimization or threats of violence.

High Risk Activities Performed

Officers were asked what types of high-risk activities are performed on a monthly basis in their districts. It was expected that officers who are required to perform high-risk activities would be more likely to be victimized and more dissatisfied with the training they are currently receiving, and would have higher rates of concerns for on-the-job personal safety.

The two high-risk activity variables used were the performance of searches and the seizure of contraband. Each of these was compared with victimization, concerns with on-the-job safety, and satisfaction with safety training. Two statistically significant relationships were found. First, respondents who perform searches were about 13 percent more

likely to report being satisfied with their districts' training/practices. Officers who do not perform searches were approximately twice as likely to report being dissatisfied with their districts' training/practices.

Second, respondents who perform seizures are approximately 25 percent more likely to report being satisfied with their districts' training/practices. Respondents who do not perform seizures were over three times more likely to report being dissatisfied with their districts' training/practices.

The research revealed that the districts where the high-risk activities of searches and seizures are performed do not experience increases in victimization or rates of concern for officer safety. Moreover, the districts that perform searches and seizures had ratings of satisfaction for their districts' safety training/practices and lower rates of dissatisfaction. (Only about 25 percent of all respondents reported that their districts perform seizures and only 18 percent perform searches.) One possible explanation for the increased satisfaction rates is that the districts that perform searches and seizures provide more training than districts that do not. Some districts may neglect the enforcement expectations for supervision of offenders and also neglect training. Finally, some districts may omit safety training to justify the lack of high-risk enforcement activities, to which they are philosophically opposed. The information currently available does not allow for any further comparisons.

Conclusions

Major changes have taken place in the roles of United States Probation/Pretrial Services officers. The population now being supervised has changed drastically from the white collar probationers of the past to more dangerous recidivists of today. To remain effective officers must perform more enforcement duties than in the past. These changes have created a gap between the dangers officers are now exposed to and the safety training they receive. The reasons for the current gap in training may range from lack of resources to the philosophical debate between the law enforcement and social work ideological orientations (DeGrosso, 1997). The only way to ensure that all officers receive the training they need to safely perform their job duties is to establish national officer safety training, standards, and policies. The current research shows that a vast majority of officers are concerned for their personal safety while on the

job. Our study has demonstrated that certain types of safety training are directly related to improving levels of satisfaction with safety training among U.S. Probation/Pretrial Services officers. Respondents who receive training in defensive tactics, scenario-based training, or at a safety academy were far more likely to rate their training as excellent and less likely to rate their training as poor. These types of training should be provided to all officers across the board to increase officer satisfaction with training and overall job performance.

Many districts have taken the initiative to provide training rated as excellent by their officers. Other districts have not provided training, and have received poor ratings from their officers. Whether this results from a lack of resources or philosophical conflicts, the system should provide national training, standards, and policies. According to a staggering 93 percent of the respondents, officer safety training should be provided at the onset of an officer's career.

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