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## Police Psychologists as Consultants

*By John Nicoletti, Scott W. Allen, Kym M. Baum, Major Gene Deisinger, Sara Garrido, Michael G. Gelles, Audrey L. Honig and Ellen Kirschman*

**P**olice psychologists are broadly and effectively utilized as internal and external consultants to law enforcement agencies of all sizes and jurisdictional scope in day-to-day and special operations.<sup>1</sup> Consultation is a growing subspecialty in the field of police psychology,<sup>2</sup> with specific guidelines created by the Police Psychological Services Section and approved by IACP in 2006.<sup>3</sup> These guidelines hold consulting psychologists to the most current standards and compel them to keep abreast of current legal issues and rulings. An updated version of the guidelines will be presented to the IACP leadership for approval later this year.

The specialty areas of consultation by a police psychologist are diverse and include subjects covered by companion articles in this issue of *Police Chief* magazine. It is likely that most law enforcement agency executives are well aware of the role police psychologists play in establishing programs for—and—conducting preemployment and psychological fitness-for-duty evaluations; counseling; intervention; and postincident debriefings. This article will provide law enforcement executives with a better understanding of the benefits of utilizing police psychologists in a wider role as agency consultants by expanding on a few additional topics. The first section will delineate the important contributions of police psychologists during operational callouts; the second section will focus on utilizing police psychology consultants for internal issues and programs involving law enforcement families; and the third section will explore police psychology consultation services for events involving threat assessment and management.

Although beyond the scope of this article, it is important to highlight that police psychological consultants can provide additional assistance to chief executives in the areas of risk management and liability mitigation. For example, having a police psychologist research law enforcement and psychological studies, design and conduct applied research, develop program evaluation methodologies to assess both effectiveness and return on investment, and create targeted interventions can



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reduce an agency's risk for litigation. Consultations can include performing psychological autopsies following suspicious or controversial deaths (e.g., a shooting involving suicide by cop); working with agencies in their handling of Title VII issues (e.g., discrimination and retaliation or calming interracial conflicts); implementing strategies for returning combat veterans; evaluating causal factors related to low-producing units or conflicts between units; and designing, implementing, and evaluating training protocols to improve employees' pursuit driving, report writing, courtroom testimony, and response to and recall of traumatic events, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, consultations can include police management, leadership, and supervisory training; police academy instruction; employee assistance program (EAP) implementation; peer support team development and supervision; and personnel wellness program development and implementation.

### Police Psychological Consultation during Operational Callouts

Four out of ten law enforcement agencies with a crisis or a hostage negotiation team utilize a mental health professional—of which 88 percent are psychologists.<sup>5</sup> Typically, this psychologist is a consultant and an advisor to the tactical team<sup>6</sup> and can bring a variety of knowledge, skills, and abilities to the team.<sup>7</sup> Within this role, the psychologist provides concise psychological impressions and feedback in *behavioral* terms to the tactical commander. This behavioral input optimizes the efficiency of and the relevancy in the decision-making process at the tactical operations center (TOC).

The psychologist as a consultant or an advisor at the TOC is frequently requested to provide input in

- the indirect assessment of the most likely behavioral reactions of the involved subject, often described as a function of dangerousness;
- the development of questions and a strategy for interviewing family and witnesses; and
- the direct involvement and implementation in the family and witness interview process, particularly with questions involving treatment, mental health symptoms, and psychopharmacology (i.e., the study of the effects of drugs on the mind and behavior).

Usually, the consulting psychologist at the TOC is most qualified in understanding psychopathology (i.e., mental illness and psychological impairment) and the influences of legal and illegal substances and psychotropic medications (i.e., medications prescribed to treat mental illness) on the subject and other individuals involved in the event. Moreover, a psychologist is familiar with the medical and psychiatric professional language and networks, which simplifies the process of finding mental health professionals to access medical information regarding the subject.

During an operational event, a consulting police psychologist can assist the TOC team in additional areas. For instance, as a consultant to the negotiation team, a psychologist can monitor

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the communications between the lead negotiator and the subject and suggest both verbal strategies for the negotiator and the probable motivations of the subject. Verbal statements by the negotiator that elicit strong, emotional reactions in the subject(s) are referred to as “hooks.” Often these hooks initiate the process of the subject trusting the negotiator. Once trust is established between the negotiator and the subject, it is more likely that the negotiator can begin to influence behavioral compliance in the subject.

A consulting psychologist also can provide an objective analysis of the decisionmaking strategy at the TOC.<sup>8</sup> It is a role of the consulting psychologist to consistently inquire of the TOC commander and personnel the specific question, “What is your anticipated outcome for this specific action you are contemplating?” This question invariably initiates a more involved discussion and a review of alternative strategies to best achieve the intended goal.

A final responsibility for a consulting psychologist at operational events is the facilitation of critical incident stress and posttrauma debriefings.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, not all operational callouts end without injury or death to law enforcement officers, hostages, or subjects. Therefore, at the conclusion of the operational debrief, there should be a posttrauma, psychoeducational debriefing facilitated by a consulting psychologist. Because the original consulting psychologist on scene acts as an active participant in the process of the operational callout, it is reasonable to assume that this psychologist also is affected by the events of the callout. As such, it is highly recommended that agencies use a *second* consulting psychologist to lead the psychoeducational postevent debrief.

A consulting police psychologist also is instrumental during a crisis or a hostage negotiation team training. The police psychologist is best suited to provide the agencies’ negotiators with the most current and relevant training in categories such as active listening skills, personality types, characteristics of individuals who are in crisis or actively suicidal, and an overview of domestic and global terrorism. The consulting psychologist also contributes to the development of interactive training sessions including role-playing, negotiator roundtables, and large-scale scenarios.

Research has found that law enforcement agencies utilizing consulting psychologists at callouts were significantly less likely to kill hostage takers and experience serious injuries to hostages.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, those law enforcement agencies utilizing consulting psychologists reported a significantly greater percentage of events ending in a negotiated surrender. Thus, the data are clear that consulting psychologists provide valuable input and contributions in the successful resolution of operational incidents.

### **Consulting on Family Issues**

Belonging to the law enforcement community is a source of pride and concern for officers and their families. Shift work, long hours, public scrutiny, the inherent danger of being in law enforcement, and the crisis-driven nature of the job can disrupt life at home.<sup>11</sup>

Changes in attitude resulting from exposure to death, despair, and inhumanity can turn a once familiar person into a stranger or a loving spouse into an abrasive, authoritarian partner and parent. Police work changes officers—this is to be expected—but it should not damage them or their families.

Police families had been all but invisible prior to the 1970s. Since then, there has been a growing recognition at local, national, and international levels that

- families are an officer's main source of support,
- offering assistance to families benefits the organization and the family,
- police families are both the same and different from other families,
- family members should not suffer needlessly as a result of their loved one's choice of profession, and
- agencies can strengthen police family resilience with a variety of low-cost efforts.

This section describes ways in which consulting police psychologists have helped agencies prepare families to skillfully handle the spillover from work to home and manage the occasional yet inevitable crisis. Among the factors that promote family resilience are effective communication styles; conflict resolution skills; health education and wellness programs, such as for alcohol awareness; multiple support systems; and the early identification of stress factors and symptoms followed by the rapid response of accessible, trusted, confidential resources such as peer support, chaplains, and culturally competent mental health consultants.<sup>12</sup> Simply adjusting to the police family lifestyle is not sufficient; families need tangible skills and realistic expectations.

The following nonexclusive list exemplifies the variety of activities by which consulting police psychologists have assisted law enforcement agencies in promoting family resilience.

**Family orientations or spousal academies.** These academies are traditionally scheduled during academy training, at graduation, or early in the field training program. They include ride-along opportunities; a tour of the facilities; firearm safety at home; introductions to relevant personnel (the chief, chaplains, peer supporters, critical incident response team, mental health staff and consultants, EAP representatives, and so on); stress management education; and couples communication skills. A panel of successful veteran couples and police parents discuss how they have coped with fear and anxiety, shift work, crises, and separations. They normalize the unique aspects of the police family lifestyle and show new families that they are not alone. Time for socializing helps new families—especially those who are relocating—to develop extended support systems. Participants usually receive a gift bag with important phone numbers; information regarding benefits such as counseling and code cards; information about relocation services; and other handouts, such as reading lists or books, for future reference.<sup>13</sup>

**Seminars and workshops.** The “it-will-never-happen-to-me” attitude of rookie families changes, sometimes rapidly, with time and street experience. As reality sets in, the material presented at the orientation needs reinforcing and new issues (i.e., the birth

of children) need to be addressed. Psychologists can facilitate or act in an advisory capacity for the development of seminars, workshops, and family support groups.

**Crisis intervention.** Family concerns are often overlooked following a critical incident, such as an officer-involved shooting.<sup>14</sup> Consulting psychologists have facilitated critical incident debriefings for family members, developed notification and information systems that keep families informed during a prolonged incident or deployment, and designed ceremonies that recognize the contributions families make by assuming greater levels of child care and domestic responsibility during prolonged events. Additionally, these psychologists have trained family members to respond to distressed families as peer supporters or as members of a critical incident intervention team and have helped departments design workbooks that cover important family matters and preferences in the event of injury or death.

Finally, consulting psychologists can assist law enforcement agencies with research; family needs assessments; identifying culturally competent community or EAP clinicians; and consulting to departments and clinicians in crisis situations such as divorce; domestic violence; suicidality (i.e., contemplation or likelihood of completing suicide); and line-of-duty deaths.

## Consulting on Threat Assessment and Management

Key figures in all branches of government are increasingly targeted for threatening communications and actions. Events just this year have demonstrated the potential for such threats to cause harm to government officers as well as to disrupt the continuity and effectiveness of government. The threatening behaviors may be targeted at government services (e.g., the hostage-taking and subsequent shooting incident at a school board meeting in Florida in December 2010) or may be directed toward public figures and others close to them (e.g., the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and others at an event she hosted in Tucson, Arizona, in January 2011). In addition, since the Columbine High School massacre and other high-profile incidents of school, workplace, and campus violence, law enforcement agencies have been increasingly relied on as an integral part of threat assessment teams to assess risk from disruptive and potentially violent individuals. This section of the article will focus on the utilization of police psychologists with two different target groups: threats to government officials and threats to schools and campuses.

### **Threats to local public officials and governmental targets.**

Over the last 30 years, the field of threat assessment and management has grown and matured to better support protective intelligence operations. Police psychologists have been heavily involved in conducting research and developing methodologies that support protective service officers in identifying persons who may pose a threat to a protectee, assessing the nature and significance of the threat, and developing strategies to deescalate the subject of concern and decrease the vulnerability of the potential target.

The police psychologist providing consultation to law enforcement on these issues will help most by developing and

bringing forth a range of understanding and relevant skills including but not limited to

- mental illness,
- dynamics and modalities of violence and aggression,
- stalking,
- threatening communications,
- violence prevention,
- integrated threat assessment and management practice,
- interviewing and detection of deception,
- deescalation of hostile and acutely violent subjects,
- mental health and social service systems in the community and region, and
- synthesizing complex patterns of data and behavior.

Police psychologists can be instrumental in assisting local and state law enforcement agencies in developing integrated threat assessment and management processes that better enable early identification of and intervention with threatening circumstances. This can be accomplished at a number of levels. First, police psychologists can provide consultation to law enforcement executives to sensitize them to the methods and resources that exist and to develop protective intelligence processes that are responsive to the needs of protectees. Second, they can provide training for intelligence analysts, protective service agents, and field investigators to help them better gather relevant information, assess that information, and develop a case management strategy. Finally, police psychologists may directly support protective operations by assisting in interviews of witnesses, protectees, and subjects of concern and then helping to develop case management strategies to mitigate the risk in specific cases.

At a strategic level, the police psychologist can provide law enforcement executives with a synopsis of the literature on protective intelligence and the application of threat assessment and management methods that are relevant to the protective mission at hand. They can help the agency develop a systematic and integrated process to gather and assess information, develop case management strategies, evaluate deescalation of threats, and continuously improve the process. The police psychologist can also develop and deliver a training curriculum to enhance the skills and abilities of law enforcement personnel regarding protective intelligence.

Measuring the effectiveness of the intervention is accomplished by the prevention of violence toward governmental agents and programs. Agencies, prior to the implementation or the refinement of protective intelligence methodologies, may be well served to assess the historical base rate of violent acts, adverse approaches to public figures, threatening communications, and hostile disruptions to governmental services. This will help agency executives to better understand and demonstrate how their efforts have improved processes as well as outcomes. As effective threat assessment and management occur through improved integration and utilization of information, agencies likely will be more aware of the number of threatening situations, the nature of those threats, the resources available to mitigate identified risks, and the resources that can be deployed to counter developing threats.

The paramount consideration for police psychologists is the competent and diligent discharge of their duties to support the safety and security of those served by the protective mission of the law enforcement agency. A significant consideration is that of the privacy of the persons involved, including the protectees, the witnesses, the subjects of concern, and the protective agents. While these protective intelligence operations are supported by active sharing, analyzing, and disseminating information, this should always be done in full accordance with relevant laws. Protective operations and their psychological consultants should be highly attentive to the sensitive nature of the information they encounter and work to protect against wrongful use of that information.

**Threats to schools and campuses.** Concerns about school shootings and the need to develop standard protocols were highlighted in two reports generated by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>15</sup> The uniqueness of the service requires the assessors of threat to navigate a narrow line between overreacting and underreacting to a student's identified behavioral spectrum. Often, people in a student's life will tend to minimize concerning behaviors such as threat making, labeling it as mere teenage angst. One role of a competent risk assessment consultant is to recognize the potential seriousness of disruptive behavior. An inaccurate assessment can have significant unintended consequences for the school district, the law enforcement agency, the community, and the police psychologist. The police psychologist providing consultation to law enforcement agencies in this particular area should at a minimum be able to

- maintain competence in the area of targeted or avenger violence,
- distinguish normal versus disruptive behaviors,
- identify concerning behaviors and appropriate countermeasures, and
- understand the limitations and considerations in conducting a risk assessment.

The purpose of completing a violence risk assessment for a disruptive student is to determine that student's level of risk to self and to others and to work with law enforcement officers to identify appropriate countermeasures (e.g., establishing rules of engagement and a point of contact, confronting disruptive behavior, requiring counseling, and so on). Consultants should use as many data sources as can be made available to them from the law enforcement agency, the school, and other organizations and individuals in the student's life.

Risk assessments can be either indirect or direct. An indirect risk assessment involves reviewing only collateral data and has inherent notable limitations based on the completeness and depth of data collected for review. A direct risk assessment involves reviewing collateral data in addition to conducting an individual interview and possibly psychologically testing the identified student.

In a final report, the consultant should address the student's risk level for violence. An example of one categorization of risks consists of the following:

- Proactive Attack Behaviors toward People/Property: violent behaviors that are premeditated and involve weapons of choice
- Reactive Attack Behaviors toward People/Property: behaviors that occur in the moment as a reaction to a perceived triggering event
- Behaviors That Create Social/Psychological Disruption: actions that interfere with the functioning of the organization, along with causing others to feel intimidated, harassed, and so on<sup>16</sup>

There are several legal and ethical issues that are unique to conducting risk assessments. If a risk assessment determines the individual is at risk for ongoing violence or disruption, this will likely result in the implementation of countermeasures, which could have negative repercussions for the student. If countermeasures are implemented and no violence or disruption follows, at times it is difficult to determine if the student was not at high risk of escalating disruptive behavior (i.e., a false positive) or if the countermeasures implemented were effective in interrupting and stopping escalating violent or disruptive behavior.

The effectiveness of the risk assessment can best be determined by analyzing behaviors that occur following an intervention. If disruptive behaviors cease, the risk assessment and the countermeasures presented were successful; however, if disruptive behaviors continue or escalate, several possible explanations may exist. First, a false negative (i.e., incorrectly predicting no threat) may have occurred, meaning the student was more of a risk than previously determined. Alternatively, postassessment events may have occurred in the student's life leading to an escalation in disruptive behavior. Finally, there is the possibility that countermeasures presented were either not implemented or were ineffective. Once an initial threat assessment is completed and it is determined that there is some risk for ongoing or escalating violence or disruption, it is imperative to continue to evaluate the situation, the potential triggers, the effectiveness of countermeasures, and the outcomes. Many police psychologist consultants are well suited to assist a law enforcement agency in this ongoing planning, data analysis, assessment, and evaluation.

**Threats from persons with mental disorders.** Mental illness is a factor to consider in threat management and criminal cases. A recent report from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics indicated that more than half of all prison and jail inmates have mental health concerns.<sup>17</sup> The mental health history of those inmates was associated with past incidents of violence. Among local law enforcement agencies, an estimated 7 percent of police contacts in jurisdictions with 100,000 or more people involve the mentally ill. A three-city study found that 92 percent of patrol officers had at least one encounter with a mentally ill person in crisis in the previous month, and officers averaged six such encounters per month.<sup>18</sup> A subset of these individuals act out in threatening and violent ways. In many communities, the local law enforcement agency is the only social service agency that is able to respond to mental health crises 24 hours a day. To that end, many law enforcement agencies have implemented crisis intervention officer models similar to the Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) program developed in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1988. Such models provide law enforcement officers with effective training

and skills in recognizing and responding to subjects with mental disorders or who are highly emotionally distressed. Consulting police psychologists can assist in training CIT officers in more effective strategies for assessing and managing subjects who may pose threats, whether the target is an agent of government, another member of the community, a workplace, or a school.

## Summary

The challenges facing law enforcement agencies continue to increase and diversify, and, as a result, law enforcement executives must also expand their options and resources. A police psychologist's training can make the individual uniquely qualified to provide law enforcement leadership an additional expert resource. ■

## Notes:

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<sup>2</sup>David M. Corey and Audrey L. Honig, "Police Psychology in the 21st Century," *he Police Chief* 75 (October 2008): 138, [http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article\\_id=1646&issue\\_id=102008](http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display&article_id=1646&issue_id=102008) (accessed June 13, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>IACP Police Psychological Services Section, *Guidelines for Consulting Police Psychologists*, ratified at the 113th Annual Conference of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (Boston, Massachusetts, 2006), [http://theiacp.org/psych\\_services\\_section/pdfs/Psych-ConsultingPolicePsych.pdf](http://theiacp.org/psych_services_section/pdfs/Psych-ConsultingPolicePsych.pdf) (accessed June 13, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>Audrey Honig, consultation abstract, emailed to Philip S. Trompetter, PhD, on December 30, 2010.

<sup>5</sup>William M. Butler, Harold Leitenberg, and Dwayne G. Fuselier, "The Use of Mental Health Professional Consultants to Police Hostage Negotiation Teams," *Behavioral Science and the Law* 11 (1993): 213–221.

<sup>6</sup>Chris Hatcher, Kris Mohandie, Jim Turner, Michael G. Gelles, "The Role of the Psychologist in Crisis/Hostage Negotiations," *Behavioral Science and the Law* 16, no. 4 (February 1998): 455–472.

<sup>7</sup>Wayman C. Mullins and Michael J. McMains, "The Role of the Psychologist as a Member of a Crisis Negotiation Team" in *Handbook of Police Psychology*, ed. Jack Kitaeff (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>Scott W. Allen, "Crisis and Hostage Negotiation and Police Psychology," in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Law*, ed. Brian L. Cutler (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 167–171.

<sup>9</sup>Frank Parkinson, *Post-Trauma Stress: Reduce Long-Term Effects and Hidden Emotional Damage Caused by Violence and Disaster* (Tucson, Ariz.: Fischer Books, 2000).

<sup>10</sup>Butler, Leitenberg, and Fuselier, "The Use of Mental Health Professional Consultants to Police Hostage Negotiation Teams."

<sup>11</sup>Ellen F. Kirschman, *I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know*, rev. ed. (New York: Guilford Publications, 2007).

<sup>12</sup>Lorraine W. Greene, "Uplifting Resilient Police Families," *The Police Chief* 64 (October 1997): 70–72; and Lorraine W. Greene and Ellen F. Kirschman, *On-Line Education, Resources, and Support for Law Enforcement Families, Final Report*, document no. 186749 (U.S. Department of Justice, February 13, 2001).

<sup>13</sup>Elizabeth K. White and Audrey L. Honig, "Law Enforcement Families," in *Police Psychology into the 21st Century*, ed. Martin I. Kurke and Ellen M. Scrivner (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 189–206; Horace Johnson and Jerry Huffman, "Kentucky Develops Orientation for New Law Enforcement Families," *The Police Chief* 75 (May 2008): 34–36, <http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?>

[fuseaction=display&article\\_id=1497&issue\\_id=52008](#) (accessed June 14, 2011); and Sam Torres, David L. Maggard Jr., and Christine Torres, "Preparing Families for the Hazards of Police Work," *The Police Chief* 70 (October 2003): 108–114.

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<sup>14</sup>Suzanne Best, Alexis Artwohl, and Ellen Kirschman, "Critical Incidents" in *Handbook of Police Psychology*, ed. Jack Kitaeff (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2011), 491–507.

<sup>15</sup>Bryan Vossekuil et al., *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, May 2002), [http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi\\_final\\_report.pdf](http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf) (accessed June 14, 2011); and Robert A. Fein et al., *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education, May 2002),

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<sup>16</sup>John Nicoletti, Sally Spencer-Thomas, and Christopher Bollinger, *Violence Goes to College: The Authoritative Guide to Prevention and Intervention*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 2010).

<sup>17</sup>Doris J. James and Lauren E. Glaze, "Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates," *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report*, NCJ 213600, September 2006, <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/pub/pdf/mhppji.pdf> (accessed June 14, 2011).

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