

Officers in Danger:

Results of the Federal Probation and Pretrial Officers Association's National Study on Serious Assaults

by Philip J. Bigger, Vice-President, FPPOA

Introduction

A major purpose of the present study was to determine the existence, extent and nature of serious assaults against probation, pretrial services and parole officers in the United States and its territories. While incidents of assaults had been common knowledge, there had been no study which was considered to be sufficiently broad to ascertain the extent of the problem. Two other studies, discussed hereafter, were accomplished in 1990. These were in-depth analyses, but they were regional in nature and were based on self-reporting. Thus, the most serious form of assault - murder - was excluded. As a result, it was decided that a solicitation for information from all jurisdictions in the country might result in additional, helpful data.

A secondary motivation to complete this project lay in the attempt to assist the Judicial Conference of the United States in securing national firearms legislation in behalf of Federal Probation and Pretrial Services Officers. This, however, is not to suggest that the possession of a firearm by an officer will significantly reduce the risk of death or serious injury. It is true that in some of the study cases it might have, but it cannot be said that this is always true. The present undertaking did not ask respondents for actual case circumstances to be able to draw such conclusions. Essentially, what has been accomplished is the development of a raw data base - one which, based on the empirical evidence gathered, is now sufficiently compelling for jurisdictions to recognize the prevalence of danger. With this knowledge, then, the various probation, pretrial

services and parole entities can begin to develop their responses including an examination of their particular judicial and/or statutory mission and the consequent role of officers, the formulation of officer safety training and later, perhaps, arming with less than lethal weapons or with firearms themselves.

Parameters of the Study

The Federal Probation and Pretrial Officers Association sought data from all states and territories and all jurisdictions, both juvenile and adult, for whom probation, pretrial services and parole officers worked, including the Federal Probation and Pretrial Services System. Thus, entities in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts were solicited. In some instances where it appeared that a statewide agency had jurisdiction over a particular group of officers, e.g., a state-administered parole system, that agency was solicited. Where a statewide system did not appear to exist, the county and municipal agencies were solicited directly.

The survey was actually conducted in two stages. Originally, it was planned that Federal Probation and Pretrial Services Officers who were members of the Association would contact all local jurisdictions in their respective districts. This process worked well in some cases, e.g., Alaska, Connecticut, the District of Columbia, Florida, Guam, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, Rhode Island, the U.S. Probation and Pretrial Services System, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin. However, only some jurisdictions were reached in other

states (Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, New York, Ohio and Texas). Where the process worked well, that data was used in this study. In those states and territories where only some jurisdictions were reached, a survey form was sent to the balance of the agencies not previously contacted. All of the remaining states and local jurisdictions were also sent a survey in a needed second stage of the study.¹

The primary goal of the present research was to quantify the types of serious assaults against probation, parole and pretrial services officers in the United States and its territories which occurred in the line of duty or because the perpetrator was aware of the official status of the officer. For the purpose of the study, therefore, no information was sought in regard to threats, intimidation, animal attacks, confrontations, property damage or the like. While these latter circumstances are, or could be, serious, they were excluded in preference to actual physical assaults or attempts against officers. The survey form included the following categories of assaults against officers: murder, rape, other sexual assault, shot and wounded, use of blunt instrument, slashed or stabbed, use of car as weapon, punched, kicked or other use of body, use of caustic substance, use of incendiary device and "other." Attempts to commit the above assaults were also included separately. The survey requested all such incidents since 1980.

Solicitations and Respondents

In all, 955 agency heads were solicited, representing parole, probation and pretrial services agencies and included

adult, juvenile, felony and misdemeanor jurisdictions. Four hundred fifty-nine jurisdictions responded (48%) either directly to the researcher or to Association members seeking the data. Two states, Arkansas and Louisiana, reported having no reporting procedures for hazardous incidents; one state, Rhode Island, did not have a reporting procedure but also noted that there was no anecdotal information suggesting that any hazardous incidents had ever occurred. Four states, one district and one territory reported that they had no serious assaults of the type solicited (Colorado, District of Columbia, Georgia, Minnesota, Puerto Rico and Wyoming). Only three states and one territory did not respond (Mississippi, Texas, Vermont and the Virgin Islands; information from Texas, however, was obtained from other sources).

Overview of Results

Table 1 provides the total number of reported assaults against probation, parole and pretrial services officers nationwide, by category, since 1980. As indicated, there were a total of 1,818 completed assaults during this period. Table 2 presents the data for the attempted commission of these assaults which amount to 792 cases.

Table 3 (pages 16-19) provides the serious assault data by state and category. In reviewing this table it will be noted that under the "Other" category there are six figures which are marked with an asterisk. In these cases (Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Texas) the data was obtained, in part, from two previous studies: *Worker Safety in Probation and Parole* by William H. Parsonage, National Institute of Corrections, April 1990, and a *Study of Probation and Parole Worker Safety in the Middle Atlantic Region* by William H. Parsonage and Joe A. Miller, the Middle Atlantic States Correctional Association, August 1990. It is noted that the Parsonage studies did not specify the type of

physical assault inflicted. Hence, these assaults were designated as "unspecified" in the present study. Nevertheless, the assaults were committed by persons and did not include threats, dog bites, etc. If the present study received subsequent data from any of these states, the new data was subtracted from the Parsonage studies in order to avoid double-counting of statistics, even if it meant an overall under-reporting of occurrences.

Conclusions

Gaining a full understanding of the dangers in any profession is one of the first steps in reducing those dangers. This was a primary goal of the present research. It should be noted that, while the present study was national in scope, a few states and territories and a large number of local jurisdictions, as well as some major metropolitan areas, such as New York City, did not respond to the survey (52% of all jurisdictions solicited). Thus, however inclusive the study appears to be, the results probably under-represent the actual number of assaults occurring.

The results of the current project, as ambitious as it attempted to be, nevertheless give rise to a number of questions. For example, if only 48% of the jurisdictions contacted actually responded, can we extrapolate the response data to the non-responsive agencies and conclude that there were approximately double the number of actual and attempted assaults during the study period? Or did the non-responses imply that there were no such incidents and that, therefore, those jurisdictions did not believe it to be worthwhile to answer. Notably, as the various entities were responding to the survey instrument, the tone of the added comments from some who were reporting no serious incidents suggested to the author that it was somehow an affront even to question if an assault had occurred in their domain. This impression would

Text continues on page 20

Table 1
Assaults Against Officers Nationwide
- by category of assault -
(Since 1980)

Murders	14
Rapes	2
Other Sexual Assaults	99
Shot and Wounded	8
Use of Blunt Instrument or Projectile	46
Slashed or Stabbed	14
Car Used as Weapon	4
Punched, Kicked, Choked or Other Use of Body	691
Use of Caustic Substance	1
Use of Incendiary Device	9
Abducted or Held Hostage	3
Unspecified Assaults	927*
Total	1,818

* For a description of unspecified assaults, please see the discussion in the text.

Table 2
Attempted Assaults Against Officers
- nationwide by category -
(Since 1980)

Attempted Murders	2
Attempted Rapes	5
Attempted Other Sexual Assaults	1
Shot At (and missed)	24
Attempted Use of Blunt Instrument or Projectile	14
Attempted Slashing or Stabbing	14
Attempted Use of Car as Weapon	8
Attempted Punching, Kicking, Choking or Other Use of Body	705
Attempted Use of Caustic Substance	2
Attempted Unspecified Assaults	17
Total	792

Table 3: Assaults Against Officers By Jurisdiction and Category (Since 1980)

OFFENSES	AL	AU	AZ	AR	CA	CO	CT	DE	DC	FL	GA	GU	HI
Murders										1			
Rapes													
Other Sexual Assaults										74			
Shot and Wounded													
Use of Blunt Instrument or Projectile							6			28			
Slashed or Stabbed	1	1					5						
Car Used as Weapon													
Punched, Kicked, Choked or Other Use of Body	23	3	3		36		67					3	3
Use of Caustic Substance													
Use of Incendiary Device		1											
Abducted or Held Hostage													
Unspecified Assaults	2		11		3			11*		68			
Attempted Murders													
Attempted Rapes													
Attempted Other Sexual Assault					1								
Shot At (and missed)			1		4		1						
Attempted Use of Blunt Instrument or Projectile					1								
Attempted Slashing or Stabbing													
Attempted Use of Car as Weapon													
Attempted Punching, Kicking, Choking or Other Use of Body	33		7		10		? ²						1
Attempted Use of Caustic Substance													
Attempted Unspecified Assault	1				1								
TOTAL	60	5	22	0 ³	56	0	79	11	0	171	0	3	4

* All asterisked cases indicate that data was obtained, at least in part, from the Parsonage studies (p.3 *supra*). ³State indicates that no such records are kept.

²State reports that these incidents were too numerous to count.

ID	IL	IN	IA	KS	KY	LA	ME	MD	MA	MI	MN	MS	MO	MT
	1 ⁴	2 ⁵											1	
													24	
										1			3	
	1	1		1										
1	1													
		1												
11	6	15	5	6									191	4
		1												
				1									6	
		5					49	99*	36					
													1	
				1	2					1			3	
	1													1
2		3												1
1		1												
34	14	13		4									102	
														1
		2												1
49	24	44	5	13	2	0 ⁶	49	99	36	2	0	0 ⁷	331	8

⁴Officer was raped prior to murder.

⁵One officer was raped prior to murder.

⁶State reports that no records are kept.

⁷ No jurisdiction in the state responded to survey.

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Table 3: Assaults Against Officers By Jurisdiction and Category (Since 1980) - continued

OFFENSES	NE	NV	NH	NJ	NM	NY	NC	ND	OH	OK	OR	PA	PR
Murders		2				2			1				
Rapes											1		
Other Sexual Assaults							1						
Shot and Wounded									3				
Use of Blunt Instrument or Projectile		1				3	2		3				
Slashed or Stabbed	1	1				1	1		1				
Car Used as Weapon			1				1						
Punched, Kicked, Choked or Other Use of Body	15		3		73	73	10	9	48	7	29		
Use of Caustic Substance													
Use of Incendiary Device									1				
Abducted or Held Hostage													
Unspecified Assaults				154'		82'	1				56	245*	
Attempted Murders											1		
Attempted Rapes											5		
Attempted Other Sexual Assault													
Shot At (and missed)					1		3						
Attempted Use of Blunt Instrument or Projectile	3					2		2	4				
Attempted Slashing or Stabbing	1				3	1	3						
Attempted Use of Car as Weapon						3	1		2				
Attempted Punching, Kicking, Choking or Other Use of Body	20				120	135	1	12	110		86		
Attempted Use of Caustic Substance									1				
Attempted Unspecified Assault							1 ⁸	1 ⁹			10 ¹⁰		
TOTAL	40	4	4	154	197	302	25	24	174	7	188	245	0

⁸ Reaching for a gun.
⁹ Pointing gun at officer.

¹⁰ These incidents represented booby traps set for officers, but were discovered prior to use.

RI	SC	SD	TN	TX	USP/P ¹¹	UT	VT	VA	VI	WA	WV	WI	WY	Totals
					2					1	1			14
				1										2
														99
					1									8
														8
														46
														14
								1						4
	9	1			13			3				22		691
														1
	1													9
					1			2						3
				36	66					3				927
														2
														5
														1
			2		2							3		24
														14
													1	4
														8
			3											705
														2
														17
0 ¹²	9	1	5	37	85	0 ¹³	0 ¹⁴	6	0 ¹⁵	4	1	25	1 0	2610

¹¹ United States Probation and Pretrial Services System.

¹² State reports that no records are kept, but also noted that there were no assaults recalled.

¹³ State reports that records are being moved and re-established. Data is

kept but not yet available.

¹⁴ No jurisdiction in the state responded.

¹⁵ No jurisdiction in the Territory responded

lead one to believe that it was embarrassing or shameful to acknowledge an assault. While this is only an impression, it persisted through the review of a number of responses and suggests one possible motive for the many who did not respond.

The compiled data also raises a more thought provoking question: Why did six jurisdictions report having no serious assaults at all? Have they a plan to forestall or avoid assaults? Do they have model officer safety programs? Notably, the states and territories reporting no serious assaults answered for the entire

state or territory. Thus, there was no missing data in these cases, which makes their negative responses all the more extraordinary. The veracity of their responses is not being questioned, just the reason for this promising circumstance.

Finally, the present study revealed that, except in a few instances, such as Florida, Oregon and the Federal Probation and Pretrial Services System, there exists no central state or territorial data bank. Clearly, there is no national one. If officer safety is a significant concern, it would be the recom-

mendation of this project that such centralizing of information be instituted in order to track and respond to the very evident danger faced by probation, pretrial services and parole officers in their every day work.

End Note

¹ The source used to identify all state jurisdictions was the *Probation and Parole Directory* of the American Correctional Association, 1992-1994 (Laurel, Md., 1992). An earlier edition (1985) contained the addresses for the American territories.



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