



# Research in Brief

LINE-OF-DUTY DEATHS:  
SURVIVOR RESPONSES AND  
DEPARTMENTAL POLICIES STUDY II: 1997  
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## Introduction

When a law enforcement officer dies in the line of duty, it's too late for the department to try to figure out how to handle the death. It's too late to decide how to notify the family; too late to consider how to debrief and counsel colleagues; too late to establish guidelines for assisting with the funeral arrangements.

The kind of support a spouse and family receive from a police agency following a line-of-duty death actually affects the length and intensity of the grieving process and how well the survivors are able to move on with their lives.

Additionally, when a line-of-duty death occurs, many departments are not prepared to deal with trauma and distress, either of the deceased officer's survivors – or among their own police force. Surviving spouses do not always receive the support from their “police family” that they have been taught to count on and need from the co-workers.

Over the past decade, line-of-duty deaths and the needs of survivors have been brought increasingly to public attention. Concerns of Police Survivors, National Police Week, and the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial have raised awareness. C.O.P.S. addresses the

issues affecting survivors and helps police agencies understand the need to help rebuild lives shattered by a line-of-duty death.

This document reports on a study sponsored by C.O.P.S. to investigate factors associated with police spouse survival--how spouses respond to a line-of-duty death, and how police agencies are prepared to support them. It also provides recommendations to police agencies to develop workable, sensitive policies to help bereaved spouses and families.

*(continued on next page)*

*Concerns of Police Survivors, Inc. (C.O.P.S.) provides resources to assist in the rebuilding of the lives of surviving families of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty as determined by Federal criteria. Furthermore, C.O.P.S. provides training to law enforcement agencies on survivor victimization issues and educates the public of the need to support the law enforcement profession and its survivors.*

*Every year, C.O.P.S. sponsors grief workshops in conjunction with National Police Week activities in Washington, DC. C.O.P.S. also trains volunteers in active listening, peer support, identifying the signs for needing professional help, and has developed*

*training programs to help law enforcement agencies prepare for line-of-duty death. Additionally, C.O.P.S. has hands-on, peer support programs for parents, children and spouses of those who die in the line of duty.*

*Concerns of Police Survivors, Inc. takes the position that law enforcement agencies share a responsibility to provide liaison assistance to survivors of line-of-duty deaths. Agencies should tend to such matters as the clarification of survivor benefits and provide emotional and practical support throughout the ordeal.*

*Concerns of Police Survivors receives its major financial support through a grant from the Office of Justice Programs,*

*Bureau of Justice Assistance, US Department of Justice. Other funding sources include police organizations, private foundations, private citizens, and corporations.*

*If you would like a copy of this complete study, or if you are interested in finding out more about C.O.P.S. and its activities, please contact us at P.O. Box 3199, South Highway 5, Camdenton, MO 65020, call our office at 573-346-4911, or visit our website at <http://www.nationalcops.org>.*

*-Suzanne F. Sawyer  
Executive Director, 1984-2011  
Concerns of Police Survivors*

Of the 298 law enforcement agencies surveyed, approximately 50 percent of them credited C.O.P.S. with influencing their awareness and policies regarding line-of-duty deaths.

## **BACKGROUND: C.O.P.S.' POLICE SURVIVOR STUDY I - 1987**

This study is a follow-up to one conducted ten years ago to learn more about the impact of a law enforcement officer's death on adult survivors and on the steps a police department can take to help survivors. That 1987 study concluded that survivors of someone killed in the line-of-duty are not prepared for such deaths simply because their spouse worked in law enforcement. The study also found that most police departments did not have a policy concerning survivors. Most did not maintain adequate records of next-of-kin, or provide emotional and informational support during and after the crisis.

## **C.O.P.S.' POLICE SURVIVOR STUDY II -1997**

The 1997 study wanted to know whether police survivor support and departmental policies regarding line-of-duty deaths changed over ten years. It looked specifically at how line-of-duty deaths affected surviving spouses. Secondly, it considered how the psychological and physical effects on police spouse survivors compared with others who had not experienced a line-of-duty death. The study was sponsored by Concerns of Police Survivors, a non-profit organization offering support to spouses, parents, children, siblings, other family members and others who are affected by police line-of-duty deaths. It was funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and conducted by John M. Violanti, Ph.D.

## **METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY**

Data for the 1997 study came from

- Surviving police spouses,
- Police departments who had lost an officer in the past ten years, and
- A control group of police spouses whose spouses had not died.

The sample of police survivors and police departments for the 1997 study were drawn from the U.S. Department of Justice Public

Safety Officer Benefits database. The study surveyed 256 surviving police spouses to measure grief, coping strategies, self-esteem, and physical health. An additional 63 police spouses made up the control group.

Information on agency line-of-duty death policy was collected from 298 police agencies who had experienced officer deaths within the last ten years from accident, felony, illness or suicide.

When it made sense, the 1997 report compared new data to the results of the 1987 C.O.P.S. study.

## **STUDY SAMPLES**

The average age of 1997 surviving spouses was 39.8 years. In the 1997 study, about 25 percent of survivors were over 46 years old, compared to 13 percent in the earlier study. Survivors in the 1997 study had a wider ethnic origin distribution and higher educational levels than those in the 1987 study.

In 1997, a greater percentage of survivors were male, probably as a result of the increase in women police officers. Similarly, there was a larger percentage of minority survivors in the 1997 sample. In both studies, survivors had been married approximately the same average number of years at the time of death (11.9 years). However, a greater percentage of 1997 survivors were married for less than five years, and were married more than once.

## **IMPACT OF LINE-OF-DUTY DEATHS ON SURVIVING SPOUSES**

As in the first study, 1997 data showed police spouse survivors experienced heightened symptoms of psychological distress after the death of an officer. Psychological effects reported by 1997 surviving spouses were not substantially different from those of survivors surveyed in 1987.

Survivors in the 1997 study reported lower total psychological symptom scores compared to those in 1987, but they revealed higher trauma symptoms, including greater symptoms of obsessive-compulsiveness, depression and paranoia.

## **Grief Responses**

In the 1997 study, 32 percent of surviving spouses of police officers killed in the line of duty met the criteria for having Post-

traumatic Stress Disorder, compared to 59 percent in 1987. This psychological disorder is common among victims of physical assault, rape and natural disasters, prisoners of war and persons taken hostage.

The 1997 survivors also demonstrated low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward themselves.

## **DEPARTMENT RESPONSES**

The study showed an increase in the percent of police departments providing specific services to survivors of line-of-duty deaths from 1987 to 1997. However, most departments respond "informally," rather than according to a formal policy. In the 1997 survey, only 39 percent of police agencies reported any type of general orders in place for handling line-of-duty deaths. This was a very slight improvement from 1987, when 33 percent reported formal officer death policies. Approximately 20 percent said their formal policy came about as a result of a line-of-duty death.

This lack of formal policy is significant. Without one, departments and survivors are unprepared to deal effectively with funeral, benefit explanations or emotional distress of the officer's death. Department size plays a role in whether a formal policy exists. Almost three-fourths of large departments (1001-6274 officers) have policies, as compared to about half of medium departments (51-1000 officers) and just more than one-fourth of small departments (2-50 officers).

## **Death notification and funeral arrangements**

In 1997, eighty percent of the departments handled death notification, in comparison to only 50 percent in 1987. This is particularly important, as other research has shown that death notification has a substantial and long-lasting affect on survivors' ability to deal with their grief and move forward with their lives.

More than half of the police agencies (51 percent) send more than one officer to the survivor's residence, and 77 percent send the chief or a high ranking official. Only ten percent send one officer.

Sometimes, agencies send other individuals to notify survivors of a line-of-duty death. This may be clergy (57 percent), the officer's partner (13 percent) or a physician (4 percent). Almost a third of the departments reported contacting relatives and bringing them to the residence.

Only 13 percent of the police agencies actually train people for death notification.

Over the ten-year period, the number of departments providing assistance with funeral arrangements for officers has increased.

### Follow-up

Almost three-fourths of agencies assign a family liaison officer following an officer's death, and almost as many support survivors during the death investigation and trial.

Only 39 percent of agencies report policies to maintain contact with survivors after the funeral. In those cases, the contact generally lasts from one to two years. Some departments maintain contact for as long as the survivors feel is necessary.

Department contact with survivors is handled formally -- by a high ranking official -- for about half the departments; 65 percent said they initiated informal contact by patrol officers. If the deceased officer was single, 90 percent of departments offer the same services to surviving parents.

### Record Maintenance

Phone numbers and addresses of officers' spouses are maintained by only 89 percent of responding departments. Half keep similar records for parents, about a third keep records for adult children, and 38 percent keep records for minor children.

This is a higher percentage than reported keeping such records in 1987.

### Agency Services for Survivors

Even though more departments reported handling death notification and more departments also reported handling funeral arrangements than in 1987, fewer departments provide an explanation of death benefits, assistance with the media or psychological referrals.

Psychological treatment for police survivors is important to help address many of the same problems affecting anyone who has suffered a loss. Many times, however, there are additional issues involving the suddenness and violence of the officer's death, which present an even more compelling reason to provide survivors with professional counseling. Extensive and

graphic media coverage of the death, and the slow, unresponsive criminal justice system both take their toll on line-of-duty death survivors. Quite often, psychological closure is delayed for many years as legal issues concerning the death are argued in the courts and discussed in the media.

- Changes in family notification procedures, and/or
- Identification of a need for additional officers.

Survivor Service	1987: % of police agencies providing this service	1997: % of police agencies providing this service
Hospital Expenses	*	40
Death Notification	50	80
Funeral Arrangements	53	69
Funeral Expenses	33	30
Explanation of Death Benefits	89	82
Escort to Hospital	*	95
Assist with Media	92	85
Escort for funeral, burial	95	95
Assistance with Insurance	80	80
Financial Counseling	32	28
Access to Staff Psychologist	31	32
Referral to Psychologist	43	39
Access to Police Chaplain	*	67
Aftercare of Survivors	*	53
Payment for Counseling	*	27
*Not questioned in 1987 study		

Table 1 compares death services provided by police agencies in 1987 and 1997.

### Effects of Line-of-Duty Deaths on Police Departments

The study also investigated the affects of line-of-duty deaths on police departments.

Because police departments often consider themselves as a "family," the death of fellow or sister officers can have profound psychological impact on officers, dispatchers and civilian personnel.

More than 90 percent of departments reported that the death of an officer had an emotional impact on other officers and resulted in trauma among those close to the scene.

For 25 percent of the departments, the impact led to initiating psychological services for those officers.

Other changes that took place in some agencies as a result of an officer's death included

- Changes in operational procedures,

### SURVIVORS AND THEIR RESPONSE TO THE DEPARTMENT SUPPORT

For the most part, survivors reported satisfaction with death notification. Sixty-nine percent of survivors surveyed said they were notified with sensitivity and understanding. However, 11 percent said notification was cold and informal, and ten percent wished someone else would have told them.

### Support after the Death

In the period following the death of their officer spouses, survivors ranked who was most supportive for them, in the following order:

- Parents
- Non-police friends
- Children
- Police friends
- Co-workers
- In-laws

Surviving spouses were much less satisfied with the responses of the police departments and other officers in 1997 than reported in the 1987 study.

Table 2 compares responses of surviving spouses in 1997 and 1987 to response of various non-family groups.

**Table 2. Percent “Very Satisfied” with Responses After the Death of the Officer**

Responses:	1987 Survivors (percent very satisfied)	1997 Survivors (percent very satisfied)
Police Departments	53.7	35.9
Other officers	56.6	33.2
Death notification	35.4	32.8
Funeral arrangements	66.9	66.4
Community response	70.3	73.0
Police Benevolent Groups	55.4	54.7
Trial proceedings	10.3	10.9
Final verdict	13.1	16.8
Media coverage	30.3	24.6

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Judging from results in both the 1987 and 1997 survivor studies, departments do not appear to be *formally* responding to survivors of line-of-duty deaths.

The difficulty is that without a formal policy, departments really have no guide on procedure. In the distressing time after the death of the officer, it is difficult for department leaders and officers to prepare an orderly, caring protocol for the death. Emotional as well as tangible support through the entire process of grieving is essential. The police “family” must be available for the survivor during the ordeal and afterwards. In this study, only 53 percent of departments provided any type of aftercare for survivors.

The study also suggested that support by police agencies may be important to survivors of police deaths in helping them deal with distress and trauma. This support must occur at the police organizational as well as the individual level.

### Based on data from this study, it is strongly recommended that agencies consider the following:

- 1) Develop a formal policy relating to on-duty deaths if none presently exists. Existing policies should be continually updated, to reflect current benefits, procedures and legal factors.
- 2) Formal training for officers on death notification. This is essential for compassionate notification of law enforcement families and the public as well.
- 3) Hold regular informational seminars for officers and spouses on what support services are available to law enforcement personnel following such a death.
- 4) Make available psychological services, grief counseling and trauma counseling (short- and long-term) for survivors of line-

of-duty deaths. **The term “survivors” includes affected co-workers as well as family of the fallen officers.**

- 5) Adopt plans to offer psychological and/or other services (i.e. day care) for children of deceased officers.
- 6) When an officer death occurs, appoint a trained officer to act as liaison with survivors to ensure the family’s needs are met.
- 7) Develop a standard for follow-up with survivors. One suggestion is that both high ranking and patrol officers schedule visits for survivors for at least two years after the officer’s death.
- 8) Provide media support for survivors who choose to deal with the media. Perhaps assign a public relations officer to be present during media contact.
- 9) Because physical health among coworker survivors tends to worsen following the death of an officer, departments should make physicians available for immediate physical examination and follow-up aftercare of other officers after the death of a colleague.
- 10) Survivors in the 1997 study reported less satisfaction with department support than in the 1985 study. Departments should make an effort (perhaps with a survey of survivors in their agency) to find out why this may have occurred. Could it be because survivors now talk with other survivors about support offered by their agencies?

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