



COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS INSTITUTE SAFETY BULLETIN

December 2012

GANG SUPERVISION: THE “OFF-DUTY” SAFETY ISSUES

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Gang membership continues to rise in most areas of the United States. The 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment reports there are approximately 1.4 million active street, prison and Outlaw Motorcycle Gang members, comprising more than 33,000 gangs, in the United States.¹ Gangs are responsible for an average of 48 percent of violent crime in most jurisdictions and up to 90 percent in several others, according to National Gang Intelligence Center analysis.²

When gang members involved in criminal activity are adjudicated, most ultimately end up on some form of community supervision, be it adult or juvenile parole, probation or supervised release. In some jurisdictions, parole and probation agencies have developed dedicated units to focus on identified gang members and provide specialized supervision. And, as with any type of supervision, there are safety issues for the supervising officers.

Safety for You and Your Family

While we tend to think of officer safety in regard to our work life, there is another aspect of safety that is not routinely addressed: safety in and around our home. Our safety, and the safety of the officer's family, is an area that is addressed by some agency-offered safety training and, whether it is or not, officers must take personal responsibility for the safety education of those they love.

The threat of attack away from our normal work venues was highlighted in the murder of probation officer Elizabeth Hicks of Kerrville, Texas, on June 30, 2004, in front of her home. That murder is still unsolved. Since that time, there have been numerous reports of officers' homes being shot at and murder plots uncovered, one of which reportedly involved the offender planning to shoot the parole officer and her family.³

There are steps we can take to make finding us a little harder, but in this world of online searching and publication of personal information, it is almost impossible to completely maintain our privacy. Some of the things we can do to at least make it harder to find our homes and learn about our family life include:

- Using a post office box or business address on our personal checks.

- Using your business address on your vehicle registration so that if someone “runs” your license plate number it will not show your home address. This is especially useful if you use your personal vehicle on the job.
- Having an unlisted number, or at least not listing your address if your number is in the phone directory.
- Avoid giving your home address on forms such as warranties, surveys, etc., as the information often makes its way into national databases.
- Avoid providing information and/or pictures on social networking sites that give your address or refer to your job. There are online instructions on how to “hack” personal sites so access can be obtained by unauthorized viewers.

To further enhance your privacy and security you may wish to contact the official custodians of your local public records, such as your county assessor’s office, that contain sensitive information about you to determine how, or if, your personal information can be removed from public record. State and county record offices have varying procedures and standards for the filing of individual requests to seal what are normally public records. Public records that are placed under seal will not be made available to commercial sources. This is a matter to pursue at your own discretion and with careful consideration because of possible adverse consequences, such as difficulty in obtaining credit or tax implications.

If you are a married female officer, using your maiden name on the job can add another layer of protection in that it can make finding you via public records more difficult.

Enhancing Safety at Home

Your home is your castle, but is the castle safe? Just as you do a safety check of your equipment before you go into the field, you should do a safety assessment of your personal residence. Make sure you do the following:

- Restrict the possession of house keys, and change locks if any keys are lost or stolen.
- Take your house key off your key ring any time you relinquish possession of your car keys, such as when you have car repairs performed or use a valet service.
- Don’t display your name on mailboxes, only your house number.
- Personally destroy all envelopes or other items that reflect your name and official position.

- Train your family to be alert to any unscheduled visits from persons stating that they are from a utility or other service and are requesting access to your home. Call their agency or department if you are uneasy.
- Check the references of service personnel, domestics, childcare providers, or others you are allowing in your home. There are online services whereby you can obtain criminal records checks if you desire.
- Write down license plate numbers of suspicious vehicles and note the description of occupants. Pass this information on to local police if you are concerned.
- Refuse unordered packages.
- Train your family to treat all inquiries about you or your activities with suspicion.
- If possible, park in your garage and make sure the garage door is closed before you exit the vehicle.
- When entering your garaged vehicle, lock the doors before opening the garage door and look in the rear-view mirror to see if anyone is attempting to enter the garage as the door rises.
- If your car is not garaged, make a visual check of the vehicle and surroundings as you approach and lock the vehicle as soon as you enter. Train you family to do the same.
- Never leave equipment in the vehicle. Numerous officers have had agency-issued safety equipment stolen from both personal and agency cars.

Probation Officer's Gun Stolen From Car

A probation and parole officer reported that her car was broken into and her Glock .40 caliber handgun was taken, along with two iPod chargers and a GPS unit, on September 29, 2010.⁴

Various jurisdictions have reported officers' homes and vehicles being vandalized with the obvious targets being weapons, identification and equipment. In 2009, suspected gang members in Broward County and West Palm Beach, Florida, burglarized nearly a dozen marked and unmarked law enforcement vehicles, stealing firearms, ballistic vests, and police identification.⁵

Teen Stole Probation Officer's Gun, Vest

In February, 2012, a 16-year-old boy caught firing a gun admitted to stealing the weapon and a ballistic vest from the home of a state probation officer.⁶

The Need to Educate Your Family

Besides the safety precautions listed, educate your family on how to respond “tactically” if a situation occurs, either in public or around the home. Teach them key words that they will respond to immediately.

On Memorial Day, 2012, a probation officer’s home doorbell rang at 8 p.m. With her husband downstairs watching television, she went to answer the door, which was locked. Prior to opening the door, she looked out the glass portion of the door and was alarmed to see one of her offenders who had recently tested positive for drug use.

She went downstairs and got her husband, who answered the door. The offender identified himself as a friend of the officer’s brother and asked if the officer was at home, to which the husband replied she was not. The offender left, but the husband observed that the offender’s hands remained in his pockets the entire time they talked. The officer later asked her brother if he knew the offender and showed him the offender’s picture. The brother advised he did not recognize the offender.⁷

When in public with their family, some officers use the word “away” if they see a potential problem developing and want the spouse and children to separate themselves from the officer. These situations could involve an offender showing up at your residence or approaching you in public. Other key words can also alert family members to call 911 or seek the assistance of others.

The word “together” can bring family members together when the situation dictates that it would be safest for family members to focus on you and come together immediately. With a discussion of these directions and even some “fun” rehearsals, family members—especially children—learn how to respond to these key words without fear or paranoia.

When in the Community

Avoid apparel or decals that identify you as a law enforcement officer, as gang members have learned to identify specific decals that relate to law enforcement. They also recognize the polo shirts (especially the ones with a badge) and khaki cargo pants that are often worn by law enforcement. Avoid these during your off-time.

As the safety “tactician” in the family (unless you happen to be married to someone else in the law enforcement profession and share that distinction), you are the one who should always be on the alert for any threat, both in and away from the home. You should always minimally be in “Condition Yellow” state of mental awareness.

Besides being aware of the issues discussed, do you seek a “tactical advantage” when out with your family? Do you keep your family in sight or make sure they let you know where they are

going if you separate when in public? Do you sit so that you can see who is coming in the door of the restaurant, and sit so that you can immediately respond to a threat and protect your family?

Don't Wait Until You Receive a Threat

Studies conducted by William Parsonage⁸ and Terryl Arola⁹ show that over half of all community corrections officers will receive some type of threat or endure an actual assault during their career. But how can someone differentiate between a “real” threat and a threat with little chance of harm? Although no studies exist on threats to community corrections personnel, studies on threats against those in related professions can provide general information. As Gavin de Becker explains in his book, *The Gift of Fear*, most people who make threats do not carry them out.¹⁰ Conversely, most people who do harm do not make threats. Studies show (and are confirmed by cases of community corrections officers killed in the line of duty) that those who cause or attempt to cause physical harm to officers are not likely to verbalize their intent to do so.

Frederick S. Calhoun labels potential assailants as either *hunters* or *howlers*.¹¹ Howlers verbalize—either directly, in writing, or through an informant—their feelings for the target of their anger and, many times, what they intend to do. Hunters gather information about their intended targets and seek them out with no verbalization or warning. Calhoun categorizes threats by their possible outcomes: *specious*, *enhanced*, and *violent*, as follows:

Specious threats have the ring of truth or plausibility but are ultimately proven fallacious because no evidence is found of an effort to carry out the threat. Simple statements, however delivered, such as “I’ll kill you” or “You’re a dead man,” were rated specious if no evidence indicates that the threat went beyond the statement to action.

Enhanced threats are accompanied by an action, such as a visit to the courthouse or probation/parole office building without an appointment or specific reason for the visit, a stranger prowling around the victim’s neighborhood, or a threatening object left for the victim to find. The suspect takes a step beyond the initial contact.

Violent threats involve physical injury and/or property damage and might include assassination, fire bombings, showing up at the courthouse or office with a weapon, muggings and burglaries.¹² All of these events have happened to community corrections officers over the years.

In research conducted by the author and Chief U.S. Probation Officer Ronald G. Schweer, none of the community corrections officers killed in the line of duty, or who suffered attempts on their life at home or in the community, were threatened or warned before the attack, according to official records. Thus, although the threats officers receive can be unnerving, most will not result in physical attack. But should they be ignored? Certainly not. Law enforcement and the employing agency should be notified.

As research shows, attempts on an officer's life—which may also involve the officer's family—will come without warning, necessitating constant vigilance by both officers and family members.

The Special Challenge of Living in Rural Areas

If you live and work in a rural area, it can be especially difficult to separate your personal life from your professional life. Your kids may go to school with the children of those you supervise or, in the case of officers supervising juvenile offenders, the people you supervise may be attending school with your children. You and family members may shop at the same stores and go to the same restaurants as those on your caseload.

This is where your professionalism is vital. Respect is especially important to gang members, and maintaining your professionalism during supervision contacts can pay off with fewer confrontations for both you and your family members.

However, in small communities, contact with the people you supervise is going to happen; and thus the safety precautions discussed are especially important. Both you and your family must adopt a “*When/Then*” attitude. *When* I'm approached in a store, *then* this is what I'll do. *When* they show up at my door, *then* this is how the family will be alerted, and this is how they are trained to respond. *When* a member of the family sees a strange package by the front door or in the yard, *then* they will know what to do.

Conclusion

Officer safety is an issue that deserves constant attention whether off-duty or on. Many officers take steps to enhance their safety if a threat is received, yet it is most likely that there will not be any type of threat or warning when an attack occurs. Think about the safety steps you would take if you were threatened and make them part of your everyday safety practices.

At first, both you and your family may have to think about the various issues addressed. But, with time and practice, these safety concepts will become part of the “unconscious competence” of both you and your family. Remember, safety begins at home.

Community Corrections Institute, LLC, is a Project Safe Neighborhoods Partner and provides training and technical assistance to corrections and law enforcement to address gang issues including intervention, reentry and community supervision strategies.

This project was supported by Grant No. 2010-GP-BX-K005 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the National Institute of Justice; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; the Office for Victims of Crime; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Endnotes:

¹ National Gang Intelligence Center, *2011 National Gang Threat Assessment: Emerging Trends*, page 7, January 2012.

² Ibid.

³ Open Source News Article, “Belpre man faces murder conspiracy charge,” *NewsandSentinel.com*, February 24, 2010, no longer available online.

⁴ Open Source News Article, “Probation officer’s gun stolen from car,” *Postandcourier.com*, March 18, 2012, available at <<http://www.postandcourier.com/article/20100929/PC16/309299983>>.

⁵ FBI-NDIC, “Gangs Targeting Law Enforcement for Weapons and Equipment Theft,” *Intelligence Bulletin*, December 21, 2009.

⁶ Open Source News Article, “Cops: Bradenton teen stole probation officer’s gun, vest,” *HeraldTribune.com*, February 2, 2012, no longer available online.

⁷ Incident Report, May 29, 2012, Arrowhead Regional Corrections, Duluth, MN.

⁸ Parsonage, William H., 1990, *Worker Safety in Probation and Parole*, Washington, DC, U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections, NCJ 125704, NIC 008501 and Parsonage, William H. and W. Conway Bushey, 1988, *The Victimization of Pennsylvania Probation and Parole Workers in the Line of Duty: A Survey*, University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University.

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¹¹ Calhoun, Frederick S., 1998, *Hunters and Howlers: Threats and Violence Against Federal Judicial Officials in the United States, 1789-1993*, Arlington, VA, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Marshals Service.

¹² Ibid.