

The Psychological Experience of Security Officers Who Work With Executions

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The Louisiana and Alabama "Execution Teams" were interviewed in order to understand the roles, experiences, and effects of carrying out the death penalty. One hundred twenty out of a possible one hundred twenty-four correctional officers were interviewed. Of those questioned, one hundred fifteen completed mental health inventories. The subjects were grouped based on their roles in order to gain a broader picture of the steps and their impact in carrying out the death penalty. Our results show that participants in the execution process stress "caring professionalism." There is an overwhelming emphasis on carrying out one's job at a high level. At the same time, officers are neither dehumanized nor callous, describing acting with respect and decency toward all involved. While their job is their prima facie duty, they experience stress and emotional reactions, frequently having a hard time carrying out society's "ultimate punishment."

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The topic of state ordered executions invokes strong emotions from many people throughout the United States and around the world. In the past decade alone, dozens of countries have either placed a moratorium on executions or abolished the death penalty altogether.¹ Simultaneously, ambivalence is the term that best describes the overall attitude towards the death penalty.² On the one hand, the majority of the American public believes that serious offenders should be punished to the extent that they inflicted pain and suffering, namely retributive justice or the biblical concept of "an eye for an eye."³

Alternatively, a growing minority is horrified by the idea of state-ordered killing, regardless of the heinous nature of the crimes committed. In fact, an ABC Poll conducted in early 2001 found that public support for the death penalty had declined to 63%, a drop from 77% in 1996.⁴ Many question

whether the death penalty has any positive deterrent effect, citing evidence comparing states with and without capital punishment.⁵ Others worry about the economic discrimination against the poor and even racist tendencies associated with the death penalty.⁶ Additional opponents of capital punishment feel the punishment to be appalling arguing that innocent individuals can be put to death.⁷ Finally, many individuals question the lengthy appeals process that allows inmates to be executed years after their convictions. Over the course of ten, fifteen, or even twenty years on death row, inmates can be rehabilitated, the family of the victim(s) receive no closure, and prison guards can form a relationship with the inmate.⁸⁻⁹

A great deal of intrigue surrounds the members of an execution team. From stereotypes of a hooded executioner to the notion of multiple executioners with only one possessing the deadly bullet, little knowledge exists

about the actual nature of how executions are carried out.¹⁰⁻¹¹

Our interviews of execution team members at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola and Holman State Prison in Alabama utilize an unprecedented number of subjects through full and uninhibited access to the staff involved. The current study was undertaken in order to gain more understanding about the unusual responsibilities and experiences of those who are directly involved with the legal termination of the lives of others.

One hundred and twenty correctional officers at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola and Holman State Prison in Alabama were interviewed anonymously in order to understand broad areas of the execution process. The one to two hour interviews were conducted over the summers of 2000 and 2001. During 2000, interviews were conducted of fifty of fifty-two members of the Louisiana execution team. During 2001, fifty interviews were conducted of security officers who either work on Death Row or are a part of the execution process in Louisiana. An additional twenty interviews were carried out involving correctional officers who have worked with executions in Alabama. In addition to gathering demographic and background information, a number of questions were asked about the following topics: 1) The execution experience, including roles, reactions, preparation, emotions experienced, and changes over time; 2) Stresses related to their job and methods to cope with stress; 3) Support network and influence of work on relationships; 4) Aftermath of execution experience for the officer. Based on our interviews, we were able to recreate the step-by-step process of carrying out an

execution. The process was largely similar in the two states, but differed due to both situational factors with the two facilities as well as the mode of execution employed in each state (Louisiana uses lethal injection while Alabama is one of two remaining states still employing the electric chair as its sole means of execution).

The security officers were asked to complete three separate measures. During 2000, subjects completed the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) and the first page of a Clinician Administered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Scale (CAPS 1) for the DSM-IV, a life events checklist. The reported results from these two measures are primarily descriptive due to our desire to understand the execution process and psychological impacts of carrying out the death penalty. During 2001, we asked the officers to complete a questionnaire pertaining to issues of moral disengagement employed throughout the process. Interviews were tape recorded (without their names on the tapes) in order to guarantee that quotes, reactions, and attributed material were accurate.

After completing the interviews, we classified subjects into one of twelve roles: Wardens, classifications personnel death row guards, death house/front gate security, liaisons to the press, mental health professionals, spiritual advisors, officers who sit with the victim's family, officers who sit with the inmate's family, the strapdown team, emergency medical technicians, and the Executioner.

Interview responses conveyed an interesting perspective on the death penalty relative to the existing literature on the subject. Consistent with current national polls,

approximately two-thirds of officers indicate general support for the death penalty, stressing the heinous nature of the inmates' crimes and the impact on the victims and their families.

All but three do not believe the death penalty is racially motivated. However, an equal number raised concerns that social class and poverty play major roles in determining who is executed.

"I've never seen a rich man executed," Death Row guard Willie W. asserted. The inmates on Death Row tend to come from poor, underprivileged backgrounds in which they had little access to basic necessities. Sarah S., the deputy warden pointed out, "If they had educational opportunities, they wouldn't be here."

The execution team also noted that certain districts within the state are more likely to hand down a death sentence. This variation by district is a function of the District Attorneys, judges, and juries — standards that vary by city and state. A considerable number of the officers discussed their concern that many "lifers" have committed crimes that are as horrific as those committed by the inmates on Death Row. For this reason alone, several members of the execution team argued that either the sentences of those on Death Row should be commuted to life in prison or others should be on Death Row.

Further, we repeatedly heard that the death penalty simply takes too long to be carried out. Some described their identification with the inmates' pain in living and awaiting execution. Others discussed the high monetary cost to the state of the lengthy appeals process. Some worried that the victims cannot receive closure until the inmate is dead.

Ultimately, nearly every person we interviewed echoed two

main components of the execution process. On the one hand, and most importantly, the security officers stressed their professionalism. Their duty is to carry out the laws of the United States, whatever those may be. They believe in their jobs, and try to do them as well as they possibly can. On the other hand, they act with decency and humanity toward the inmates. In their efforts to adjust and function successfully, they struggle internally. Although most attempt to suppress painful feelings, they state that if it ever becomes easy to participate in an execution, they would worry about themselves and their loss of humanity. Some deal with their stress by disassociative mechanisms. Some overtly exhibit their distress through

transient or persistent stress, guilt, and even depression. Although many officers view Death Row inmates as the “worst of the worst,” all describe treating the inmates with decency. Death Row guard Charles S. said, “I treat them as I would want to be treated. I help them when I can and when my job permits.” Strapdown team member Robert A. concurred, “They are people and deserve to be treated as such.” While some prisoners do not repent or do so only superficially, the officers describe how many change, becoming cooperative in the process.

Certainly there are exceptions to the almost universal decency of the officers in this study; wrongful emotional and physical abuse can occur in a

maximum-security penitentiary. Some guards have inappropriate motives for working at a prison. From our discussions it appears that most voluntarily leave or are weeded out over time. However, the officers we interviewed did not display hostility toward the inmates, but were concerned with maximizing humanity and dignity. Within the constraints needed to maintain security, they describe being kind to the inmates. Some describe feeling good about a number of inmates who shortly before their execution thank them for their compassion. If anything, after being involved on the death team, correctional officers become more reflective and take their job more seriously than ever.

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