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The POLICE OFFICER as



Burned-out Samaritan

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Crisis, it has been said, is the business of the police. In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on training police officers to deal with a wide variety of crisis situations, from domestic disputes, to suicide attempts, to psychotic episodes, to rape victimization.¹

Another kind of crisis confronts many officers, a crisis produced by the stress of certain kinds of police work. When subjected to severe or prolonged stress, many officers become what psychologist Dr. Christina Maslach has called "burned-out samaritans."² Burnout not only affects the officer's health and well-being, it interferes with his or her ability to function effectively in many aspects of police work.

While many departments have acknowledged that policing can be a stressful business, most have taken the official attitude that crisis reactions in an officer are a sign of personal weakness. Some "modern" departments have sought to help their members deal with the symptoms of job-related stress—alcoholism, suicide attempts, and the like—by hiring psychologists or other counselors.³ Such professionals have the potential to be of help, particularly to an officer suffering the effects of acute stress. Unfortunately, their effectiveness often is compromised because their first loyalty is to the department. As such, it is their duty to identify officers who are "unfit" to carry out their regular duties and recommend "corrective" measures. Often these measures involve removing the man from his regular assignment and assigning him to a "rubber gun" squad. While this may be necessary for the good of the department, it often is devastating to the officer. To be deprived of the symbols of his authority, his weapon and his badge, is one of the greatest disgraces that can befall him. Few will feel free to admit serious problems, or even

trifling ones, to someone who has the power to use these revelations against them.

The idea that crisis reactions reveal a problem in the individual also suggests solutions involving better selection procedures and inservice screening to weed out the "inadequate" personality. While certainly there are people who are unfit intrinsically for police work, there are many others whose "symptoms" result from pressures intrinsic to certain organizational and supervisory styles. There may even be assignments for which certain organizational styles make efficient, creative police work impossible.

In her studies of other high-stress professions, Maslach found that "many of the causes of burnout are located not in permanent traits of the people involved, but in certain specific social and situational factors."⁴ This article suggests that organizational structure may be as important as personality variables in producing crisis reactions in police officers. Crisis reactions observed in police are related to those found in professionals working in other stressful occupations. In addition, a general theoretical model is presented to aid in understanding these crisis reactions, and suggest or-

ganizational changes aimed not only at minimizing stress, but also at maximizing effectiveness as a police officer.

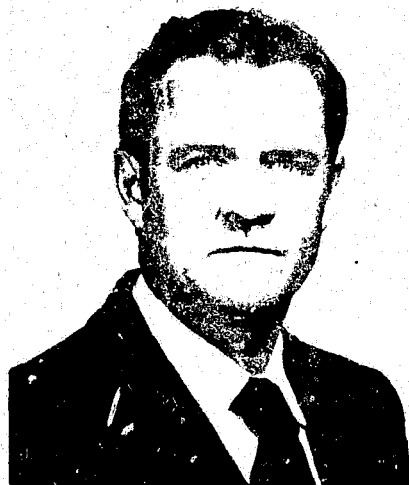
These suggestions are based upon a review of literature for examples of crisis-producing stresses and an interview of police officers and supervisors at all levels in several jurisdictions. Particular emphasis was placed upon interviewing supervisors who were identified by their peers and subordinates as "good" leaders, whose units have been successful at difficult tasks and have maintained high morale.

Introduction to Crisis Theory

The term "crisis" has been used very broadly, such as the energy crisis, a crisis in confidence, and so forth. As the term will be used more narrowly in this text, and because some psychologists writing about crisis have used the word to mean different things, it seems useful to define crisis as used here. In the psychological sense, crisis is a subjective reaction to a stressful life event. It is the way a person feels when confronted with drastic, life-threatening changes or too much pressure. Indeed, any major



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change in a person's life may be stressful. Even positive experiences, such as marriage, a new job, a new home, or the birth of a child, can lead to crisis reactions. This is especially true if the individual experiences too many changes in a short time period.⁵ For example, a person who, in the space of a year, graduates from college, gets a good job, gets married, goes to Europe for a honeymoon, buys a house, and has a baby has an increased chance of developing stress symptoms such as depression or a psychosomatic illness, such as ulcers.

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People can plan for and control many of the changes in life, and control lessens the crisis impact of change. A situation is more likely to be stressful and result in crisis reactions if it is unpredictable and if the individual has, or feels he has, little or no control over it. Such stresses may be acute in nature, such as an accident, natural disaster, crime victimization, or sudden death in the family. They may also be the chronic stresses of living in a disturbed family relationship, in a community in chaos, or of working at a job that makes demands that are impossible to meet.

In many cases, crisis reactions are a normal, understandable defense against overwhelming stress, and are *not* indications of a "weak" or "sick" personality. Given appropriate support, most people can recover from very traumatic situations and return

to normal levels of functioning. Lacking support in crisis situations, even the "normal, healthy" individual may suffer personality change and long-lasting psychological damage.

One form of psychological damage seen in stressful professions is "institutional dehumanization" or "burnout." Burnout is the tendency to "cope with stress by a form of distancing that not only hurts [the professional people] but is damaging to all of us as their human clients."⁶ Distancing, of course, is a matter of degree, and some distancing—"objectivity"—is necessary to allow an individual to work in difficult situations. How, then, is "burnout" different from these normal defenses which facilitate competence?

Maslach describes a variety of symptoms which point to a person who is burning out. He becomes cynical and develops negative feelings about his clients. He may begin to talk of them as other than human, and to withdraw from contact with them. Withdrawal is further characterized by sharp distinctions between job and personal life. A major symptom of burnout is "the transformation of a person with original thought and creativity on the job into a mechanical bureaucrat."⁷ The individual withdraws from personal involvement by "going by the book" rather than by unique circumstances of each situation. He treats interpersonal management tasks as if they were technological ones.

Coping mechanisms of this sort, while they may work in the short run, take a toll. A person who is burned out often develops physical symptoms, such as ulcers, anxiety attacks, and insomnia. He may seek relief in alcohol, drugs, or tranquilizers. Family

life deteriorates, and divorce and suicide rates are high.

The reactions described by Maslach are seen all too frequently in police officers. Niederhoffer⁸ has described a process of alienation and increasing cynicism in urban police officers that in many aspects parallels Maslach's description of burnout. Niederhoffer goes so far as to assert that the kind of cynicism that is directed against life, the world, and people in general . . . is endemic to policemen of all ranks and persuasions . . .⁹ Certainly the distancing phenomenon, the feeling of an ingroup "we" versus the rest of the world, seen as "they," is a commonly reported experience of those who observe police society, a feeling which may increase with length of service.¹⁰ Many writers have documented the high rates of psychosomatic illness, divorce, and suicide that are the extreme consequences of burnout.¹¹

The prospect is not so grim as it would first appear. Both Maslach and Niederhoffer—and many others—find examples of individuals who have escaped cynicism and burnout. They become, as Niederhoffer puts it, "tolerant observers of the human comedy,"¹² and even dedicated and successful agents for change. Maslach believes that "burnout is not inevitable and that steps can be taken to reduce and modify its occurrence."¹³

Burnout in Police

Research revealed a high degree of consensus about the stressfulness of certain situations in policing. These conditions were categorized into acute, transient, situational stresses—those that come on suddenly, even accidentally, and usually are over

quickly—and chronic stresses of certain assignments or organizational patterns.

Two kinds of acute stress which seem to precipitate crisis reactions in even the most seasoned, best adjusted officer are: The wounding or death of a fellow officer, particularly one's partner; and having to deal with cases involving a child who has been injured or killed, particularly a child who has been physically or sexually assaulted. Joseph Wambaugh, who has provided us with many insightful characterizations of police officers and their reactions to stress, dealt with the first kind of stress in "The Onion Field."¹⁴ This book details the deterioration of a conscientious officer whose partner is shot and who is blamed publicly for the death by his department.

Many officers relate their horror in having to deal with child victims. It is one of the few occasions when officers feel free to weep openly in front of their fellows, and the one in which brutality against an offender is most likely to be condoned. The laughing and joking that relieve tension in so many other stressful situations is largely absent in these. They are frequently relived in nightmares.

Certain assignments also seem to involve high psychological risk. Those assignments which involve dealing with mutilation and death, such as working in a medical examiner's office or in homicide investigation, come immediately to mind, and indeed, are stressful for many people, especially at first. However, people who work these assignments often have, or develop in the course of the work, the kind of personality that can cope with such situations. These defenses, which permit one to do an important job well, often prevent him from doing the work which involves interacting with others. By analogy, the successful surgeon would make a dreadful psychiatrist.

As long as a job requires only one basic kind of skill or personality problems may be minimized. Special problems arise in assignments which require different, contradictory skills and defenses. Many tasks on policing involve human interaction skills, the kind in which it is impossible to follow a formula. These are the tasks which demand a different response to each situation and from different individuals. When the necessity for interaction and sensitivity to human feelings and behavior is combined in an assignment with the necessity for dealing with situations which demand distancing because they deal with basic human fears of mutilation, trauma, and death, the officer must attempt to perform the almost impossible balancing act of working appropriately with "clients" who are undergoing ego-threatening crisis and protecting his own ego. Respondents listed several assignments that fit this category as particularly stressful: Sex crimes investigation, undercover narcotics work, and increasingly, juvenile work.

Burnout is also seen more frequently in patrol officers who have to handle large numbers of calls that involve serious problems that they are not equipped by training or mandate to solve. Residents of urban ghettos commonly call the police with such problems. This is consistent with Maslach's finding that:

"... burnout often becomes inevitable when the professional is forced to provide care for too many people. As the ratio increases, the result is higher and higher emotional overload until, like a wire that has too much electricity flowing through it, the worker just burns out and emotionally disconnects . . ."¹⁵

Job-related stress is exacerbated, and indeed, may be caused by cer-

tain traditional police practices. One of the most devastating of these is the indiscriminate use of a military model. This model sees police skills as technological ones. It assumes that every assignment involves skills that do not vary greatly from individual to individual or with the setting. It views discretion as unimportant and inappropriate for all but top brass. Certainly there are skills and assignments in policing for which such a model is appropriate. For many others it is not.

The practical consequences of such a model have been satirized by Wambaugh:

"Deputy Chief Lynch wouldn't stand for a violation of the Los Angeles Police Department order concerning phone answering . . . Officers had to answer thus:

"Good morning [afternoon or evening], Wilshire Watch Commander's Office, Officer Fernwood speaking. May I help you?"

"If any word was left out of this standard greeting, the officer could be subject to disciplinary action.

"It was said that once when a desk officer at Newton Street Station had uttered the entire phrase before giving the caller a chance to speak, the caller, a cardiac victim, fell unconscious before completing the address where the ambulance should be sent and died 20 minutes later."¹⁶

Consequences also extend to the officer. Untrained in the exercise of discretion, told it is not part of his job and is inappropriate for one of his rank, the officer on the street finds himself called on to exercise his own judgment hourly. Frustration sets in when he is seldom rewarded for the many instances his judgment is ap-

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appropriate, but is often punished if his actions attract adverse public attention. The creative person learns to take the conservative path, not to make waves, to go by the book even when such action may be damaging to his larger mandate to serve and protect.

A corollary of the military model is the view of the police officer as a Renaissance Man. Once he pins on his "tin" he magically becomes able to perform any task to which he may be assigned, regardless of training, interest, experience, or personality style. As one supervisor said to a man given a clerical assignment who complained that he did not know how to type, "You've got ten fingers, of course you can type." (And even, as on "Barney Miller," find ways to improvise missing letters.)

Preventing Burnout

Burnout is not inevitable. Preventive measures may be taken in a number of areas. The chances that an event will have serious crisis impact are lessened if several basic human needs are met. These are: To feel that one has control over the circumstances of one's life, to understand why things happen, and to be able to predict one's future. After confronting a stressful event, one needs to ventilate—to "get it out of his system," to talk about it to someone who can understand but will not pass judgment. Ventilation can serve a further purpose. As the person talks about his experiences and feelings and attends to the reactions and experiences of others, he may learn new ways of dealing with situations.

Maslach emphasized the importance of opportunities for ventilation in pre-

venting burnout among the groups she studied: Poverty lawyers, prison personnel, child-care workers, and psychiatric nurses. She found that "burnout rates are lower for those professionals who actively express, analyze and share their personal feelings with their colleagues."¹⁷ The opportunity for such ventilation could best be provided by having available a variety of programs, formal and informal, which could provide opportunities for sharing problems. These were particularly effective when they were developed and supported by the agency in which the individual worked.



In addition to the opportunity to get together with coworkers and share experiences, people in stressful professions need the opportunity to get away from the stressful situation from time-to-time. If the person is not allowed sanctioned opportunities to do less stressful work from time-to-time, he will find ways of escaping, often at the expense of his clients or the job. The "sanctioned time-out" is more than a coffee break; it is an opportunity to continue to do useful work, but work that does not involve direct contact with clients. Thus, it is not the length of the work day that contributes to burnout, but the continuous contact with the public throughout that day.¹⁸

The interviews uncovered examples of practices similar to those which Maslach found effective. Sanctioned time-outs, which allow the professional some control over his work life, were provided in a variety of ways. A supervisor of a sex crimes squad, for example, would allow, encourage, or even assign his officers to give a lecture, set up a demonstration, or just work in the office for a day after they had worked a particularly difficult investigation, such as one involving a child. Interestingly, those officers, whose supervisors allowed them some control and flexibility over their assignments and schedules, reported that they were less likely to try to "cheat" or malingering than those with little control.

Other supervisors would from time-to-time share the work of their officers and give them informal opportunities to ventilate. In one unit, there was a change of commanding officers over the time that some of the members were being studied. The first commander, who had had little street experience, spent most of his time in his office and seldom spoke to most of the members of the unit except to give assignments or ask direct questions. The second frequently worked at a desk in the squad room, and often during the first weeks, solicited information and advice from older hands. Absenteeism decreased, morale improved, and there was an increase in the number of cases investigated by the unit that resulted in conviction.

One practice that was mentioned frequently as a means of relieving tension was some form of what Wambaugh popularized as "choir practice,"¹⁹ and which others called "debriefing." These occasions usually were informal, often spur-of-the-mo-

ment, as events dictated. A group of officers from the same unit or shift get together after work and talk about the events of the day. In one unit, beer and pizza would be brought into the station for end-of-tour parties (in violation of rules but with the tacit approval of the unit commander). Members of the unit felt these gatherings solidified the group.

Unfortunately, if this form of ventilation is not carefully controlled, it contains the ingredients for disaster, as brought out in Wambaugh's book. Too often the setting is a local ginmill, where alcohol and weapons are mixed with outsiders. Thoughtful officers recognize these dangers, and several explained they pick a spot across the county or State line, make sure to get a room to themselves, and leave weapons at home. One group said they take along a nondrinker to do the driving! In some cases, supervisors or even chiefs have given direct or tacit approval to squad parties and may even allow officers to bring beer into the station house and drink it together at the end of their tour.²⁰ Perhaps, more study is needed here; if these occasions are carefully controlled, they can provide an appropriate setting in which officers can fulfill their need to ventilate.

In a few cases, social science professionals were able to provide support for officers. The most successful of these seemed to be people who were involved with the department in one way or another, but had no formal input into the officers' records or other forms of individual evaluation. Some of these were researchers or trainers hired by the department on a consultant basis who worked closely with officers on projects of interest to both. In one case, a department hired a so-

cial worker to work out of the station and take responsibility for some of the problems confronting their officers, but for which they have neither the training, resources, nor interest. At first the officers were suspicious, but after finding that he could be trusted, often would drop in to discuss a case, share solutions and insights, or discuss problems. Many researchers who spend time "on the bricks" with officers find them eager to talk about the rewards and problems of the job. Those who realize this as potentially more than just chit-chat or griping can sometimes perform a valuable service, as well as gain insights that may be useful in their work.

Not all ventilation is verbal. A common finding among people in stressful occupations is that a regular program of physical exercise contributes substantially to their feeling of well-being. Stress has physiological as well as psychological consequences,²¹ and exercise both conditions the individual to be able to withstand increased tension and works some of the tension off.

While exercise is something an officer can do on his own, departments can encourage it by providing good, attractive facilities and a variety of activities and encouraging officers to use them. It should be noted, perhaps, that the use of exercise as punishment, as happens in some recruit training programs where demerits are worked off by pushups, hardly encourages officers to enjoy physical activity.

Other techniques to reduce stress, such as biofeedback and meditation, are also being tried by some departments. Biofeedback, of course, has the disadvantage of requiring equipment for the observation of one's heart beat

to induce relaxation. Meditation, on the other hand, can be used on an individual basis without equipment.

The need of a person in a high-stress profession to gain control by being able to understand and predict may be met, in part, by training. Training aimed at minimizing police burnout should begin at the recruit level. A section on the police officer in crisis fits well into a broad crisis intervention unit, that includes the study of techniques for interviewing victims and handling psychotic or suicidal people, as well as for intervening in domestic disputes. The kinds of situations most likely to lead to crisis reactions should be discussed, as well as the symptoms of crisis most common in police officers. Suggestions for ways to minimize the crisis impact of stressful events are presented. This training predicts for the new officer some of the feelings he may have, and helps him understand that many of his reactions are normal and not an indication that he is going crazy, or evidence that he is inadequate as an officer.

This training may be repeated profitably in a variety of inservice courses. It is included particularly in the specialized sex crimes courses taught at the New Jersey State Police Training Center. Here, too, the purpose is to allow the officer to understand and predict. Officers are also encouraged to participate in creative ventilation by sharing their solutions, things that have worked particularly well for them or for other officers they know. This sharing has, parenthetically, been an important source of knowledge on the subject of police burnout and has provided much of the basis for questions in this systematic research.

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Inclusion of a section on crisis reactions in police is particularly important in courses for supervisors and police administrators. They need to realize the crucial nature of their role, and help to develop techniques for satisfying the needs of their subordi-

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nates in ways that enhance their ability to perform their duties.

The prevention of burnout in police officers requires a reorientation, an

increased concern for the needs of the officer. As the organization helps him meet these needs, he, in turn, becomes better able to perform the functions society has given him. (6)

FOOTNOTES

¹ Morton Bard and Katherine Ellison, "Crisis Intervention and Investigation of Forcible Rape," *The Police Chief*, May 1974, pp. 68-73.

² Christina Maslach, "Burned-Out," *Human De-*

avior, September 1976, pp. 16-22.

³ Georgette Bennett-Sandler and Earl Ubell, "Time Bombs in Blue," *New York Magazine*, March 21, 1977, pp. 47-51.

⁴ Maslach, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁵ See Barbara Dohrenwend and Bruce Dohrenwend (eds.), *Stressful Life Events*, John Wiley, New York, 1975.

⁶ Maslach, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸ Arthur Niederhoffer, *Behind the Shield*, Anchor, New York, 1967.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁰ J. L. Genz and D. Lester, "Authoritarianism in Policemen as a Function of Experience," *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 1976, 4:1, pp. 9-13.

¹¹ William Kroes, *Society's Victim: The Police Officer*, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, Ill., 1976.

¹² Niederhoffer, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹³ Maslach, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁴ Joseph Wambaugh, *The Onion Field*, Dell, New York, 1973.

¹⁵ Maslach, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Joseph Wambaugh, *The Choirboys*, Dell, New York, 1975, p. 14.

¹⁷ Maslach, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁹ Wambaugh, *op. cit.*, 1975.

²⁰ Richard C. Clement, Chief, Dover Township, N.J., Police Department, "Reducing the Divorce Rate in Police Departments by the Use of Alcoholic Beverages," unpublished manuscript.

²¹ Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1956.



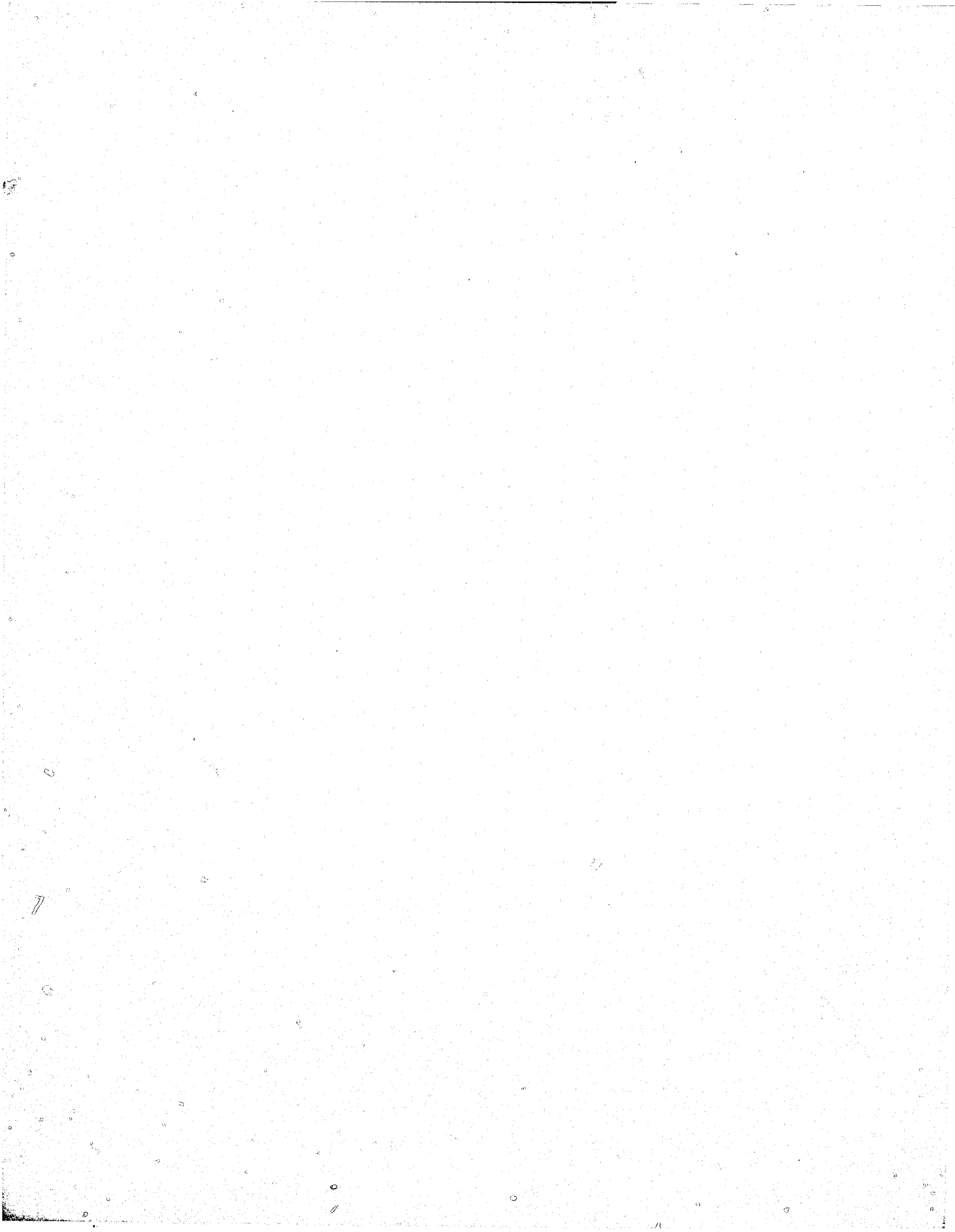
Article Suggestions Invited

To determine those law enforcement subjects of greatest interest to the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin readership, a sampling of opinion among 200 students at the FBI National Academy was recently made.

Those surveyed indicated greatest interest in management methods, legal matters, investigative techniques, discipline, training, and professional ideals. Over 30 percent of those queried thought more articles on these subjects should be included in the Bulletin. One fifth of these officers preferred less material on firearms and defensive tactics.

The Bulletin would like to receive the opinions of all its readers on subjects of interest to you. Instead of a mail survey, which can only be general in nature, you are invited to send the Bulletin specific suggestions for articles, along with any comment on content.

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