



NASW SPECIALTY PRACTICE SECTIONS  
SUMMER ■ 2015

# Administration/ Supervision

SECTION  
CONNECTION

## Letter from the Chair

On August 9, 2014, an 18-year-old black man, Michael Brown, was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, a local policeman. The name of the town—Ferguson—became synonymous with protests and racial unrest, as well as issues around police restraint and tactics in volatile confrontations. This event and its aftermath sparked a new interest in ongoing violent confrontations between police officers and unarmed black men nationwide—and the perceptions and reality of racism in America.

The *NASW Code of Ethics* states, in part, that social workers should learn about and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression, and that they should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class.

This month, the Administration/Supervision Practice Section of NASW presents two sides of the Ferguson issue. Social worker Sarah Buehner, MSW, LCSW, wife of a St. Louis area police officer who was also involved in Ferguson from a perspective rarely heard from: the local families and friends of the Ferguson police. As a local mental health practitioner and a policeman's wife, she offers insight into the problems of stress and offers ways to help the families of the local professional community cope.

The second article, titled "The Ripple Effect: The Secondary Trauma of Ferguson," addresses the empathetic emotional pain felt by many social workers of color for the young men and their families. It addresses the struggle to objectively seek solutions to the issues of race in America. This reawakened awareness of racism, triggered by events at Ferguson and around the country, has become the focus for social work change in this month's Administration/Supervision Practice Section.

Janice Hawkins PhD, LMSW

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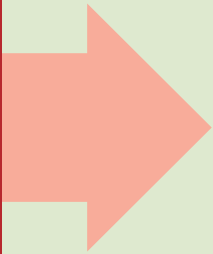
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## IT'S A FACT:

Social work does not seem to be drawing majority profession as older male social

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# SUPPORTING FAMILY & CHILDREN of Law Enforcement Officers

SARAH BUEHNER, MSW, LCSW

The 2014 events in Ferguson, Missouri, have been a catalyst for our country to closely examine the relationship between law enforcement and the communities they serve, and as with any significant event, emotions have run high—throughout our nation—as we all struggle with how to move forward. A lot of work must be done to ensure that minorities and people of color are not systematically discriminated against in our law enforcement and criminal justice systems; it may even take a long time for minorities and people of color to build trust in law enforcement.

Throughout the United States, many people are angry at law enforcement, and officers have at times become the targets of this anger.

As the wife of a law enforcement officer and as a social worker, I am also keenly aware of the toll that Ferguson and recent related events have taken on police families. The daily life of a police family is constantly hectic, stressful, and unpredictable, as officers often work long, erratic hours and come home stressed and exhausted. As with other first responders, police officers are frequently exposed to

potentially life-threatening and traumatic situations; as social workers, we are well aware of the effects that trauma can have on families and children. For police officers, even a minor traffic stop triggers a limbic fight-or-flight response, as that officer has no idea if the person they pulled over is angry, hostile, or carrying a weapon. According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, ([www.nleomf.org](http://www.nleomf.org)) between 2008 and 2014, close to 1,000 law enforcement officers have lost their lives while on duty in the United States.

When my husband leaves for work, the thought crosses my mind that he might not come home.

Life post-Ferguson has exacerbated this stress for police families. Even more than before, officers are on “high alert,” a condition that impacts the daily life and stress levels of police families and children. Children of law enforcement have also become targets of anger and bullying by peers at school, or they may be acting out as a result of absorbing trauma and stress from the family system. Spouses and

# young men into the profession and is becoming even more of a female-workers age out of the workforce

family members may also feel angry, anxious, and afraid that their loved one will not make it home from work. Police spouses often feel overburdened with home responsibilities and child rearing, as the schedule of a police officer is often erratic and unpredictable. Add all of these factors together with stress and trauma, and it is no wonder that police families have such a high divorce rate. As police officers and other law enforcement officials are a part of every community we serve, we, as social workers, undoubtedly will interact with police officers, their children, spouses, or other loved ones. From my experience as a clinical social worker and police wife, I have a few suggestions for how social workers can help these children and family members as they deal with the stress, trauma, and other effects of being part of a police family.

## BACK TO BASICS:

- **Active Listening 101:** Listen, validate, reflect. Modeling active listening can also teach police families healthy ways to communicate.
- **Empathy:** A lot of criticism is being directed at police and law enforcement right now (and in many cases, rightly so), and it can be harder to empathize and humanize with others who are in the hot seat. Along with the criticism and challenges, police and law enforcement are still exposed to high levels of trauma and stress, and police families still feel the effects. Empathy is such a healing force—there is so much power in feeling heard and understood.

## FOR SPOUSES AND ADULT FAMILY MEMBERS:

- Teach the importance of self-care, and help the family member find a way to prioritize it as well as balance it with other responsibilities. Self-care is an investment in the family—by taking care of ourselves, we are better able to care for others.
  - Educate about trauma, stress, and the limbic response, and how to manage these symptoms through self-care and healthy lifestyle choices.
  - Educate about the ways kids and family members may be affected by their officer's trauma and stress, and how the family member can help the family cope through positive communication and prioritizing quality time as a family.
  - Help the family member understand the importance of having a support system and how seeking support from family, peers, or the local Police Wives' Association can help.
  - Help the family member build a support system, if desired.
  - Educate about counseling—as with the military, there is a stigma associated with counseling in the law enforcement community. Focus on destigmatizing counseling, and show how helpful it can be for individuals, families, and couples.
  - Not in front of the kids! Encourage family members to set boundaries with what children/teens are exposed to. Law enforcement officers may “vent” about their day to family or a partner, but often kids (even teens) are not able to process some of the traumatic events that the officer has experienced. Limiting this exposure may also limit the child's acting-out behaviors or anxieties.
- Limit exposure to “triggers,” like the news or violent TV shows.
  - If an adult is harassed for being related to law enforcement, coach him or her on how to de-escalate a situation. Encourage him or her to focus on safety, not defending their family member. Help him or her understand that verbal or physical arguments rarely solve a conflict.
  - If someone harasses or bullies a child, coach the family member on healthy ways to talk with the child/teen to process the situation, and remind the child of the importance of safety. Validate for the child/teen that many people are angry and frustrated currently, and they aren't sure how to process or respond to these feelings. Emphasize that fighting verbally or physically will not solve the problem; it only increases the conflict.
  - If a child is acting out, educate the parent or caregiver on how children respond to family stress and/or trauma. Reframe this “acting out” as an opportunity to help the child, as children who act out often lack the skills to manage their emotions. Encourage the parent/caregiver to seek ongoing counseling or support for helping the child to learn healthier ways to cope.

## FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS:

- Remember to be age appropriate. What you say to a 3-year-old will be very different than what you say to a 12-year-old—and even more different than what you say to a 16-year-old. A lot of people try to “shield” their children from talking about Ferguson or police-related topics, but this rarely works. Even my 3-year-old hears

about police officers at school or from adults she is around, and when the riots in Ferguson happened, she was asking about “daddy helping with the fires.” Be age appropriate but give children a safe space to talk, share their perspectives, and ask questions.

- Middle or high school students are old enough to learn about trauma, stress, and the limbic response. Help them learn about how their body and mind react to these things and what they can do about it.
- Kids need support, too. You can help a child/teen learn about the importance of support.
- Teach about SELF-CARE!!! Kids need positive activities to manage their emotions and stress as well.
- Talk with kids about any bullying or harassment they may have experienced for having a police parent. Process with that child how they responded, and coach him or her on conflict resolution and staying safe.
- Assess for hobbies/extracurricular activities to help the child manage stress and have an outlet where they don't have to worry about mom, dad, or any stresses at home.
- Teach kids about asking for help, and destigmatize counseling in order to minimize barriers to asking for help later, if needed.

**Sarah Buehner earned her MSW from the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University and holds her LCSW in the state of Missouri. She works for Lutheran Family and Children's Services of Missouri, where she provides school-based counseling services to teens in St. Louis. She can be contacted at SarahB@lfc.org.**



# THE RIPPLE EFFECT: The Secondary Trauma of Ferguson

JANICE HAWKINS, PHD, LMSW

Eric Garner was an unarmed black man. He died after a police officer reportedly put him in a chokehold. At the time of Eric Garner's death, during the demonstrations happening in the streets of New York City, one of my white colleagues asked me what I thought social services agencies' response should be to the events surrounding Michael Brown's death and the protests springing up across the country about it. Like Eric Garner, Michael Brown was unarmed when he was shot by a policeman.

I was at a loss for words. My anger at that moment was overwhelming. I was no different than any other mother of a black or Latino child. I was almost doubled over in empathetic emotional pain for Garner and Brown and their families. To discuss Michael Brown, killed in a police shooting in Ferguson, Missouri was almost beyond me; the reawakened awareness of racism that had been triggered and its ripple effects: fear,

discrimination, blame, death, and imprisonment.

In 1985, registered nurse and well-known civil rights activist Carol Taylor wrote *The Little Black Book: Black Male Survival in America, or Staying Alive & Well in an Institutionally Racist Society* for the protection of her own young son. It was a guide for black teens on their rights and how to behave when approached by a policeman; the events of Ferguson show such a guide is clearly still necessary.

As a mother of a young black man, I taught my son from the age of 11 to carry ID with him at all times, to never argue with the police, to keep his hands open, and to take "it" (whatever "it" is) just to survive. The right to walk down a city street at any hour of the day or night with the expectation of police protection—an expectation that my white colleagues and their children enjoy—is a luxury that cannot safely be assumed by people of color.

Social workers must continue to work closely with law enforcement despite any personal opinions or prejudice. To be fair: the police officer's job—to protect and serve—is not easy. Police see society at its worst. They are called in when conditions and people are out of hand, and they are often placed in life-threatening situations. Likewise, many black people only encounter police at times of great stress. Though understandable, the fear and hostility on both sides—that of the confronter and the confronted—cannot be ignored.

## SOLUTIONS

It is believed that cultural sensitivity training can change people's views and that well-written intellectual discourse against racism can effectively solve the problem; however, with so much subtle pressure for those on the front lines to be politically correct—and with so many misconceptions that remain unspoken and unaddressed—one can only wonder how effective those approaches will be.

It is indeed insulting to behave as though somehow the shooting at Ferguson and its aftermath were unusual or unique incidents—they are not according to the Department of Justice Report on Ferguson, 2015, ([www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson\\_police\\_department\\_report.pdf](http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf)). Police brutality in communities of color has been an ongoing issue, and it only sporadically receives media attention. There is something fundamentally wrong with a scenario that repeats over and over, nationwide while the exact number of unarmed black men who have been shot remains undocumented and anecdotal. One could surmise that the need to track how many times an unarmed person has been shot or killed would indicate a problem or would lead to an investigation that could ultimately reflect badly on various departments. Thus, the government seemingly continues to say, "No paper trail, no problem"—no matter

how many people may have witnessed it. Black and Hispanic people are more likely than whites to experience a police officer's threat or use of force, according to the DOJ's Police Public Contact Survey 2008 ([www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACJD/studies/32022?archive=NACJD&q=Police-Public+Contact+Survey+2008](http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/NACJD/studies/32022?archive=NACJD&q=Police-Public+Contact+Survey+2008)), the latest year for which data are available. Of those who said that police had used or had threatened them with force that year, about 74 percent felt that those actions were excessive.

Police shootings of unarmed black people are not limited to poor or predominantly black communities; police officers have shot unarmed black men and women in affluent communities as well. Likewise, actors, football players, college students, high school graduates, and even black cops have been victims (Lee, 2014). Living with fear like this can make many of us unwitting victims of secondary trauma. It trips a vicious cycle of fear and mistrust in which prejudicial attitudes cycle again into violence. The solutions to this issue are not easy.

### **RECOGNIZE THE PROBLEM PROACTIVELY**

The challenge is for all of us to recognize our own trauma and biases around the issues of

prejudice and race, to realize when those biases are affecting our behaviors toward others—in both official and unofficial capacities—and to courageously address racism wherever it is found.

We must be willing to address clients as well as coworkers who suffer from secondary trauma from exposure to a traumatic event. Conventional protocol is to debrief the person 24 to 48 hours after the incident. Research suggests that debriefings—which include peer support and an opportunity to discuss thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions with a mental health professional, while learning coping techniques—may help prevent post-traumatic stress (Packard, 2008). We cannot behave as though vicarious stress is something that happens to other people.

It is important to realistically educate the public at large, and people of color in particular, on how to recognize and behave in sensitive situations. Taylor's book prepares the reader for potentially problematic situations on the street, by spelling out 30 commonsense rules of engagement—such as not to run or walk down the block with a wallet, cell phone, or anything that might easily be mistaken for a gun when held in your hand. The book also

contains spaces for a photo, medical info, and, in case of arrest, a lawyer's name, number, and an emergency contact.

Police departments around the country have initiated new training in safe ways to restrain suspects. It is also my sincere belief that most police officers protect and serve the public to the best of their ability out of have a sense of duty.

Nevertheless, there has to be accountability on both sides. Overall, we must learn not to leap to conclusions about people or situations. There are some accidental events, regrettably, just as there are people who were rightfully arrested. There are also officers who need to be weeded out. The police and the community should establish a universal code of ethics that spells out mutually agreed-upon, beneficial protocols for culturally sensitive situations.

Our clients and coworkers look to us, social workers, to be the change agents. When the situation for change arises, we are ethnically required not to let our feelings leak over into our work; we must give the best service possible to everyone in need. We have a long way to go to understand each other as human beings without race coloring that understanding.

**Janice Hawkins, PhD, LMSW, is a native New Yorker who gained extensive experience during her tenure at New York Children Services. She has published locally on keeping kids safe and conducts workshops on many topics, including child abuse and neglect, spirituality, ethnicity, and culture in social work practice. Dr. Hawkins' PhD is in public policy and administration. She may be contacted at [jhawkinstrategic2@gmail.com](mailto:jhawkinstrategic2@gmail.com).**

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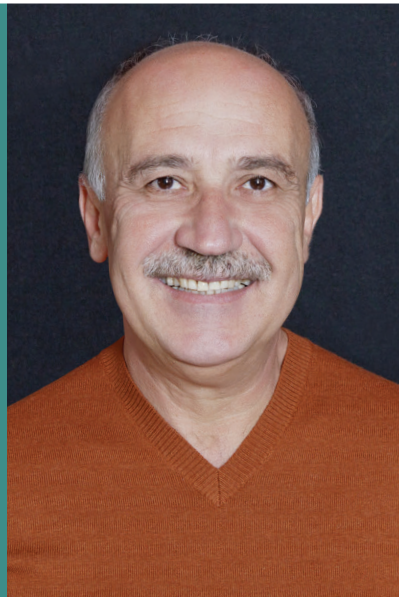
***The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) offers its condolences to the families and friends of the nine people who lost their lives in the June 17 mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.***

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## *Did You Know?*

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