

**The Unseen Victims of Capital Punishment: The Psychological Toll on Those Tasked with  
Execution**

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## Introduction

“First do no harm”. A statement repeated by physicians that seems so morally correct, no matter an individual’s career. However, in the practice of executions, there are individuals defying this moral rule by carrying out the state-sanctioned killings. These executioners are typically left out of conversations surrounding the death penalty. This paper explores the question: What are the psychological effects of carrying out executions on those tasked with them? This paper will examine how the executioners land this role and the psychological consequences of performing executions by using research and firsthand accounts. Understanding the experience of the executioners can give us a deeper perspective on the death penalty as a whole.

## Literature Review

Understanding how executioners come into this role is essential when exploring the psychological effects of performing executions. In the study *The Psychological Experience of Security Officers Who Work with Executions*, Michael J. Osofsky & Howard J. Osofsky (2002) interviewed fifty correctional officers who were all part of execution teams. They discovered that most officers viewed the role as, simply, an extension of their job. However, the study also revealed that many officers relied on various coping mechanisms to manage the psychological burden of taking a life. Despite this, internal stress was still common, suggesting that long-term psychological impact is not that easily deferred.

Building on this, Jeffrie G. Murphy (2016) takes a philosophical approach in *People We Hire as Executioners: Who Are They? Who Are We?*. Murphy argues that being an executioner is not just a job but rather a moral dilemma. He challenges the question of whether or not someone can maintain a stable moral identity while repeatedly carrying out intentional acts of harm. His

work emphasizes the moral and ethical burdens that executioners carry. This perspective adds to the findings of Osofsky & Osofsky, offering clues to understand why correctional officers might feel opposed to the act, even when they are “just doing their job.” Together, these perspectives support the idea that psychological harm isn't just about the act itself, but also the moral weight of participating in state-sanctioned killing.

Adding to this, Casey Chiappetta & Robert Johnson (2021) explore the long-term effects of execution in their article *Trauma and Coping Among Execution Team Members*. They found that executioners often experience symptoms that are similar to those found in other stress-inducing professions, such as combat soldiers or emergency responders. They also found that a lot of these individuals attempted to manage their emotional reactions by separating themselves from the act, emotionally or mentally. However, Chiappetta & Johnson add that these coping strategies often weaken over time, leading to worsened psychological consequences. Their findings reinforce the idea that the psychological effects of execution work can build up quietly and linger long after the event itself.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

This paper theorizes that the psychological effects experienced by executioners are greatly shaped by the institutional structure of the justice system, which treats executions as a normality. By framing the act of killing as just another duty, the system creates a space where executioners are expected to suppress their emotions. Over time, this emotional distancing can lead to larger psychological consequences.

This theory forms two hypotheses. The first being that executioners are often placed into this role by assignment rather than choice. This ultimately leaves them unprepared to handle the weight of the task. The second is that while coping mechanisms such as emotional detachment

may help in the short term, they fail to help against long-term trauma. These expectations shape the way the evidence is analyzed to explain not just how executioners are affected, but why the system contributes to their emotional consequences.

## **Data, Analysis, Results**

### **Method of Inquiry**

To explore the psychological effects of carrying out executions, a variety of qualitative sources were examined. Studies by Osofsky & Osofsky (2002) and Chiapetta & Johnson (2021) provided insight into the emotional strategies that correctional officers use to cope and the long-term trauma they may experience afterward. From an ethical view, Jeffrie G. Murphy's (2016) analysis, which situates execution as a moral dilemma. To understand the emotional burdens from firsthand perspectives, Chiara Eisner's (2022) article, *Carrying out executions took a secret toll on workers - then changed their politics* and Jim Dwyer's (1994) article, *Living With Those Deaths*, were considered. Francie Diep's (2015) article, *The Psychology of the Executioner*, was also considered. This source was chosen because it discussed the different ways someone may become an executioner, allowing an understanding to form around how that point is reached.

### **Psychological Unreadiness for the Role**

Becoming an executioner isn't necessarily a choice. It's often decided by institution convenience. In most cases, correctional officers don't search for this role but rather, it finds them. That's because the individuals in the medical field who are usually expected to carry out executions, refuse to do so. According to Diep (2015), in one instance, Missouri officials reached out to 298 anesthesiologists asking for help with an execution. Every single one refused. There

are simply not enough medical professionals who are willing to be involved in a state-sanctioned killing (Diep, 2015).

This shifts the responsibility elsewhere, oftentimes, to correctional officers. They're not trained for it, nor prepared for the emotional impact, and rarely even asked. In the study by Osofsky & Osofsky (2002), many officers described the act as "just another duty". It's framed as part of the job, a normal task, something that you can't say no to. There is a lack of choice. Murphy (2016) explains that this isn't just a job but also a moral conflict. He questions whether someone can keep a clear sense of right and wrong while carrying out executions. Without space to reflect, the role becomes ethically heavy alongside emotionally heavy.

### **Coping Through Detachment**

Executioners often rely on being emotionally, mentally, and even socially silent. They're taught to separate the act from themselves. In Osofsky & Osofsky (2002) interviews with executioners, many officers described developing coping mechanisms that allowed them to shut off their feelings. They did this by viewing their role as simply following orders or protecting the reputation of the prison. Chiappetta & Johnson (2021) found that executioners often relied on rationalization and compartmentalization. These coping mechanisms divide their emotional selves from their professional selves in order to complete what's assigned to them.

Unfortunately, this detachment has limits.

Murphy (2016) reinforces this idea, writing that the emotional labor of killing on command creates an internal conflict that cannot be resolved by distancing alone. As one man described in Eisner's (2023) article, "I didn't think about it - I couldn't," until many years later when he began to dream of those he helped to execute. The man described himself becoming deeply unsettled when this started occurring. Dwyer (2005) writes of officers who referred to the

process casually in public but broke down in private, unable to reason with what they had participated in. One man states, “After each execution, I felt as though I left another part of my humanity and spiritual being in that showing room”. It leaves us asking, how does someone live with themselves while feeling this way? While the silence protects the job, it can isolate the person.

### **Long-Term Consequences**

The toll of carrying out executions is often noticed long after the act itself. Chiappetta & Johnson (2021) discovered that execution team members frequently experience symptoms, such as intrusive thoughts and nightmares, that are similar to those seen in post-traumatic stress disorder. Similarly, Osofsky & Osofsky (2002) observed that correctional officers that have been involved in executions reported significant emotional distress. This ultimately led to the development of depression and anxiety disorders. These findings are all reiterated in Diep’s (2015) article, which highlights the extreme impact on individuals who, despite attempting to emotionally detach, find themselves haunted by the memories of those they executed.

The consequences can be devastating. As noted in an article from The State, South Carolina has witnessed this firsthand. A former executioner died by suicide, and two others were placed on disability due to PTSD and depression (Eisner 2022). As a former warden reflected in the article, “You don’t know until you’ve done it what it’s going to do to you”. This statement shows the lasting psychological impact of participating in executions.

### **Analysis**

Looking at this data side by side, some patterns emerge. The first being that executioners aren’t prepared to kill, yet they’re expected to carry on like it’s just another simple task in the job. My first hypothesis, that executioners are placed into this role by assignment rather than

choice, is confirmed not just by institutional patterns, but by the silence that follows them. It's not just that they don't choose this work, it's that they aren't emotionally warned about what it'll do to them. When the psychological damage begins to surface, there's no system in place waiting to help.

This lack of preparation feeds into my second hypothesis. While some correctional officers manage to get past executions by emotionally distancing themselves, that distance doesn't last forever. The weight of what they've done returns in nightmares, breakdowns, or even suicide. While society may expect coping to look like strength and the ability to move on, it's seen that coping often looks like numbness, and that numbness eventually wears off. These cases all follow an institutional pattern which is that the system teaches executioners to detach, then leaves them when the detachment no longer works. The stories, research, and first hand accounts all point to a similar conclusion. What starts as a simple task at work becomes a death of its own.

### **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this paper, I asked the question: What are the psychological effects of carrying out executions on those tasked with them? What is discovered is that the damage isn't always apparent right away, but it usually is later. My first hypothesis was confirmed. Executioners are usually thrown into this role with little to no emotional preparation. My second hypothesis was also confirmed. Many executioners rely on emotional detachment to cope in the short term however, that strategy tends to diminish over time.

These findings align with the work of Osofsky, Chiappetta, and Murphy, whose research supports the idea that executioners suffer from institutional neglect. My contribution is connecting those findings to the human stories behind them. The theory proposed, that the

structure of the justice system creates emotional harm by design, proves to be necessary to understand this issue.

This matter has broader implications. If executioners are suffering lasting psychological consequences, that raises serious ethical concerns. In a system that demands emotional suppression, more harm may be created than beyond its reach. In the end, it isn't just about those being executed but also about those who do the executing. The emotional cost that execution imposes on the people carrying it out must not be ignored for any longer.

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