

Law Enforcement Trauma: Phenomenological Study - Protecting the U.S. Capitol on January 6th

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study analyzes the public testimony of four law enforcement officers who defended the U.S. Capitol during the January 6, 2021, insurrection. Using thematic analysis of their statements presented to the House Select Committee, the research unmask four themes: contested identity and ideas of patriotism (Who's a Traitor); existential vulnerability (Being Killed by My Own Weapon); prolonged psychological suffering (Recovery from Trama); and institutional abandonment (Betrayal by Congressional Authorities). The findings illuminate concepts of ethical harm embedded within law enforcement, revealing how institutional neglect and politized aggression can exacerbate post-traumatic stress. This study advocates trauma-informed care, public acknowledgement, and ethical accountability as essential components of recovery and reform. These officer's lived experiences offer a humanizing lens through which to reassess core democratic values and the treatment of those who take oaths to protect and serve our nation.

INTRODUCTION

This phenomenological article explores the lived experiences of four officers: Sargent Acquillino Gonell, Officer Harry Dunn, Officer Daniel Hodges, and Officer Michael Fanone, who were assigned to protect the U.S. Capitol, on January 6, 2021 (Moustakas, 1994). On that day, the Capitol building was violently breached by domestic insurgents (Schmidt, M. S., & Broadwater, L. (2021). While the political and historical implications of the attack have been debated, the visceral experiences of officers stationed at the Capitol, whose careers included commitments to safeguarding legislators and the peaceful transition of presidential authority, remains underexamined (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

The officers' testimonies delivered to the July 2021 Select Committee offer candid reflections on the psychological, ethical, and existential trauma faced by officers, who were both physically assaulted and morally betrayed by the people and institutions they swore to defend. Their narratives reflect core themes of mission, institutional loyalty, moral degradation, and survival while encountering overwhelming domestic violence and systemic disregard for their badge and uniform (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Elevating these accounts invites deeper inquiry and understanding of law enforcement mission and American patriotism. Beyond the need for trauma-informed recovery, these harms have been compounded by public gaslighting, political minimization, and institutional neglect (Congressional Research Service, 2021). A restorative justice framework offers a pathway toward accountability and healing. It reaffirm officers' roles as protectors of civic peace while

acknowledging the moral betrayal embedded in institutional silence and politization (Government Accountability Officer, GAO-22-105001, 2022). This article counters nationalist revisionism by anchoring analysis of the lived experiences of officers protecting ideals and practices of American democracy.

METHODOLOGY

This research study employs qualitative thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) of public testimonies provided by four law enforcement officers during the July 2021 Select Committee hearings. Their statements were transcribed, reviewed, and coded to identify patterns and salient themes relating to trauma, betrayal, violence, and moral dissonance. Analytic processes occurred in four phases: 1. Data Collection: statements and transcripts were sourced directly from Congressional hearings; 2. Initial Review: testimonies were read and contextually; 3. Coding: descriptive and interpretive codes were developed to capture recurring motifs and patterns (e.g. identity, institutional betrayal, trauma, and violence); 4. Themes: emerged through comparative synthesis and reflection. This interpretive approach honors the integrity of first-person accounts, situated within trauma, political and racial engagements, and restorative frameworks. Officers' names and statements part of the public record, enhancing transparency and academic rigor in the documented lived experiences.

Background

The transfer of presidential authority has previously occurred peaceably without incident for generations. Capitol police, D.C. Metropolitan police and other responding law enforcement resources began assembling on the perimeter of the Capitol building after FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and Federal Protective Service warnings about the Proud Boys and Trump supporters were proceedings toward the Capitol building (Mendoza, 2021). The House Select Committee investigated the events of Jan. 6 and estimated that Trump's speech drew 53,000 supporters. Emotions apparently ran high amongst the crowd and psychological, verbal and physical encounters with law enforcement personnel took place throughout the afternoon, resulting in approximately 140 police injuries (Zeigler, 2021).

Research Question (RQ)

Per Robson, (2021), a research question (RQ) is a clear and concise question identifying the goals and objectives of the research project. Descriptive RQs seek to describe characteristics or phenomena whereas a causal RQ seeks to determine cause and effect relationships. The proposed research question for this proposed study: RQ1: How do law enforcement personnel who encountered violence during the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol process their experiences and trauma?

Analysis and Themes

Testimony provided by Sargent Acquillino Gonell, Officer Harry Dunn, Officer Daniel Hodges, and Officer Michael Fanone to the Select Committee illustrates four dominant themes, as well as a collapse of moral certainties that previously grounded their roles and careers.

Theme 1: Who's the Traitor? – Identity Crisis:

Officers confronted a crisis of belonging and public perception of what had traditionally been symbols of law enforcement identity. Testimonies from the qualitative analysis revealed

officers voicing concerns about allegiance, perplexed who were the traitors. Officer Gonell initiated House committee testimony stating:

On January 6th, I was more afraid to work at the Capitol than my entire deployment to Iraq... I was falsely accused of betraying my oath, of choosing my paycheck – over my loyalty to the U.S. Constitution, even as I defended the very democratic process that protected everyone in the hostile crowd (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Other officers voiced the same concerns about traitors and their allegiance to the law enforcement. For example, Officer Hodges reflected on January 6th events and stated in his testimony:

“... people in the crowd said here comes the boys in blue, so brave, ... before yells of “traitors” ensued. This was followed by comments that the police were on the wrong side; you’re on the wrong team. Do not attack us, we’re not Black Lives Matter (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).”

Officer Dunn stated in his testimony:

One of assailant allegedly displayed [his own] law enforcement badge. This encounter fractured my sense of shared law enforcement and national purpose. The intruder noted, “We’re doing this for you!” [Shortly thereafter, a group of insurrectionists told to leave an area near the Rotunda.] They replied “No, man, this is our house... President Trump invited us here. We’re here to stop the steal. Joe Biden is not the President. Nobody voted for Joe Biden (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Theme 2: Being Killed by My Own Weapon – Trauma, Vulnerability, Survivor Instincts:

Law enforcement officer testimonies vividly reflected fears of being disarmed and then executed by their own equipment. Officer Gonell stated in his testimony:

Some of the rioters had the audacity to tell me there was nothing personal, that they will go through me, through us police officers to achieve their goal, as they were breaking metal barriers to use as weapons against us. If you shoot us, we all have weapons. We will shoot back; Or we’ll get our guns. We outnumber you. Join us (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Officer Gonell stated in his testimony:

[Interaction between insurrections and law enforcement on that day were] something from a medieval battle. We fought hand-to-hand, inch by inch to prevent an invasion of the Capitol by the mob... I too was being crushed by the rioters. I could feel myself losing oxygen and I recall thinking to myself, this is how I’m going to die, defending this entrance (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Officer Fanone stated in his testimony:

"... they ripped off my badge. They grabbed and stripped me of my radio. They seized ammunition that was secured to my body. They began to beat me with their fists and with what felt like hard metal objects. At one point, I came face-to-face with an attacker, who repeatedly lunged for me and attempted to remove my firearm. I heard chanting from some in the crowd: Get his gun and kill him with his own gun (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021)."

Officer Fanone continued sharing his testimony:

I was aware enough to recognize I was at risk of being stripped of and killed with my own firearm. I was electrocuted again and again with a taser. I'm sure I was screaming, but I don't think I could even hear my own voice... During the assault, I thought about using my firearm on my attackers, but I knew that if I did, I would be quickly overwhelmed and that, in their minds, would provide them with the justification for killing me. So, I instead decided to appeal to any humanity they might have. I said as loud as I could manage, I've got kids (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Officer Hodges stated in his testimony:

A man attempted to rip the baton from my hands, and we wrestled for control. I retained my weapon after I pushed him back. He yelled at me, "you're on the wrong team." Another attacker shouted, "you will die on your knees... Another man attempted to disarm me of my baton, and again we wrestled for control. He kicked me in my chest as we went to the ground. I was able to retain my baton again, but I ended up on my hands and knees and blind. The medical mask I was wearing at the time to protect myself from the corona virus was pulled up over my eyes so I couldn't see. I braced myself against the impact of their blows and feared the worst (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Officer Hodges offered in his testimony,

A new man came to the front and fixated on me, continually berating me, telling me to take off my gear and give it to him to show solidarity with "we the people," or "we are going to run over you." His voice cracked with the strain and the volume of his threats. He continued, "Do you think your little peashooter guns are going to stop this crowd? No. We're going in that building (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Theme 3: Recovery from Trauma – Navigating the Post-Insurrection Landscape:

Three of the officers voiced the trauma and the difficulties recovering from events at the Capitol. Officer Dunn's testimony began with a request for moments of silence for:

My fallen colleague, Officer Brian Sicknick, who died from injuries he sustained in the line of duty defending the Capitol of our beloved democracy... From my first-hand experience as a Capitol Police Officer directly involved in those events, I am still hurting from what happened that day... [An assailant stated] You hear that,

guys? This nigger voted for Joe Bidden... then the crowd, perhaps twenty people, joined in screaming, Boo, fucking nigger." No one had ever called me a nigger while wearing the uniform of a Capitol Police Officer." In the days following the attempted insurrection, other Black officers shared their stories of racial abuse on January 6th. One officer told me he had been confronted by insurrectionist in the Capitol who told him, "put your gun down and we'll show you what kind of nigger you really are (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Officer Dunn is his testimony added,

As the afternoon wore on, I was completely drained, both physically and emotionally, and in shock and in total disbelief over what happened. The violence, destruction, and chaos we saw earlier was unacceptable, undemocratic, and un-American. It was the saddest day I have ever had in serving this institution. More than six months later, January 6th still isn't over for me. I've had to avail myself of multiple counseling sessions from the Capitol Police Employee Assistance Program, and I am now receiving private counseling therapy for the persistent emotional trauma of that day. I've also participated in many peer support programs with fellow law enforcement officers from around the United States (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Theme 4: Betrayal by Congressional Authorities – Institutional Disillusionment:

Some statements suggest a deep sense of abandonment by those in power. Officers expressed betrayal by Congressional legislators who did not provide the level of support anticipated by protecting police. For example, Officer Fanone in his testimony exclaimed:

I feel like I went to hell and back to protect them and the people in this room, but too many are now telling me that hell doesn't exist or that hell wasn't that bad! What makes the struggle harder and more painful is to know that many of my fellow citizens, including so many of the people I put my life at risk to defend, are down-playing or outright denying what happened. ... Nothing, truly nothing has prepared me to address those elected Members of our Government who continue to deny the events of that day and in doing so, betray their oath of office – those very members whose lives, offices, staff members, I was fighting so desperately to defend (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021).

Officer Dunn noted that the attackers were trying to overturn the election results and bring harm to the institution he had sworn to protect. He felt betrayed by lawmakers who stoked violence and subsequently made fraudulent claims about the election.

We can never again allow our democracy to be put in peril as it was on January 6th." (U.S. House Select Committee, 2021)

Officer Gonell spoke about the lack of support from political leaders, some of which he sacrificed his own life to protect against protestors. Many legislators failed to acknowledge the toll the attack had on law enforcement officials.

As an immigrant to the United States, I'm especially proud to defend the U.S. Constitution and our democracy on January 6th. I hope everyone in a position of authority in our country has the courage and conviction to do their part by investigating what happened on that terrible day and why.(U.S. House Select Committee, 2021)

CONCLUSION

These narratives of Officers Gonell, Fanone, Hodges and Dunn offer more than personal reflections, rather they constitute a collective indictment of institutional failure and plea for reckoning. Their experiences reveal how trauma is not confined to physical injury but extends into the psychological and ethical domains, where political leadership and racialized abuse can compound harm.

The officers' testimonies illuminate concepts of moral injury, wherein deeply held beliefs about duty, justice and integrity are engrained in law enforcement ethos from the first day of basic training. Transpose protection and career service to democratic ideals to catcalls of being a traitor. This insidious form of mental harassment transformed these and other law enforcement personnel into bouts of trauma and PTSD. Recollections of abandonment were echoed from the same individuals these officers are dedicated to defend. Additionally, the racialized violence endured by Black officers further underscores the intersectional nature of harm, which demands therapeutic responses.

Recovery as described by these officers is ongoing and uneven. Restoration requires counseling and mental health services, but also public acknowledgement, political accountability, and cultural transformation. Their testimonies challenge us to reimagine law enforcement not as a monolith of authority, but as a human vulnerable body of human being inseparable from the health of our democracy.

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Role of the Researcher

As a qualitative African American male sis gendered researcher, I acknowledge that my prior years in law enforcement could influence some perspective aspects of the research. In the best of intent, I approach these topics with a neutral and empathic stance, while acknowledging first-hand experiences of the trauma experienced by law enforcement. With the stated potential of occupational bias, I remain evermore mindful of ethical considerations in all aspects of the study. In this regard, officer and participant voices are captured so that accuracy is maintained in a non-judgmental manner. Further, I am aware of the emotional impact that this event had on matters of race. For example, law enforcement responses to George Floyd's death and other social injustice matters were handled much differently than January 6th protests at the U.S. Capitol.