

Reprinted from *Law Enforcement Suicide Prevention* toolkit.

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Police Suicide: An Executive's Perspective

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Abstract: *Over the last 20 years, as researchers, police administrators and psychologists have focused on the phenomenon of police stress; much of our effort has dealt with its negative manifestations: heart attacks, cardiovascular disease, premature death, digestive disturbances, ulcers, divorce and substance abuse. By its nature, police suicide has been the subject of particular interest. That police suicide is a concern in law enforcement circles is not an issue. What remains a question, however, is the magnitude of the problem and an appropriate and effective response from both the profession and individual agencies.*

INTRODUCTION

The literature adequately details many of the reasons for our inability to assess the extent of police suicide (see, for instance, Violanti, 1996 and Baker and Baker, 1996). In an effort to protect officers, their families and their department, many suicides are, in all probability, misclassified, under reported or, in fact, never reported. Some deaths may not be attributed to suicide absent clear and convincing evidence, while others may be attributed to police action; often of a heroic, albeit reckless, nature. Data, including speculation about causation, are contradictory. Unlike the issue of law enforcement officers killed and assaulted, no national reporting requirements exist. Taking all these issues into account, we as a profession can only speculate about the true frequency of the phenomenon and how we compare to other professions and demographic groups reflective of the makeup of our workforce. Yet the bottom line for those in the police organization is clear. One death because we do not understand the problem, have not intervened, or have failed to successfully prepare an officer, is unacceptable.

ISSUES

The national conference, which led to the publication of this compendium, has clearly identified a number of the issues associated with police suicide. As police executives review the material, however, it is critical that they analyze and reflect upon its usefulness in stress management and suicide prevention within their individual agencies. Key, of course, is the identification of warning signs that indicate the possibility of suicide and, perhaps more important, the creation of an environment suitable for effectively dealing with and helping officers who are experiencing problems.

Management's response to the issues of stress and suicide sets the tone for the agency. It is this management approach that allows members of a law enforcement agency to feel that they can openly and honestly deal with problems or, to the contrary, can close down the officer's response and willingness to seek help. For the executive, then, it is critically important to recognize that stress is an issue in law enforcement. Some officers reach such a point of desperation that the only resolution appears to be suicide. An effective agency deals with the problems of its employees.

It is the executive who fosters the feelings about what is right and what is wrong within our profession and the agency and about what acceptable conduct is and what cannot be tolerated. We recognize that police suicide frequently occurs because officers believe that they are facing insurmountable, unsolvable problems. Many times, those problems center on illegal, immoral, or inappropriate conduct. The conduct itself may, to that officer, signal a far deeper issue than that about which he faces serious consequences. As FBI former Special Agent Bill Hagmaier noted, "our officers are proud. They can handle their own guilt; they can't handle the shame" of their actions."

We as administrators define that shame, which may often include the stigma associated with one's inability to handle problems and the act, attempted act, or even thoughts of suicide. While we recognize that there are other professions that are as physically and emotionally dangerous as law enforcement, we also must recognize that there are factors unique to our environment that impact the ability of officers to successfully reflect on and

report feelings that can lead to suicide. In many agencies, officers distrust their administration and feel that their bosses do not care. Too often, we as executives send out mixed messages, encouraging officers to report situations in which they or their fellow officers are at an emotional crisis point, but then punishing those who do, removing them from routine duty, assigning them to a “rubber gun” squad and taking away their firearms and, more traumatically, their badge. It is easy to understand some of the issues for law enforcement officers about suicide. The heart of our very self concept identifies us as action-oriented people who are problem solvers. We do not – perhaps cannot – perceive ourselves as individuals who have problems and consequently, when we find ourselves in our own personal crisis situations, we do not recognize or know how to handle them correctly. It is at that time that the perception of hopelessness and the belief that we have no other way out becomes most pronounced.

An additional issue that must be confronted centers around the use of mental health resources to assist police officers experiencing difficulties. It would appear that many officers distrust mental health professionals, doubt their sincerity and understanding of a law enforcement officer’s job and believe that they are a pipeline of privileged information back to the departmental administration. Any successful intervention program requires us to successfully overcome such perceptions and expressed feelings, or the program will fail.

IDENTIFYING WARNING SIGNS

There are, of course, a number of behaviors which normally serve as warning signs for any officer under extreme stress, including:

- a sudden and extreme change in personality, for example, the gregarious officer who literally overnight becomes sullen and withdrawn;
- an increase in on-duty accidents or worker compensation claims;
- an increase in citizen complaints;
- an increase in complaints by fellow officers and
- expressed feelings of sexual inadequacy, impotence, or dysfunction.

There are still other behaviors that may telegraph suicidal feelings and of which we should be aware. Those officers reflecting prolonged grief or depression; those who give away their most important possessions, discuss plans for their funeral, or write wills; those who face the anniversary of a significant emotional event (either professional or personal); those who openly express hopelessness or helplessness; or those who disconnect or isolate themselves from family, friends and colleagues. Similarly, there are clear personal circumstances that also should raise a red flag to the executive: upheaval in an officer’s personal relationships; pronounced alcohol or substance abuse; a major internal or criminal investigation, which could result in arrest, termination, or severe disciplinary action; a history of psychological problems; or pronounced or perceived financial difficulty.

Are any of these behaviors clear and definitive expressions of an officer who is suicidal? No. Collectively, do they flag issues about which we should be aware and concerned? Undoubtedly. As police executives, it is imperative we both recognize and have a plan of action to handle the potential damage of such personal problems.

DEALING WITH SUICIDE

If we are to effectively deal with the issue of police suicide, we as executives must clearly face several issues within our organization. First, we must recognize that the organizational culture, from the chief executive on down, is what encourages our personnel to successfully deal with problems. The formal and informal tenets of the organization must support the recognition of officer problems and a willingness to effectively deal with those problems. For us as administrators, it is critical that we temper the need for firm management with an appropriate level of compassion and commitment to our personnel. It is equally important that we identify and minimize management and organizational practices that magnify, rather than mitigate, officer stress and the potential for extreme stress-related behaviors (see, for instance, Ayres, 1990, for a more detailed discussion of

organizational issues and responses). If there is a “bottom line,” it is that we must look upon good management practices and stress management programs as an investment in the organization and our personnel.

Within this context, we can no longer deny the problem. For too long, we as administrators and senior officers have told our folks, “if you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen”. The reality for us is that, especially in the midst of the impact of Generation X on our profession, the ability of an individual to handle stress depends on a number of things: the severity and intensity of the stressor, how frequently it occurs and, most important, our pre-stress preparation. Too frequently, however, we as executives fail to prepare our personnel to handle the stressors so unique to law enforcement and from which some of them will never recover. Is it any surprise our personnel have difficulty handling the stress associated with post-traumatic stress, emotional upheaval in their personal lives, or the interpersonal conflict unique to the police role?

As part of this, we in law enforcement must recognize our responsibility for each other. Remaining silent when another officer is in crisis can have deadly consequences. Especially as executives, we can neither afford to distance ourselves from our officers in time of crisis nor can we afford to send the message we simply do not care.

Police Culture

Changing the organizational culture also necessitates dealing with the stigmatization associated with seeking help. We cannot afford to penalize good officers who ask for help, nor can we afford to continue the reality of career ceilings, which have limited the potential of such officers in many agencies in the past. At the same time, however, we must acknowledge that, for some officers, it is in their and the department’s best interest to find a profession more suited for their personality, temperament and skills. Most important, we as executives must assure that personnel who are truly dangerous to themselves or others are promptly removed from police service.

Over the last several years, we have looked upon community policing as a “new way of doing business”. As we examine our interaction with the community and adopt a problem-solving approach to their problems, it is imperative that we also critically examine and challenge our internal mechanisms—how we deal with our personnel, how we intervene in their problems and how we prepare them to solve their own problems or know where to turn for help.

Training

A successful organizational response requires training. Not only must officers understand the issues, they must be able to recognize warning signs within themselves and their peers. As important, managers and supervisors must be able to identify the warning signs among their officers, understand methods by which successful intervention can occur and feel that their support of their personnel is both applauded and encouraged by agency executives; as is the case in every other issue involving police performance, it is especially the first-line supervisors who are the organization’s “eyes and ears”.

Additionally, it is important that we educate our governing bodies and others involved in the criminal justice community—judges, attorneys and police psychologists—about the issues, circumstances and successful treatment of the stress that can result in suicide.

Most important, we must provide the same training, care and compassionate understanding to police families, who bear the brunt of their loved ones’ crises.

As part of our departmental response to suicide and stress management, we must recognize that it begins, literally, at the beginning of a police officer’s career. Too frequently, the signs indicative of an inability to handle stress can be recognized in an officer’s background—if we bother to do a comprehensive and accurate background investigation. Some of the same signs can occur during the officer’s field training and probationary periods—again, if we use those critical times to screen out those personnel who should not remain in law

enforcement. The tools to anticipate and manage the stress of our personnel exist today if we are willing to use them.

Employee Assistance

We must develop and implement effective employee assistance programs – programs which both offer practical assistance and can be used successfully by officers to deal with their problem. Programs that meet the true issues underlying the hopelessness leading to suicide: financial difficulties, interpersonal relationships, substance abuse and significant personal and professional trauma. Sadly, in spite of our knowledge about the impact of stress on officers, we must acknowledge that the presence of a formalized stress management program still does not appear common in all police agencies. Yet, the development of such a program is critical to the protection of our law enforcement professionals. The use of effective employee assistance programs, trained peer counselors, critical incident stress debriefings and coordinated programs of fitness and diet are necessary to the mitigation of the effects of stress and the prevention of its negative manifestations.

A comment about police psychological services is appropriate here. As we examine the mental health of our personnel, we must recognize the need to carefully bifurcate our efforts and the role of the “helpers.” On the one hand, it is important to use in-house or contract psychologists to perform pre-selection assessments, fitness for duty examinations and similar agency-controlled evaluations. On the other hand, to ensure a willingness of officers to seek assistance and assure both trust and confidentiality, separate psychological services, again by contract or through the department’s insurance carrier, should be provided to officers, as individuals. In both cases, however, an understanding of police agencies, the police role and the working personality of a police officer is necessary for the mental health professional to succeed.

Research

Finally, we must undertake an adequate study of the issue and fully understand the nature and extent of police suicide. A law enforcement officer who kills himself in the line of duty or as a result of “the job” is just as dead as a law enforcement officer who is killed by a “bad guy.” Too often, the death is just as preventable. As we attempt to understand this dangerous phenomenon, it is imperative that we develop a clearinghouse—perhaps within the Federal Bureau of Investigation or National Institute of Justice—that can assemble, analyze, assess and actively promulgate the facts surrounding this loss of police officer lives. It is critically important that we develop a national methodology by which we can identify and analyze those deaths, including among retired personnel and provide information to the living: our officers, our executives and their families. Perhaps nothing is more important in the understanding of the profession of law enforcement than the fact that we use our knowledge to become capable of assuring the protection of our own.

CONCLUSION

In summary, stress is an expected and acknowledged part of our law enforcement profession. In its most extreme form, especially when combined with an emotional crisis in an officer’s personal life, it can result in an officer committing suicide. It is incumbent upon each agency executive to understand the nature of such events, recognize potential warning signs and develop effective measures of intervention and mitigation in order to ensure a life-engendering organization and mentally healthy personnel.