

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**The Psychological Wellness of Police Officers:
A Pro-Active Approach**

**An Administrative Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research to examine is whether or not law enforcement agencies should become more pro-active in addressing the stress levels of police officers. This research will examine the need for police departments to implement periodic psychological wellness evaluations for its sworn personnel. This topic is extremely relevant to contemporary law enforcement because of the increasing negative effects of stress on today's police officers. It is a current requirement in the state of Texas that all police officers are required to pass a psychological pre-employment evaluation prior to employment, but there are no other requirements for any Texas peace officer to be psychologically tested at any other point during the officer's career. The pre-employment psychological screening is to determine if the officer candidate is mentally equipped to perform the duties of a police officer at that time. The relevance of improving methods to evaluate and give additional support to police officers who may be suffering from stress disorders throughout their career is absolutely critical.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included reviews of articles, books, and journals. Also conducted were survey document of 18 police supervisors, interviews with leading police psychologists, and a review by the president of a large police union organization. The legal issues both from the officer and psychologist perspective were also addressed through various statutes contained within the State of Texas Health and Safety Code.

The research discovered that periodic psychological testing is a logical step to identify potential stress related issues officer may be experiencing. The research fully

supported the need and benefits of implementing periodic psychological exams. The research will affirm and support that officer stress levels may and likely will increase as their careers move forward and their psychological wellness should be periodically evaluated.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to examine the need for periodic mandatory psychological wellness examinations for Texas peace officers. The current mandated practice of a psychological exam prior to employment serves only as a filter to eliminate police officer candidates with existing mental health conditions from the application process. The author's research will support the need for police departments to proactively address the psychological wellness of its officers by implementing some form of required mental health evaluations or wellness visits periodically as officers progress within their respective agencies.

This author is of the opinion that periodic mental health or wellness examinations would be beneficial both to law enforcement and to the community. The research will include a review of journals, books, articles, and information contained in both state and federal statutes. The methodology also includes interviews with practicing police psychologists and a survey of 18 police officers.

This topic seems to be more relevant today than ever before. In the United States, police officers have the third highest suicide rate among the studied 130 occupations (Brown, 1994). Research showed that self inflicted deaths by police officers are continually rising. More officers take their own lives than those that are lost in the line of duty. Sadly, it is more likely that an officer will take his own life than that his life will be taken by an assailant (Brown, 1994).

More recently, reporting California Highway Patrol officers are experiencing an increasing number of suicides within their ranks. Barrett (2007) reported that 13 cops, since 2003, at the nation's largest state police force, have killed themselves. Eight died

in 2006, which is five times the national rate for law enforcement. The likelihood of a sudden onset of coronary death is increased for those in the law enforcement field. Compared to civilian groups, officers, after 19 years of service, are 300% more likely to die from an unpredicted coronary death. The mortality rate for police officers is 66 years of age. The non-police mortality rate for private citizens is 77.8 years of age (Blum, 2000).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To fully understand the dynamics of police stress and why psychological wellness exams may be beneficial, first there must be an examination of some common causes of stress among police officers. According to Decker (2006), the most critical police stressors are an officer killing someone, an on duty death of a co-worker, and a physical attack. Also included in Decker's reports of critical stressors were battered children, high-speed chases, and incompatible partners. Decker goes on to include shift work, use of force, inadequate department support, and accidents in a patrol car as more of the critical causes of police stressors.

Some of the most recent research shows that officer stress levels appear to be broken down into four categories (Kroes, 1974). The first is external stress, which is related to negative public perception of the public toward the police and the fact that crime may continually be on the rise. A second category is organizational stress. This often relates to the lack of, or the excess of, stringent rules, policies, procedures or departmental guidelines. This category also includes poor schedules, long hours and poor supervision, or other organizational based stressors. Another category would be personal stressors, such as marital problems, alcoholism, and other health related

issues attributed to the daily stressors of their job. And lastly, general occupational stress addresses the fact that police work is dangerous, which is an accepted fact. It is the perception of attorneys, judges who reprimand law enforcement, and the general public who may be openly negative toward law enforcement that causes additional stress levels (Kroes, 1974). Officers often learn to cope with stress by detaching themselves emotionally. As time goes by, this detachment may become part of the officer's personality.

Contrary to public opinion, people who become police officers are not erratic brutes, but healthy normal, human beings. But in as little as three months, a police officer's performance, health, and home life may reflect the effects of negative community attitudes. The police officer may cope with the pressures by deadening all sensitivity and by avoiding involvement (Kroes, 1974). The stressors of police work are well documented, and it is a well accepted theory that officer stress does manifest itself in many negative ways. This being the case, it is necessary to answer what things are being done to address the problems and whether they successful, effective, and enough.

The most common trend recently in addressing mental health or stress seems to be support through Employee Assistance Programs. According to O'Connor (n.d.), the following historical trends were revealed. In the 1950's era, a supervisor would typically either refer the officer to a chaplain or a 12-step recovery program. More often than not, the problems were simply ignored, and the officer was assigned to a desk. The 1960 era brought about the use employee assistance person (EAP) officers. EAP officers typically had the option to refer an officer to an outside mental health professional. Also,

the EAP programs could, without any questions asked, allow the employee time off with pay or sick leave. In the 1970's, in house psychological services units began to be seen in some larger departments. The psychological unit served the department in many different ways. They were often asked to intervene in mediating personnel issues or work performance issues. They would also conduct open seminars and address stress related issues. Most importantly, they began the practice of debriefing sessions after major high stress incidents. In some cases, the unit might have still utilized contractors to address some issues.

Ministry programs became popular in the 1980s. Ministry programs were typically religion based programs. The groups were typically led by either a pastor or chaplain. Many utilized church sponsored retreats, which the officers would be encouraged to attend. Rarely were these programs the only programs offered, but they were a common option during this time period. And, finally, in the 1990s, critical incident stress debriefings were implemented. Critical incidents are most often thought of as life and death situations that would bring about some form of post traumatic stress. Incidents could be inclusive of but not limited to death of a child, line of duty deaths, suicide of a co-worker, failed rescue attempts, and on duty shootings. Normally, the onset of post traumatic stress symptoms will be seen within 24 to 48 hours of the incident. A mental health debriefing team should be prepared to respond immediately. A team would consist of a mental health professional or a member of clergy and two to three peer support personnel (O'Connor, n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not periodic mental health evaluations would be beneficial to law enforcement agencies as well as beneficial to law enforcement officers. The research hypothesizes that periodic psychological evaluations of police officers would be beneficial identifying officers that might be in need of some professional mental health services. The method of inquiry will include a review of articles, periodicals, literature, surveys of law enforcement personnel and personal interviews.

One instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the psychological wellness will be a police management survey. The survey will be administered to 18 law enforcement management personnel participants at the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas. Officers were from different ranks and from different size departments across the state of Texas. The survey will consist of four questions. The questions will be relative to what type of strategies or programs exist within their departments to address officer stress levels in addition to questions concerning how the officers themselves handled their individual stress. The information obtained from the survey will be used to analyze the need for police departments to become more pro-active in addressing stress levels of their police officers. One of the questions asked was whether the department offers any type of stress management training, and, if so, what kind of training it was. Respondents will also be asked about how they handle stress and whether they know any law enforcement officer who has committed or attempted to commit suicide. Lastly, they will be asked about what they consider their greatest daily stressor to be.

To gain more insight into current practices and recommendations on what may be the next best step, three personal interviews will be conducted. Two active police psychologists currently practicing in large metropolitan areas in the state of Texas and one active departmental police psychologist from a large California police agency will be interviewed. In addition, an interview will be conducted with a representative from the largest police union in the state of Texas. The question or discussion topic presented both to the departmental psychologists and the union official will be whether police departments should become more pro-active in addressing officer mental health issues by mandating periodic psychological reviews.

It will be discussed with all parties that the wellness exams would be private in nature and the psychologist would not report the findings back to the department. If the psychologist believes there were psychological issues or stress related issues that needed to be addressed, the psychologist would work as a referral service to the officer using existing mental health benefits.

FINDINGS

The implementation of mandatory psychological testing is a proactive first step in addressing the officer mental health issue. Both the psychologists and the union official interviewed revealed the obvious privacy issues that exist. In Texas, the privacy issues between the department and a patient are clearly defined in the Texas Public Safety Code Sections 611.03 and 611.04. In summary, the safety code states that all patient records and reports are private and can only be disclosed if it is required by law, if there is a probability that the patient will injure himself or someone else, or if there is a probability of immediate injury to the patient's mental health.

Both the psychologist and the union official agreed that if an officer did display behavior that presented itself in a way that the psychologist believed some imminent danger existed either for the patient or a third party, they would want to act immediately, both for the well being of the officer and the well being of innocent people. Intervention in this context would justify the existence of such a program. Getting immediate help to an officer must be a priority. The immediate help is the prevention aspect of a pro-active program. Without help or intervention, the consequences or risk continues.

The police psychologists interviewed affirmed the following. A wellness program would be beneficial in identifying police stress symptoms. Mental health should be a concern and pro-actively addressed, and the first visit could be beneficial in matching the police officer with the appropriate counselor or therapist. The suggested fee for such a visit would be \$100.00.

A high ranking Houston police union official contacted provided a verbal response. The purpose of the interview was to determine if police unions would resist mandatory psychological visits for its members. The official from CLEAT, Combined Law Enforcement Association of Texas, which is the largest active police union in the state of Texas, was very direct and insightful. The police union response stated that such a program makes sense and could be beneficial, but many safeguards must be put into place to protect officer members. There must be a highly regarded psychological services unit managing the program. The privacy issue must be appropriately addressed; whether something was criminal or civil in nature, privacy concerns exist. They would want to see privacy policies committed in writing and mutually agreed upon by the officer and the counselor or therapist. Also, they feel it

best the psychologist hold a doctoral degree to ensure a professional evaluation takes place. The final area mentioned was that they would like a thorough review of the laws or rules that compel a doctor to disclose medical information to an outside party.

In order to get a local assessment of the stress related problems facing Texas peace officers and how the departments may be dealing with the issue, an independent questionnaire was presented to a group of 18 Texas police supervisors of varying rank. The first question asked about the types of stress related training programs that were offered at the respondents' agencies. The results indicated that 14 of the 18 responding agencies offered no stress management training programs. The second part of the question asked respondents to identify any type of stress related programs that existed at their agencies. There were four common counseling programs listed for the departments. Post traumatic stress counseling was a common program and was offered at 11 of the participating agencies. Critical incident team counseling was also a common program, and it was also offered at 11 participating agencies. Chaplain services were offered at ten of the participating agencies, but the most common program was an employee assistance program, which was offered at 17 of the 18 responding agencies.

The survey also asked participants how they personally handle stress, and several indicated more than one method of handling stress. The most common method of handling stress was exercise. Nine respondents indicated exercise as a form of stress relief. The next most common method was isolation or the respondent preferring to be alone. Six respondents indicated interaction with peers or significant others as a stress reliever, and four respondents indicated they utilized reflection, prayer, or

meditation. No respondents indicated that they would seek professional counseling, and no respondents reported they would use either alcohol or drugs to handle stress.

The final survey question was whether the participant knew anyone in law enforcement who had committed suicide or who had attempted to commit suicide. Nine respondents indicated they knew an officer that had either committed suicide or had attempted suicide. Five of the nine who respondents knew more than one person with one respondent indicating five police officers he knew had been involved in a suicide incident. Perhaps the most revealing of all the responses was that zero respondents would seek professional counseling as a way of handling stress.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined is to determine whether law enforcement agencies need to take a more pro-active role in addressing the stress and mental well being of police officers. Law enforcement agencies have either been ineffective or have ignored the problem of job related stress for too long. If these proactive programs were made mandatory, officers would not be as reluctant to attend because they would know that all officers were required to go. Mandatory attendance removes the labeling by peers as being weak or unable to cope with the demands of the job. The failure to address stress can manifest itself in many ways, such as absenteeism, tardiness, low morale, labor management conflicts, adverse public reaction in regards to increase of citizen complaints (police brutality), and the abuse of alcohol and drugs (Finn, 2000).

The relevance of improving methods to evaluate and give support to police officers who may be suffering from stress disorders is absolutely critical. The law enforcement community should make the commitment in the 21st century to proactively

assist their officers in coping with stress. Departments must realize that police stress is both an individual problem as well as an organizational problem. Law enforcement agencies are typically reluctant to admit to shortcomings or problems within their organizations. Implementation of a proactive stress management program is a win-win situation for law enforcement agencies. The cost of starting a program is minimal compared to the cost of employee turnover, long term disability, civil suits, and early retirement. Police administrators must take the first step in showing their officers that the management cares and is willing to provide ongoing assistance. Outreach programs will pay long term benefits back to both the employer and the officer

Recognizing and discussing the problem is only a first step. The author was unable to locate one police agency, of the agencies surveyed, that mandates periodic psychological examinations. Employee assistance programs that are already in-place at many agencies provide the majority of the costs associated with implementing such a program. This author plans to monitor the progress of the Los Angeles Police Department to see if a program is implemented in that city. The author plans to be propose a wellness program through the agency he is currently employed. In addition, copies of this research will be made available to police chiefs in the Houston and surrounding area for their review and consideration.

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APPENDIX

Stress Management Survey

1. Does your department offer any type of stress management training?
(yes) (no)
2. Does your department participate in one of the following?
Post traumatic counseling – (yes) (no)
Critical incident team counseling – (yes) (no)
Chaplain Services (yes) (no)
Employee Assistance Program (yes) (no)
3. How do you personally handle stress? Circle One
Reflection, Prayer, Meditation, Exercise
Isolation, prefer to be alone
Seek professional counseling
Prescription Medications
Alcohol
Interact with peers or significant others
4. Do you know anyone in Law Enforcement who has committed suicide or attempted to commit suicide? (yes) (no). If more than one how many. ()

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey all results or confidential.

No signature is required.

Return to: Mike Raney, METRO Police Houston, 810 N. San Jacinto,
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