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Police Subculture and Suicide

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how the law enforcement subculture creates an environment favorable for police suicide. During the span of a career, police officers are generally exposed to traumatic events more often and more intensely than those in other occupations. Under such conditions, the probability of addiction to and residual effects of trauma increases. Lasting impact of trauma may be the result of separating from police service, diminishing stimulation from police activities, and loss of social support from a cohesive police culture. The law enforcement subculture and stress of the profession exists and always has existed in the police occupation. Dealing with the police subculture and the stress of the profession must begin with the officers and supervisors acknowledging that there is a problem. Once the step has been taken to acknowledge there is problem, steps must be taken to correct the problem. The elements that are unique to the law enforcement profession, including organization structure, occupational stressors, and the police subculture do create and environment favorable to police suicide and must be dealt with.

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INTRODUCTION

News stories relate heroic feats performed by simple people capable of superhuman acts born of courage and desperation when tragedy strikes. When life hangs in the balance, adrenaline pumps, hearts race, and human compassion reaches deep inside where selfless sacrifice lays dormant. Once the situation decreases, the physical reactions to the stress subside, the participants are praised, and life returns to normal. The human body is equipped with this fight or flight mechanism to enable us to handle emergency situations, and when the danger is over, the parasympathetic gland calms the nerves and restores the vital organs to a normal functional range.

This return to a normal range of physical function, though natural and necessary, is not available to the members of some occupations. Firemen are ever vigilant while on duty, waiting for the fire alarm to ring. Emergency medical technicians are ever aware that every action they perform may mean the difference between life and death for those who they care for. Similarly, law enforcement officers must be constantly on guard and as members of the front - line response for emergency situations, their adrenaline pumps overtime. Each call might be a crisis situation. Each crisis situation might be life threatening. Each life-threatening situation might end in the death of the officer or in the officer needing to take another life to defend his own. Reactions cannot be subdued pending an assessment of the situation; each call must be handled as a critical situation. Therefore, the adrenaline never stops, the heart never slows, and the stress never subsides.

Constant exposure to stress manifests itself in various ways. Physical symptoms may affect any or all parts of the body. Depression and psychoses may develop as the mind becomes overwhelmed with uncontrollable emotions. Without treatment, the combination can turn into

self-destructive behavior as the victim of the job-related stress seeks some way to ease the physical and emotional pain. A study conducted between 1944 and 1978 reported the suicide rate in the general population to be 11.3/100,000 or 1.4% of all deaths (Violanti, 1996). Janik (1994) found that the 1989 statistics showed the suicide death rate at 11.3/100,000, confirming the consistency of the data.

These surveys included all occupations, as well as the elderly, the unemployed, and mental patients. An occupational analysis shows no significant elevation in the suicide rate among fireman, emergency medical technicians, or other municipal workers who encounter long-term stressful situations. However, the suicide rate among law enforcement officers was found to be 334.7/100,000 and the rate increases to 2,616/100,000 when the target group is narrowed to officers who have been retired due to a disability (Violanti, 1996). Violanti goes on to explain that "one study of the Chicago Police Department estimated that as many as 67% of police suicides in that city had been mis-classified as accidental or natural deaths" (p. 20). Skolnick attributes this falsification of data to the police officer's "working personality" which portrays a perception of invulnerability that views suicide as disgraceful to the victim officer and the police profession (p.15). This perception may also prevent officers from seeking necessary psychological help. An analysis of the structure and expectations of the unique police subculture exposes many of the factors, which contribute to police suicide.

This research is intended to show how the elements, which are unique to the law enforcement field, including organizational structure, occupational stresses, and the police subculture, create an environment that is favorable to police suicide. This will be shown through literature reviews, confidential research survey, personal interviews and personal experience.

Law enforcement personnel will benefit from this research by becoming aware of the issues related to job stress and police officer suicides.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Law enforcement agencies in the United States are based on a military model. The challenges of budget constraints, personnel shortages, and overpopulation in cities has created an atmosphere where policing is re-active, rather than pro-active. Officers on the front- line of policing are not involved in prevention, but are involved in solving crimes that have already happened. They are not able to meet and work with citizens in a positive manner. Daily interactions with the public are not positive in nature. Because of the increasingly negative perception of law enforcement officers, citizens learn to view law enforcement as the enemy.

Police Officers train in a manner is very similar to firemen and other public safety officials. All are given intensive instruction in tactics, the care and use of weapons or equipment, and life- saving readiness. The physical demands and psychological edge needed to perform these jobs are remarkably similar, but there remains one outstanding difference.

The difference is that the fire service objective is to save lives and extinguish fires. Members of the fire service are viewed as heroes by society. Firemen and women mix into society freely without fear that their job may require them to take action against those citizens with whom they have established relationships.

Unfortunately, the opposite is true for law enforcement officers, whose training will be used for or against fellow citizens, neighbors, and persons contacted face to face. The nature of the job gives no guarantee that the next arrest won't be a friend, relative, or possibly a co-worker. Spouses and children of police officers are at risk of retribution from criminal elements. Constant vigilance at work and at home is the police officer's only alternative. However,

according to the Central Florida Police Stress Unit, "police officers are eight times more likely to die by their own hand than by homicide" (p. 1). In essence, the police officer becomes his own worst enemy.

The uniqueness of the police role, combined with a lack of social acceptance and the need for constant vigilance, creates an existence for the police officer, which excludes persons, activities, and social events not related to the police subculture. Social outlets begin to revolve around activities with other officers. Socialization with persons outside of the police community is limited because of the demands and risks of the job, and very quickly the job becomes an entire lifestyle. Shift-work creates an environment that is detrimental to alternative activities, including sports, social events, and family activities. Additionally, the necessity to work varying shifts creates an imbalance in the internal body clock and adds stress to the nervous system. In some instances, the officer's own family is excluded because of the perception that they could not possibly understand the world the police officer exists in. Police officers attempt to protect loved ones from the detrimental effects of the reality of police work. For the most part, such exclusions only create barriers that may lead to the breakdown of the family unit. Police marriages experience divorce rates of 60 to 75%, up to 25% higher than the national average. (Goldfarb 2). Although the marital difficulties were not as significant in the rate of attempted suicide (48%) as work related problems and suspensions (6.7%), and the lack of marital difficulties. For instance, according to Janik, "a supportive family can buffer and diminish the occupational stresses that a police officer experiences" (p. 272).

While the statistical average of police suicides is much higher than that of the general public, that average exposes a notable increase experienced among older officers and those officers facing suspension. The loss of the subculture that has become their world appears to be

a very large motivational influence. The National Fraternal Order of Police is conducting an

ongoing study to attempt to isolate causes and identify preventions to police suicide. The study

conducted includes a variety of departments representing different types, styles, and sizes. The

study has found that suicide accounted for 37% of police officers deaths. According to Violanti

(1996), homicide was second with 26%, motor vehicle accidents accounted for 26%, and other

accidents accounted for 11%. The largest number of suicides was experienced around the age of

55 and the average age was 49.7. Guns were the method of choice in 95% of police suicides.

According to Violanti (1995), the choice of the officer's service weapon appears to be

important. Browning discovered that 10% of the firearms used in police suicides were purchased

for that reason alone, while 90% of police suicides involved the officer's service weapon. A

study comparing police suicides in New York City to those in London found that New York

officers committed suicide twice as often as the general population while officers in London was

very comparable to the general public. The difference seems to be that officers in London do not

carry lethal weapons.

Officers in the United States are required to carry a weapon, and in most cases, are

required to carry that weapon while off duty. The service weapon is not only representative of

the officer's status in the community; it is an instrument to be used as a last resort in

unresolvable conflicts. In the case of police suicides, the officer's weapon serves just that

purpose. It ends the internal emotional pain of social segregation, lack of extra occupational

recreation, and the pressure from super- human expectations placed on very human officers.

Rather than admit the problems and personal hell the officer is experiencing, the officer opts to

end his or her own life. The Central Florida Police Stress Unit said, "Suicide is often an

impulsive act, and the handgun at the officer's side is guaranteed to be lethal in the hands of an experienced shooter" (p. 1).

METHODOLGY

The research method of inquiry used for this paper included personal interviews, various literature, and confidential surveys. The literature that I chose for this research was explicit to the police subculture and officer suicide. The literature included topics such as how the stress of the police subculture affects an officer and how the job-related stress can lead to suicide.

The confidential surveys were distributed to various law enforcement officers through out the State of Texas. Making the surveys confidential made it possible to acquire more truthful responses from the officers who participated in the survey. It was my objective to solicit responses from those who had been affected by knowing an officer who had committed suicide and the reason why. The officers who responded to the survey had a broad range of experience in law enforcement.

FINDINGS

Suicide in law enforcement is a problem that everyone inside and outside of law enforcement agrees needs to be addressed. Experts agree that the reported incidences of suicide in law enforcement are much higher than the general population. Most law enforcement who commit suicide have emotional and psychosocial problems that can be readily treated by counseling and medications. However, in order for police officers to receive the help they need, law enforcement management needs to be aware of who needs the help.

Most police officers see more traumatic situations in a few years than many people see in an entire lifetime. The threat of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is high and there is no way to tell if an officer is going to be one of the lucky ones who finds a way to deal with the stress or one of

the ones who will fall into the category of having the potential for depression. Law enforcement officers are never invited into the happy occasions; they see people at the worst times: domestic violence, shootings, and stabbings. It is hard not to become hardened by it. Many times law enforcement officers take the stress of their work home with them. They take care of everybody's problem while on duty and then all of a sudden they have problems of their own that need to be dealt with when off duty.

Unfortunately, there is a code of silence on both sides; the rank and file officers and the management. Neither side likes to talk about suicide. Departments are not willing to admit that suicide is a problem. Most police suicides are misclassified as accidents or undetermined further denying that suicide in the law enforcement profession is a problem. The silence is something that needs to be broken in order for officers to get help.

Numerous law enforcement officers in Texas participated in this research. The experience of the officers ranged any where from zero to 20 plus years. Ten percent of the officers that responded had less than five years of experience. Thirty five percent of the officers had 10-15 years of experience. Fifteen percent had 15-20 years of experience, and 35% of the officers who responded had 20 plus years.

There was an overwhelming response of 50% from the participants who had a friend in the law enforcement profession commit or attempt suicide. Those respondents who said they did have friends in the law enforcement profession commit or attempt suicide contributed the reasons to personal problems, health problems and even criminal charges. Sixty percent of the respondents stated they do have five or more friends outside of the law enforcement profession. An overwhelming 65% of the respondents stated they have not lost any friends due to becoming a law enforcement officer. An unsurprisingly 90% of the respondents stated they know people in

the law enforcement profession that have divorced their spouse because of their job. Seventy

five percent stated they have received formal training dealing with stress management or critical

incident debriefing prior to attending L.E.M.I.T. Another 75% stated the administrators in their

departments have had some type of formal training involving stress management or critical

incident debriefing. Seventy percent also stated the city or department they work for does offer

an Employee Assistance Program (E.A.P.). Eighty five percent of the respondents said the

department they work for does offer some type of critical incident debriefing after a critical

incident. Ninety percent of the respondents also believe that police academies should teach new

recruits about stress management and critical incident debriefing. There were varies responses to

the last question in the survey. The following are the responses to the question of how often, if

at all, does you department rotate shifts; multiple departments rotate every three month, some

with every 28 days, others every quarter, several every six months and some all the time due to

inadequate staffing.

CONCLUSIONS

Admitting that suicide is a danger for law enforcement personnel by administrators in the

police force can send a strong signal, and help encourage officers to get the help they so

desperately need. It's an important step for departments to recognize the problem. It has to start

with the chief's office. I am a proponent of suicide awareness training, particularly at the recruit

level. Some departments and police academies are starting to teach stress management and

suicide awareness courses. New recruits need to be told what is going to happen to them, based

on what we know.

Until law enforcement management sends the message that getting treatment for a psychological or emotional problem is ok, officers are not likely to submit themselves to treatment even though they know they may be in trouble.

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