

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

Suicide Among Law Enforcement Professionals

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**By
Lee Delk**

**Trophy Club Police Department
Trophy Club, Texas
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ABSTRACT

Suicide among law enforcement professionals is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it is estimated that some 300 officers “eat their guns,” or use some other means, to end their lives each year (Weinblatt, 2006). Most executives do not want to address this issue because of the ‘not my officers’ mentality and the stigma behind officers that commit suicide. Agencies need to train their officers and command staff to recognize the signs of suicidal tendencies to prevent another tragedy from occurring.

The purpose of this research is to discuss the various issues surrounding suicide among law enforcement officers. What the root cause for officer suicide is and what needs to be done to prevent such tragedies from happening. With the statistic of 300 officers committing suicide each year, agencies need to establish policies and procedures to recognize the signs of suicidal tendencies as well as how to get the effected officer help.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of articles, Internet sites, and personal interviews with various agencies. It is the researcher’s hope that with the research, this paper will provide information to agencies about the importance of helping officers in need. It is also this researcher’s hope that the paper will provide some insight into the training needed to assist officers when the need arises.

The researcher discovered that, among other things, job related stress, family related stress, and the culture that exists in law enforcement are driving forces behind officers who commit suicide. It is concluded that the need to learn how to read the signs

and know how to provide the proper form of intervention is imperative for law enforcement professionals. Agencies teach their officers and command staff how to protect the general population, but training about how to protect one of their own is lacking.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem or issue to be examined considers whether or not the root cause of suicide among law enforcement professionals is stress. Agencies have the tools and training to recognize the symptoms of suicidal tendencies among their peers, and there are several actions that can be taken to prevent suicide among officers. The relevance of suicide among law enforcement professionals is the need for agencies to recognize that there is a problem. Goldfarb (n.d.) stated that between 1934 and 1960, police suicide rates were half that of the general population. Between 1980 and the present, suicide rates in some departments approach almost double. This is an alarming trend that not only affects agencies that have had to deal with officer suicides, but law enforcement agencies nationwide. Agencies not only have a moral obligation to intervene when necessary, they also have a vested interest in that officer.

The purpose of this research is to examine what causes suicide among law enforcement professionals and to raise awareness among officers and supervisors so tragedies of this sort can be prevented. Violanti (2008) provided some examples of general indicators for increased risk of suicide. Recent stress, including daily hassles, life events, and traumatic events, can cause officers to have suicidal thoughts. Examples of recent stress could be a recent job loss, divorce or relationship issues, or illness. Traumatic events, such as 9/11, the Oklahoma Federal Building Bombing, or natural disasters where officers witnessed the events firsthand, can result in suicidal thoughts or tendencies.

The research question to be examined focuses on whether or not agencies have the proper training and resources available to them so that they may intervene.

Agencies need to provide a social support system within the department as an avenue of help. A good working knowledge of the risk factors can only be learned with proper training. The intended method of inquiry includes: a review of articles, internet sites, and personal interviews with various agencies. The researcher hopes to discover that agencies are recognizing the need for recognition and prevention training regarding suicide. The researcher intends to use the various methods to show how important an issue this is and what can be done to prevent officer suicide.

The intended outcome or anticipated findings of the research should indicate that suicide among law enforcement professionals is an alarming trend, and agencies need to be properly trained. It is also recommended that agencies make the necessary resources available to their officers and command so they will know where to obtain help to prevent a tragedy of this sort from happening. The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research because suicide among law enforcement officers is a national problem. Law enforcement suicide not only affects the agency involved, but the lives of the officer's family, friends, and peers. It is the researcher's hope that agencies will use these findings to start a program of prevention or look at their existing one and see if improvements need to be made.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of literature indicates that stress is the leading cause of suicide among law enforcement professionals; however, a number of reasons can cause stress: legal, relationship, and work related issues are among the areas that cause stress for officers. In a study by Aamodt and Stalnaker (2006), they found that relationship problems

accounted for 26.6% of officer suicide, and legal problems accounted for 14.8% of suicides.

During 1994, a record 11 New York City police officers committed suicide compared to only two officers killed by criminals that year. One research study found the suicide rate among police officers was three times higher than that of the general public. In addition, an unpublished research report recently found that the police suicide rate now has doubled (Baker & Baker, 1996).

According to Goldfarb (n.d.), the root cause of suicide among law enforcement professionals is stress. Stress is defined as a strain or a force that strains or deforms a mental or physical tension. Police work, by its very nature, is stressful. Agencies and the general public rely on an officer to use restraint. Restraint that is used on a daily basis can be extremely draining physically, psychologically, and emotionally. In this day and time, officers are forced to use greater restraint. With the use of video cameras in cars, citizens playing the role of reporters, and the increasing popularity of camera and video phones, officers have to be careful how they act in all situations, both on duty and off.

There is help for officers when they become overly stressed. First and foremost, agencies must learn how to recognize the signs of an officer who is overly stressed. People will feel stress at some point in their lives, both personal and professional, but how that stress is dealt with could mean the difference between surviving and living a normal life and falling over the edge and feeling there is no other way out but suicide.

It is no secret that there is a thin line that officers and agencies never cross, which is the line of getting involved in personal business with other officers, but even when they do get involved in others' personal business, the outcome can still lead to tragedy.

On January 4, 2008, seven-year Milwaukee police veteran Denise Schultz, who had been released to return to work after a medical leave for depression, died. Her death was ruled a suicide. Her ex-boyfriend found her lying in bed with a single gunshot wound to the head. He had received two text messages from her earlier that day. The first one said, "This is for you and because of you." The second one simply read "Bye." Milwaukee Police had two other police suicides since September of 2007 and Schultz' was the sixth in less than three years (Kissinger, 2008).

The Milwaukee police decided it was time to do about this alarming statistic. According to Dave Arndt, an officer with Milwaukee Police Department, he and his partner, Tina Kurth, conducted hour-long sessions on suicide prevention for all officers and administrators. Although there are no numbers as of this writing to measure if the sessions were successful, then Police Chief Nannette Hegerty and the current Police Chief Edward Flynn fully supported the training (Kissinger, 2008).

In March 2007, ten months before Officer Schultz killed herself, Milwaukee police Sergeant Chick Cross almost ended his life. If not for his girlfriend calling his fellow officers to check on him, he would have been dead. His agency chose to fire him for disorderly conduct while armed. During this time frame, the Milwaukee Police Department had no idea how to handle this sort of situation. It was not until after six suicides in three years that they began providing suicide awareness training. Since the training began in early 2008, they have had two more officer suicides (Antlfinger, 2008).

Experts estimate that 2% to 10% of the 18,000 departments nationwide actively work to prevent suicide in their ranks (Antlfinger, 2008). Agencies need to face the reality of officer suicides and train their personnel on how to recognize the signs of

suicidal tendencies. Stress is the biggest factor in officer suicide. Goldfarb (n.d.) stated the biggest stressor among officers is killing someone in the line of duty. Other stressors can include having a partner killed in the line of duty or a lack of support from departments and bosses. Shift work, the disruption of family time/rituals, and the daily pressure of dealing with the public can also be stressors among officers.

Research has shown that there are numerous factors related to stress. Goldfarb (n.d.) list the four most common factors, which include divorce; alcohol, not alcoholism, used to obtain the courage to commit the act; depression; and a failure to get help. The last one is the most alarming and can be prevented with the proper training.

When an officer commits suicide, the agency that officer belonged to can expect morale issues among the surviving officers. Some, if not all, can feel some type of guilt, remorse, and disillusionment (Violanti, 2008). Violanti (2008) also suggested there are some general indicators found to be associated with increased risk of suicide, such as age, race, sex, psychiatric symptoms, stress, prior suicidal thoughts and/or attempts, and available resources. Male officers that are 50 years and older are at highest risk, and females of any age are at the lowest risk. Caucasian males have the highest suicide rate of all demographic groups (Violanti, 2008).

The researcher discovered that the main reason for officer suicide is stress. It was also determined there is a lack of support, training, and help made available to officers who feel overwhelmed with the stress. Without the proper training and support, officers that become overwhelmed with stress will have nowhere to turn for help.

Miller (2007) stated there are two primary qualities that almost all officers endorse. These qualities are self-reliance and perfectionism. Officers come to believe

that they should be able to handle most situations with a minimum of help, and a long record of success can be undone by a single mistake.

Through research, it was discovered that depression is another cause of suicide. Depression is common among most people due to a natural reaction to trauma, loss, death, or major change. It is when that depression lasts two or more weeks that it becomes a problem. During that two-week period, the person will suffer a loss of interest as well as have difficulty concentrating and have weight loss or gain (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education [TCLEOSE], 2005).

A sign of major depression is poor concentration or difficulty making decisions. Making good, sound decisions is a major part of an officer's job, and when they cannot make these good decisions, it will cause job performance issues. The researcher discovered that job performance issues related to stress and depression included things like lack of productivity, increase in complaints against the officer, attitude towards peers and supervisors, etc. (TCLEOSE, 2005)

According to Violanti (2008), researchers suggested that suicide prevention efforts focus on identifying factors that can be changed as well as knowledge and identification of risk factors and attitudes towards seeking help with personal problems. Violanti (2008) suggested various areas, or models, in preventing police suicide. Some of these are conducting a psychological assessment, tracking high-risk officers, family involvement, training and stress awareness.

METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not agencies can recognize the signs of stress among their officers with the proper training and

assistance. Agencies will learn how to deal with officers who are overly stressed and need help before it is too late. Officers, in turn, will learn how to recognize when they are stressed out and what to do if they feel they are past the point of no return.

The researcher hypothesizes that most agencies do not train their personnel in suicide prevention. The researcher also hypothesizes that cities or towns do not offer any type of assistance programs for officers who recognize the need for intervention. It is the intention of the researcher to provide information about law enforcement suicide as well as the steps needed to be taken to prevent such occurrences from happening.

The method of inquiry will include a review of articles. Internet sites relating to law enforcement stress and suicides will be studied. Surveys will be distributed among various law enforcement agencies in the Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) metroplex. The surveys will be specific to training and recognizing the signs of a potential law enforcement suicide as well as the help that may be provided.

The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of suicide among law enforcement professionals will include personal interviews relating to training and assistance provided by the agencies and/or their cities/towns for officers that need intervention, whether or not the surveyed agencies provide training relating to law enforcement suicide. There is also a written survey to discover what DFW metroplex agencies provide to officers in the form of training and support.

The survey will consist of two questions that will be asked to ten survey participants from the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex. Question one will be a two-part question. Part one will ask participants if their respective agency provides any form of

training that teaches them how to recognize the signs of suicidal tendencies. If it does, part two will ask what form of training is provided. Question two will ask participants if their respective agency and/or city/town provided any outside assistance for those officers in need.

The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in all agencies providing answers to the questions. Although not surprising, it was alarming to learn agencies relied on the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education's Critical Incident Training as their only source of training for this topic. Although this is a good source of training, it is geared toward the general population and does not touch on depression, stress, and suicide among law enforcement.

The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by police chiefs and city managers for the purpose of a needs assessment. The needs assessment should be conducted to find out whether intervention training and assistance is needed in their agency. The needs assessment should also touch on the policies of the agency and how they can be written to protect the officers when assistance is requested.

FINDINGS

The researcher conducted a formal survey of various agencies in the DFW Metroplex. The survey was done in an anonymous fashion. The only identifying factor in the questionnaire was the name and size of the department. The questions asked were specifically related to awareness training and programs that offer assistance for officers about suicide. Ten agencies, ranging from small to mid-sized, were surveyed. Of the ten surveyed, all of them reported no type of in-house formal training for recognizing the signs of stress and suicidal thoughts. They all relied on the Texas Commission on Law

Enforcement Standards and Education required Critical Incident Training (CIT) for their officers. In relation to any assistance offered to their officers, seven agencies offered Employee Assistance Programs through their respective Human Resources department, while three had none.

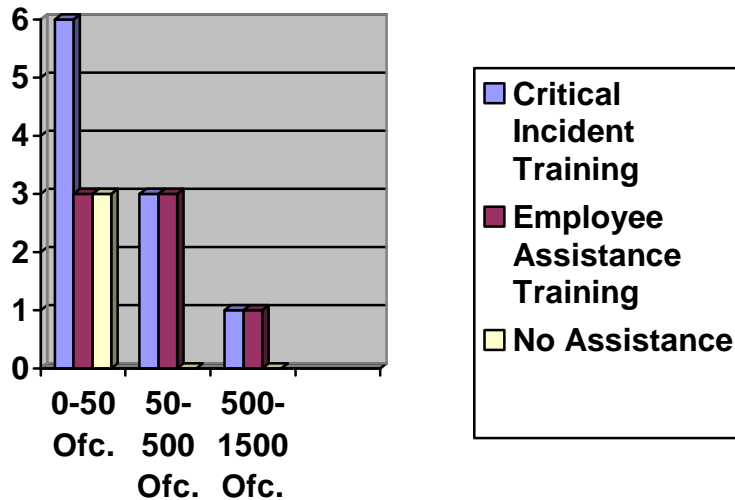


Figure 1: Type of training or assistance provided for different sized agencies.

During conversations with officers from ten different agencies, the researcher discovered that most agencies have the cavalier attitude that it will not happen to them; therefore, they do not see the need to train officers in this area. One agency's chief stated that he relies on supervisors to recognize the signs and to get that officer help when needed. A common response from agencies was that they rely on supervisors to recognize the need for intervention.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not the root cause of suicide among law enforcement professionals is stress. Agencies should have the tools and training to recognize the symptoms of suicidal tendencies among

their peers. Without the proper training and assistance, agencies are doing their officers a disservice that could cost them in the long run. The purpose of this research was to make agencies aware that this is a real problem that needs to be addressed at the agency level. Administrations should carry the brunt of the responsibility, but the problem will never be fixed if all officers do not get involved.

The research question that was examined focused on whether or not agencies had a resource they could turn to for assistance in obtaining help for officers that exhibit the signs of stress and potential suicidal tendencies. It also examined if agencies conducted any formal training for their department that would teach officers and staff how to recognize the signs and how to intervene when they felt it necessary. The training should be designed as law enforcement specific and should be given to line officers and executive level officers together.

The researcher hypothesized that agencies, in fact, did have a formalized training source that taught how to recognize the signs of stress and suicidal tendencies and how to intervene. The problem with the current training is that it is not law enforcement specific. The researcher also hypothesized that agencies had a resource they could turn to for assistance when needed.

The researcher concluded from the findings that most agencies did not have any form of specialized training on this issue. The training offered is a Basic Critical Incident Training session that the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education requires all Texas peace officers to take. The research also indicated agencies did have a resource they could turn to for assistance. Most of the agencies

surveyed relied on their respective town/city Employee Assistance Program as their source for outside help.

The findings of the research did and did not support the hypothesis. The hypothesis was supported in that agencies surveyed offered no specialized training towards officer suicide prevention. The agencies surveyed relied on the mandated Critical Incident Training offered by the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education. The research did not support the hypothesis relating to assistance offered. The agencies surveyed all had some form of assistance available to personnel. The assistance offered by all agencies was their cities respective Employee Assistance Program.

Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because of the lack of good information relating to this issue. The researcher also feels some limitations were due to the small geographical area the survey was conducted. Most agencies do not report officer suicides in their department (Kissinger, 2008), thereby resulting in a less than accurate count of the real numbers.

The study of suicide among law enforcement professionals is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it is a problem that not only affects agencies that have to suffer through it, but law enforcement as a whole. Law enforcement is a calling that provides a special bond within the ranks. When officers take their own lives, it makes an impact on all officers. It is for this reason agencies need to provide specific training that teaches their personnel how to recognize the signs of a potential suicidal officer as well as how to handle the situation when the need arises.

Agencies in Texas, as well as across the nation, stand to benefit from the results of this research. With proper training suicide among law enforcement professionals can be curbed. While suicide may never be stopped, if only one officer's life is saved due to an agency employing intervention and assistance, law enforcement as a whole will benefit.

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<http://www.policestress.org/suicide.htm>

APPENDIX

SUICIDE AMONG LAW ENFORCEMENT PROFESSIONALS AGENCY SURVEY

Agency name:

Agency size:

Does your agency provide any special training to recognize the signs of suicidal tendencies among your officers? Y / N. If yes, what type?

Does your agency or town/city offer any outside assistance for employees that might require help dealing with various issues such as job/family related stress? Y / N