
The Mystery Within

Understanding Police Suicide

By
JOHN M. VIOLANTI, Ph.D.

Although considerable obstacles hinder the study of police suicide, mounting evidence suggests that self-inflicted deaths within the law enforcement profession are continuing a dramatic upward trend that began in the 1980s. According to one study, in the years 1950 to 1979, a sample of 2,662 officers averaged one suicide every 2.5 years. From 1980 to 1990, the rate increased to one suicide every 1.25 years. These sobering findings indicate that police suicides now may be occurring at twice the rate they did in the past.¹

Such statistics make it increasingly important for law enforcement agencies to deal with a problem that refuses to disappear, no matter how successfully it is ignored. Only by gaining a better understanding of the factors that lead to police suicide can administrators develop an effective response to this tragic cause of death among law enforcement officers. Resolving the underlying problems that hinder the research of police suicide may be the first step to gaining a better understanding of it.

PROBLEMS OF RESEARCH

Considerable difficulty exists in studying police suicide. Researchers often find that information on officer suicide either is not collected or departments are reluctant to allow access to such data.²



In addition, police suicides may be misclassified routinely as either accidents or undetermined deaths. Because police officers traditionally subscribe to a myth of indestructibility, they view suicide as particularly disgraceful to the victim officer and to the profession.³

The police represent a highly cohesive subculture whose members tend to "take care of their own."⁴ The desire to shield victim officers, their families, and their departments from the stigma of suicide may lead investigators to overlook certain evidence intentionally



Dr. Violanti is a professor in the Criminal Justice Department of the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York, and a member of the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of New York at Buffalo.

**“
Police suicide can
devastate the morale
of entire agencies
and leave individual
officers with intense
feelings of guilt and
disillusionment.
”**

during the classification process. One study of the Chicago Police Department estimated that as many as 67 percent of police suicides in that city had been misclassified as accidental or natural deaths.⁵

Failure to correct for such biases could lead to false conclusions regarding the causes and frequency of police suicides. Therefore, accurate research must go beyond official rates; the preliminary results of an ongoing study of police suicides over a 40-year period indicate that nearly 30 percent of police suicides may have been misclassified.⁶

Other problems exist in the study of police suicide. Because most research focuses on large cities, very little is known about suicides in small or rural departments. Therefore, while epidemiological data reliably indicate that police officers are at a higher risk for suicide than the general population, such results may not be generalized appropriately to the entire country. However, the research that has

been conducted produced various explanations as to why police officers take their own lives.

WHY OFFICERS COMMIT SUICIDE

Studies have revealed several factors related to police suicide. Suicides have been found to be more common among older officers and are related to alcoholism, physical illness, or impending retirement.⁷ Other clues have been cited to help explain the high rate of self-inflicted death among police officers: The regular availability of firearms; continuous duty exposure to death and injury; social strain resulting from shift work; inconsistencies within the criminal justice system; and the perception among police officers that they labor under a negative public image. In addition, research confirms a higher propensity for suicide among males, who dominate the police profession.⁸

A study of the Detroit Police Department found that the vast majority of Detroit police officers

who took their lives were white young men, high school educated, and married. Alcohol abuse was fairly common among the sample (42 percent), as was a formal diagnosis of psychosis (33 percent). However, marital difficulties appeared to be the most prevalent problem among the Detroit sample.⁹

Examination of 27 cases of police suicide in Quebec found that one-half of the officers had a history of psychiatric and/or medical problems, and many had severe alcohol problems. Most officers in the sample experienced difficulties at work, and in every case, a notable drop in work performance had been observed in the 6 months prior to the suicide.¹⁰

Stress

The high stress of police work generally is cited as a primary contributing factor. The constant barrage of stressors inherent with danger, and for police managers, the pressures of administration, can overwhelm even the strongest person. When officers lose the ability to cope in normal ways, they may turn to an ultimate solution to relieve the pressures of stress.¹¹

Frustration and Helplessness

Among the occupational factors surrounding police suicide, frustration often is cited as particularly important. Almost unfailingly, officers enter policing with high ideals and a noble desire to help others. Over time, this sense of idealism may transform into hardcore cynicism.

The roots of frustration emanate from the central irony of American policing: Society charges

police officers with the task of regulating a public that does not want to be regulated. For individual officers, the resulting frustration is exacerbated by a largely unsympathetic press, a lack of community support, and a criminal justice system that values equity over expediency. A sense of societal isolation often ensues, compelling officers to group together in a defensive stance. When an officer feels that the frustration no longer is tolerable or that no coping alternative is available, suicide may become an attractive option.¹²

It also is possible that feelings of helplessness are brought about by the nature of the job.¹³ A sense of helplessness is a disturbing realization for anyone, but especially for police officers who are conditioned to view themselves as superheroes capable of anything. Suicide is one way of dealing with helplessness and emotional pain. The finality of the ultimate solution may be an attempt to restore feelings of strength, courage, and mastery over the environment.¹⁴

Access to Firearms

Another factor that distinguishes police officers from the general population also has been implicated in the high number of police suicides. That is, most law enforcement officers carry or have access to firearms. An ongoing study of police suicides in the United States reveals that 95 percent involved the use of the officer's service weapon.¹⁵

Another study compared suicides in New York City and London. While the police suicide rate in New York City was twice that of

the general population, the police suicide rate in London, where officers do not carry firearms, was similar to that of the city's civilian population.¹⁶

The police firearm holds special significance for officers. It is a very potent symbol of the power of life and death. Society entrusts law enforcement officers with the authority to use their weapons to take the life of another person in certain situations. In police suicides, officers, in effect, are claiming the right to take their own lives. After all, the weapon has been issued as a means to stop misery and to protect others from harm. Despondent officers may view suicide in such a way.

“

***...police suicides
may be
misclassified
routinely as either
accidents or
undetermined
deaths.***

”

Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse also has been implicated as a significant contributing factor in police suicides. One study documented alcohol abuse in 60 percent of the suicides in the Chicago Police Department.¹⁷ Administrators should be aware that alcoholism may lead to other work problems, such as high absenteeism, traffic accidents, or intoxication on duty. Given the established correlation between alcoholism and

suicide, these symptoms should not be ignored. They should be considered indications of a larger problem.

Fear of Separation From the Police Subculture

As officers near the end of their law enforcement careers, another potential threat appears—separation. To individual officers, retirement may mean separation from the camaraderie and protection of police peers. During their years of service, officers may have clustered with other officers due to a general isolation from society and its prejudices toward the police. Upon retirement, these officers must enter the very society that they perceive as alien and hostile.

While the benefits of retirement may be viewed positively by the majority of officers, separation from the police subculture can be a frightful and devastating prospect for others. Fear, coupled with increasing age (a definite suicide risk factor), loss of friends, loss of status as a police officer, and a loss of self-definition, leaves some retiring officers vulnerable to suicide. A recent study found a 10-fold risk of suicide among police retirees.¹⁸

OTHER FACTORS

Other factors have been suggested in an attempt to explain why officers take their own lives. One theory holds that officers commit suicide because of their continuous exposure to human misery and their constant giving of themselves.¹⁹ Another study cites police bureaucracy, with its paramilitary structure, overbearing regulations, and negativism, as a primary catalyst in police suicides.²⁰

It also has been suggested that "loner" officers who feel isolated from and uninvolved with the police subculture are more likely to commit suicide.²¹ Another theory views police suicides as a response to confusing messages from society: Police are given great discretionary powers, but that power is routinely truncated by the courts, the press, and from time to time, administrators. Under these conditions, many officers experience a significant sense of conflict and confusion.²²

Policing involves a continual barrage of boredom interspersed with acts of violence, deceit, and human misery. Many officers are exposed to a subculture of violence in which they encounter death almost daily. The average citizen generally does not witness in a lifetime the amount of death and violence a police officer experiences in one month. As a result of this exposure, Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome may lead to a breakdown of normal coping processes. Because the effects of stress are believed to be cumulative, officers exposed to many stressors may reach a breaking point leading to suicide. A study of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police found that 15 percent of the Mounties who committed suicide recently had been exposed to a traumatic work incident.²³

Current research does not explain definitively what effects such exposure has on the psyche of police officers. It is possible that exposure to death and human suffering produces a numbing effect; that is, death becomes easier to accept as a possible solution to seemingly impossible problems.

Psychological trauma is associated closely with this exposure to death and violence. Many officers involved in police shootings suffer serious aftereffects as a result of these critical incidents. Similar to veterans of war, officers involved in such incidents experience posttraumatic symptoms, such as nightmares, flashbacks, and a fear of returning to duty. Suicide can be the ultimate response to this sometimes unendurable pain.



ASKING FOR HELP

Traditionally, no matter what their problems, police officers refrain from asking for help. There are various reasons for this reluctance. Officers do not wish to appear weak or vulnerable in front of their peers. Individuals who perceive themselves as problem solvers often have great difficulty admitting that they have problems of their own. As a result, some officers who feel that they can no longer tolerate psychological pain choose to solve the problem themselves through suicide rather than by asking others for help.

Fortunately, officers' reluctance to seek out help is being

abated by successful counseling programs established in many departments. For individual officers, these programs have helped remove the stigma of admitting that they have problems. Currently the domain of large and progressive departments, intervention programs should be implemented in every U.S. law enforcement agency. Because all police officers face similar challenges and pressures—regardless of the size of the agency in which they serve—every officer should have access to comparable counseling resources.

EFFECTS ON SURVIVORS

Families

As is true with any suicide, it is the survivors who must cope with the aftermath of a police suicide. In addition to the emotional anguish and feelings of guilt that generally haunt family members following a suicide, other difficulties often face police suicide survivors. Because suicide is perceived as "dishonorable," families may not be afforded the full honors of a police military-style funeral. To make matters worse, police departments often abandon surviving family members after 1 or 2 weeks of condolences.

Law enforcement agencies must go beyond departmental boundaries to assist the families of *all* deceased officers, including those who take their own lives. By simply maintaining contact and offering assistance with practical matters, such as finances and pension rights, agencies can help family members move through the grieving process.

Departments

In addition to the immediate family, another group experiences the wrath of suicide: Police peers. A grief wave often strikes departments after an officer commits suicide. In some cases, supervisors note a lasting negative effect on the morale and work quality of surviving officers. For this reason, agencies should arrange for psychological debriefings after the self-inflicted death of any officer.

PREVENTING POLICE SUICIDE

The destructive effects on survivors underscore the need to prevent suicide among police personnel. Not only can an effective intervention effort save officers' lives, but it also can safeguard agencies from the devastating effects of suicide.

Agencies must move beyond the morbidity of the subject to develop effective suicide countermeasures. Perhaps the best way to prevent police suicide is to train officers to cope better with professional and personal problems. This provides them with the means to recognize and avoid the psychological and behavioral wrong turns that eventually can lead to suicide. In addition, training supervisors to recognize the warning signs of suicide can afford agencies an opportunity to intervene before it is too late.

CONCLUSION

Suicide leaves survivors shaken and in search of answers that may never be found. Police suicide can devastate the morale of entire agencies and leave individual officers with intense feelings of guilt, remorse, and disillusionment.

By its very nature, suicide is an act of desperation, carried out when less drastic avenues of relief seem unavailable or inadequate. Police agencies should ensure that these other avenues are available.

Because most studies suggests that law enforcement officers are at a heightened risk for taking their own lives, police agencies also should be at the forefront of developing and implementing suicide intervention programs. As is true with addressing any problem, the first and most important step is to recognize that the problem exists. With regard to police suicide, this fact can no longer be ignored. ♦

“ Among the occupational factors surrounding police suicide, frustration often is cited as particularly important. ”

Endnotes

- ¹ J.M. Violanti and J.E. Vena, "Epidemiology of Police Suicide" (research in progress, NIMH Grant MH47091-02).
- ² J.H. Burge, "Suicide and Occupation: A Review," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 21, 206-222, 1982.
- ³ J. Skolnick, *Police in America* (Boston: Educational Associates, 1975), 21.
- ⁴ J.M. Violanti, "Police Suicide on the Rise," *New York Trooper*, January 1984, 18-19.
- ⁵ M. Wagner and R. Brzeczek, "Alcohol and Suicide: A Fatal Connection," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, March 1983, 7-15.
- ⁶ Supra note 1.
- ⁷ J. Schwartz and C. Schwartz, "The Personal Problems of the Police Officer: A Plea

for Action," in *Job Stress and the Police Officer*, W. Kroes and J. Hurrell eds. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 130-141.

⁸ S. Labovitz and R. Hagehorn, "An Analysis of Suicide Rates Among Occupational Categories," *Sociological Inquiry*, 41, 1971, 67-72; also Z. Nelson and W.E. Smith, "The Law Enforcement Profession: An Incidence of High Suicide," *Omega*, 1, 1970, 293-299.

⁹ B.I. Danto, "Police Suicide," *Police Stress*, 1, 1978, 32-35.

¹⁰ G. Aussant, "Police Suicide," *Rural Canadian Mounted Police Gazette*, 46, 1984, 14-21.

¹¹ F.L. McCafferty, E. McCafferty, and M.A. McCafferty, "Stress and Suicide in Police Officers: A Paradigm of Occupational Stress," *Southern Medical Journal*, 85, 1992, 233-243.

¹² Supra note 4.

¹³ M. Heiman, "Suicide Among Police," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 134, 1977, 1286-1290.

¹⁴ P. Bonafacio, *The Psychological Effects of Police Work* (New York: Plenum Press, 1991); also S. Allen, "Suicide and Indirect Self-Destructive Behavior Among Police," in *Psychological Services for Law Enforcement*, J. Reese and H. Goldstein eds. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).

¹⁵ Supra note 1.

¹⁶ P. Friedman, "Suicide Among Police: A Study of 93 Suicides Among New York City Policemen 1934-40," in *Essays of Self Destruction*, E.S. Shneidman, ed. (New York: Science House, 1968).

¹⁷ Supra note 5.

¹⁸ C.W. Gaska, "The Rate of Suicide, Potential for Suicide, and Recommendations for Prevention Among Retired Police Officers" (Doctoral Dissertation: Wayne State University, 1980).

¹⁹ M. Heiman, "The Police Suicide," *Journal of Police Science and Administration*, 3, 1975, 267-273.

²⁰ C. Nix, "Police Suicide: Answers Are Sought," *The New York Times*, September 15, 1986, B2-4.

²¹ J. Slater and R. Depue, "The Contribution of Environmental and Social Support to Serious Suicide Attempts in Primary Depressive Order," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 90, 1981, 275-285.

²² Supra note 4.

²³ R. Loo, "Suicide Among Police in a Federal Force," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 16, 1986, 379-388.