

**Code of Silence/Culture of Suicide:
Why Law Enforcement Officers Keep Killing
Themselves Despite Our Prevention Efforts.**



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Officer Suicide

“We have met the enemy, and he is us.” (Pogo, 1971)

Some Facts About Officer Suicide

1. There is a high risk for suicide within the law enforcement profession.
2. Alcohol plays a significant role.
3. “Police work gets in your blood.”
4. Silence about feelings happens on the job.
5. There usually are warning signs.

National Rates of Suicide: General Population

- Slightly more than 30,000 Americans commit suicide annually.
- 83 suicides/day or 1 suicide every 17 minutes or 12 of every 100,000 people
- Suicide rates in the USA can best be characterized as mostly stable over time

(Centers for Disease Control; & American Association of Suicidology)

National Rates of Suicide: Law Enforcement Officers

- 1995 Fraternal Order of Police suicide study found a suicide rate of 22 deaths per 100,000 officers
- 1997 USA Today study surveyed the nation's largest law enforcement agencies.

Suicide rate/100,000:

- NYPD 15.5,
- Chicago PD 18.1,
- FBI 26.1,
- LAPD 20.7,
- San Diego PD 35.7,
- US Customs 45.6

National Rates of Suicide: Law Enforcement Officers

- 1934-1960: police suicide rates were half that of the general population (Goldfarb, 1998)
- 1980-present: police suicide rates are 2-3 times higher than the general population (Mohandie & Hatcher, 1999; Slovenko, 1999)

LAPD Deaths: 1990 to Present

- 20 line of duty deaths
- 33 officer suicides
- Death by suicide is 1.5 times more likely to occur than line of duty deaths.
- Officer suicide demographics closely follow national databases.

LAPD Officer Suicide Demographic Data

- Sex: 76% male, 24% female
- Ethnicity: 61% Caucasian, 33% Hispanic, 3% African-American, 3% Asian
- Age: range = 26-57, mean = 38
- Rank: 70% police officers, 12% Sgts., 12% detectives, 6% other
- Years of Service: range = 1-29, mean = 13
- Mode of Death: 91% gunshot, 3% hanging, 3% carbon monoxide, 3% car collision

The Suicidal Officer

- Alcohol and/or Drug Abuse (Steroids)
- Administrative/ Legal Problems
- Depression
- Financial Problems
- Exposure to Trauma/ Adverse Life Events
- Negative Self-Image
- Physical Illness/ Retirement/ Chronic Pain
- Family History of Suicide/Violence/ Abuse

Warning Signs

- Talking about wanting to die
- Unusual sadness, discouragement, loneliness
- Depression
- Unwillingness to communicate
- Change in eating patterns
- Change in sleeping patterns
- Use of drugs / alcohol
- Abrupt changes in personality
- Reckless/ self-destructive behavior
- Neglect of appearance
- Giving away possessions
- Family disruption

Four LAPD Cases Studies

Officer 1	Marital problems	Legal Problems	Work Problems	No Support System
Officer 2	Relationship Problems	Legal Problems	Work Problems	
Officer 3	Relationship Problems	Legal Problems	Work Problems	No Support System
Officer 4	Relationship Problems	Financial Problems	Work Problems	

“Will this pain ever stop?”

- Suicidal officers report intense, unending, debilitating emotional pain.
- Officers are trained and expected to keep emotions in check when handling emotionally charged situations.
- Officers tend to remain silent about their own (or fellow officers’) emotional pain.
- Detached, unemotional reporting has behavioral and psychological consequences.

What About this JOB Contributes to Suicide

- Sense of Morality - Justice - Fair
- Justifiable Force to Solve a Problem
- Suspicious of Others
- Self-reliance
- Alcohol
- Guns
- Stress
- Lack of control over your life

The Thinking Process of Someone Contemplating Suicide

- It has been done before.
- The world will be better off without me.
- I'm worth more to my family dead than alive.
- Everyone will get over it.
- This will end my pain.
- There is no other solution.

How do we protect our officers from themselves?

- Silence promotes the idea that suicide is just a “job hazard” of law enforcement.
- Police need to police themselves, and their fellow officers, emotionally.
- Research supports the value of debriefing critical incidents and processing trauma.
- Officer suicide needs to be openly addressed and discussed from top to bottom in the organization.
- Strategically intervene in problem areas.

Strategic Areas to Intervene

- 1 Relationships
- 2 Alcohol
- 3 Support System
- 4 Stress Management
- 5 Identification of at-risk officers
- 6 Education

Role of Supervisor in Suicide Prevention

- Excellent position to monitor subordinates for stress that could lead to suicide. 80% of suicidal officers give clues regarding their intentions.
- Daily contact to spot check overall “wellness” of officer.
- Provide response to a critical incident.
- Recognize suicidal symptoms and behavior.

Role of Supervisor

- Closely learn and observe the personality characteristics.
- Recommend resources when officer in professional or personal crisis.
- Keep finger on the pulse of officers.

Supervisors Lifeguard Program: “SAVE” a Life

- **S:** **Seek** out information about your officers.
- **A:** **Ask** questions about what is going on in their lives and what they are doing about it.
- **V:** Encourage them to **Volunteer** to seek help or volunteer to get them help.
- **E:** **Educate** officers about the signs of symptoms of suicide and the services available.

Relationship Management

- Communication
- Infidelity
- Conflict Resolution
- Reconcilable Differences
- Counseling
- Emotional Survival - On duty/ Off duty

Support System

- “I usta” activities
- Maintain friendships
- Connection to something
- Spiritually
- Exercise/ physical fitness
- Stress management

Alcohol Treatment

- What is an alcohol problem?
- When does it become a problem?
- How does it become a problem? Identify
 - Statistics of officers on contracts
 - Statistics of DUIs
- Utilize available treatment programs
 - Desert Refuge, Michael's House, AA, Fellowship
- Education and Training
- Encouraging alternative ways to deal with stress

Police Psychologists' Role

- Develop on-going consultation with supervisors
- Offer regular suicide prevention training
- Provide Critical Incident Debriefings
- Provide flexible services to officers in need
- Identify officers in need
- Provide education about emotional survival on the job.

Summary of Areas of Emphasis in Suicide Prevention

- Officers need communication and involvement to increase feelings of connection.
- Primary relationships are the most important connection for officers.
- Resiliency model points to importance of support system at “tipping points” in life.
- Couple and family communication skills, conflict management, problem solving, and parenting skills.
- Expectation that officers save lives, especially each others’.



Referrals

✧ **National Strategy for Suicide Prevention: Goals and Objectives for Action**

www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/suicideprevention/strategy.asp

✧ **National POLICE Suicide Foundation**

www.psf.org



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