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Police Suicide
A Glimpse Behind the Badge

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There are few documented studies on police suicide and its determinants. This paucity of research is a result of problems in the accurate identification of potentially suicidal officers as well as concerns for adverse departmental press and public scrutiny. In order to advance the literature in this area, the present study explores how certain social, psychological, and interpersonal experiences relate to a law enforcement agent's proclivity to commit suicide. In particular, the authors examine how occupational stress, a non-supportive family structure, and alcoholism, may contribute to serious suicidal ideation. The article concludes by speculating upon training techniques in the police academy. The authors maintain that the overall instructional aim must focus upon prevention and detection of self-destructive behavior. In addition, strategies that address these training concerns are discussed in the context of routine law enforcement practice and ongoing administrative police policy setting.

Introduction

The duties performed by the police are alternatively seen by many as brave and heroic or tedious and demanding. These are the public's perceptions, incomplete as they may be. Indeed, although we may feel inconvenienced when pulled over by a state trooper, we do not realize the ongoing stress officers confront; stress which lurks behind the badge. The visible aspects of policing, such as the shoot-outs, the hostage situations, and the common bar fights, are clearly physically dangerous—at times they are even deadly. However, the unseen and unheard social, psychological, and interpersonal strains on today's law enforcement agents can be equally deadly. Beyond the stress and the build-up of tension, looms the possibility of suicide. To date, however, meager attention has been given to policing and the factors which may bring an officer to engage in such self-destructive behavior.


The problem of police suicide is not new (e.g., Friedman, 1967; Skolnick, 1975; Lester, 1983; Hill and Clawson, 1988), nor is its considered seriousness as a leading cause of accidental death among officers (e.g., Violanti, Vena and Marshall, 1986; Law Enforcement News, 1995). These studies show that suicide is more prevalent for law enforcement agents than for workers in other occupations.

Early research conducted in the New York Police Department found that between 1950 to 1967, the suicide rate averaged twenty-two per 100,000 deaths a year (Friedman, 1967). What is so disturbing about this statistic is that, during the same reporting period, the average rate of death by suicide for all males was only seventeen per 100,000 (Friedman, 1967).

In a related study, researchers found that from a sample of 2,662 police officers, there was an average of one suicide every 2.5 years between 1950 to 1979 (Violanti and Vena, unpublished). Using the same sample, the suicide rate increased to one death every 1.25 years for the reporting period of 1980 to 1990 (Friedman, 1967). Violanti (1995) contends that such data help explain the persistent and acute upward trend in police suicides.

Additional investigations indicate that officers have the highest suicide rate from among a field of thirty-six occupations (Labovitz and Hagehorn, 1971; Violanti, 1995). These findings confirm the suspicion that persons employed in law enforcement are more likely to commit suicide than those in other professions (Hill and Clawson, 1988). And, most recently, the National Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) published its findings from an ongoing study on accidental deaths among police agents. For this study, data was collected from 92 FOP lodges representing 24 states. Researchers affiliated with the FOP's Center for Criminal Justice Studies conducted the investigation. They concluded that between 1992–1994, 17 out of 46 deaths (37 percent) were the result of suicide (Law Enforcement News, 1995:1). This figure represented the number one cause of accidental death among officers for the reporting period.

Studies like those mentioned above raise important questions related to self-destructiveness and police behavior. To address this broad concern, this chapter conceptually explores the nature and likelihood of police suicide by examining three of its key determinants: occupational stress; the lack of adequate family networks of support; and alcoholism among officers. We investigate these determinants and how they can (and sometimes do) affect an officer's career. We conclude by speculating upon their implications for both police academy training and general policy setting. In order to better situate our study, we begin with an overview of stress and suicide relevant to contemporary policing in American society.

Background on Stress, Suicide, and Policing in Society

As Wagner and Brzeczek (1983, p. 10) suggest, "suicide denotes all behavior that seeks and finds [as its] . . . solution to an existential
problem...[the] attempt on the life of the subject." As their definition implies, there are many reasons why officers choose to take their own lives. For some, it is about harboring extremely hostile feelings that are turned inward on the self. Such feelings are stimulated by unresolved life problems or existential dilemmas. The emotional scarring that this confrontation may include self-hatred or the hatred of life itself. Continuous negative emotional feelings involving shame, hopelessness, guilt, or dependency may also plague a suicidal mind and are likewise related to deep-seated, unsettled issues.

In their analysis of policing in society, Wagner and Brzeczek (1983:10) further indicate that "suicide may result from external social factors, internal psychological factors, and internal biological factors." These factors are varying categories of stress which, when operationalized as forms of social, psychological, and interpersonal trauma, can escalate to crisis, suicidal ideation, and the termination of life.

In relationship to law enforcement practice, external social factors may include the everyday interaction with the chronic criminal, the vagrant, the prostitute, or the juvenile delinquent. The constant contact with such troubled individuals in unsavory places can bring about additional stress and can create a very negative view of the world (Hartough, 1991:131). In addition, the police organization itself can be viewed as an external social factor. The demanding rules of the profession, disagreeable job assignments, and limited employee promotion opportunities contribute to stress in the police organization which in turn differentially affect individual officers (Kroes, Hurrel and Margolis, 1974). Dissatisfaction with the criminal justice apparatus per se is an example of an internal psychological factor related to stress and suicidal ideation. Following an attitudinal survey conducted by Wexler and Logan in 1983, several commentators concluded that frustration with and cynicism over the criminal process and the court system were the two highest sources of stress perceived by all officers (as cited in Bartol, 1992:249).

Further support for the futility that officers experience with the criminal justice system can be linked to trial outcomes that seemingly ignore the danger the police confront when engaged in routine law enforcement practice. As Coman, Evans and Stanley (1992:432) explain:

...[The police] perception that the justice system is excessively lenient toward criminals also contributes to officers' feelings of cynicism. Cynicism is heightened when, having placed themselves at personal risk to apprehend criminals, officers see the latter subsequently freed or given light sentences.

In addition to frustration and cynicism regarding the criminal justice apparatus, on-duty police officers encounter a constant and divergent barrage of citizen sentiment which can be psychologically stressful. If not altogether devastating. Adjusting to the emotional pushes and pulls of the work are psychologically depleting. Whether negotiating the release of a hostage, breaking up a barroom brawl, or comforting a lost child, the experience of riding an emotional roller coaster can produce persistent work-related tension for many officers.

Related to frustration with the judicial system and the psychic demands of routine police work are the feelings of isolation and stigmatization which many officers confront. It is very difficult for law enforcement personnel to become detached from their uniforms. Even while off-duty, friends and family may still perceive them as officers. Hagerman (1978:402) suggests that the pressure of being on-duty 24 hours a day induces stress and forces officers to identify coping mechanisms. As one commentator insists, "it would be difficult to find an occupation that is subject to more consistent and persistent tension, strain, confrontations and nerve wracking than that of the uniformed patrolman" (Milanovich, 1980:20).

The third clustering of factors related to police suicide identified by Wagner and Brzeczek are biological in nature. Serious disease is among the leading organic conditions which can lead to self-destructive behavior. Indeed, a recent study exploring disease, risk factors, and mortality rates among officers reports some rather startling figures and correlations relevant to suicide (Marsh, Vena and Violanti, 1986). According to the research team and its identification of risk factors for suicide among the study's police officer participants, 48 percent smoked, 15 percent had high cholesterol, 86 percent had little to no exercise regimen, and 25 percent were at least 25 percent overweight. The investigators concluded that all of these factors were indicative of self-destructive behavior (Marsh, Vena and Violanti, 1986).

The research team also examined how, if at all, such risk factors among officers contributed to the development of heart disease and other health-related problems. Irregular eating habits due to shift work, frequent interruption of meals following a dispatcher's call for assistance, and a sensitive or nervous stomach (including loss of appetite) related to the nature of police work, were all shown to be linked to serious digestive disorders. Myers (1985:332) has even suggested that the stress of police work can in fact cause cancer. For example, persistent lack of exercise can produce colon cancer. The common use of alcohol and the occurring digestive disorders can cause esophagus and stomach cancers respectively. Indeed, following a study of 20 police suicides in Chicago, research findings indicated that six officers were already dealing with serious health problems (Wagner and Brzeczek, 1983:11).

In sum, there is a correlation between external social, internal psychological, and internal biological factors of stress and an officer's proclivity to engage in self-destructive (i.e., suicidal) police conduct. In the next several sections, we examine more closely these stress factors. Our position is that they can be redefined and more appropriately (and concretely) understood as social, psychological, and interpersonal determinants.
Determinants of Police Suicide: A Preliminary Assessment

Occupational Stress

The nature of police work as an occupation is very stressful. Routine exposure to danger, confronting unknown assailants, dealing with unpredictable situations, and negotiating citizen hostilities are all physically and mentally draining (Martelli, Martelli and Waters, 1989:267). It is this level of anxiety which has led some police commentators to contend that such occupational stress can "cause significant personal distress" (Coman, Evans and Stanley, 1992:429). How officers cope or adjust to the demands of the job while engaged in law enforcement practice is therefore important to understanding more about the nature of police work and the likelihood of police suicide.

In order to explore the suggested linkages, two illustrations are utilized. The first example addresses a suicide crime scene. The second illustration relates to police training for vehicular stops. Both are events described by officers.

I pushed open the door, and this guy is sort of sitting up on the bed, and he had a hunting rifle, and he was barefoot, with his toe by the trigger. He was still holding onto the barrel, and there was nothing left of his head. Blood was everywhere. Brains and pieces of brain and skull were all over the place. For some reason, to this day I don't know why, I felt for a pulse. I guess it's a habit that [with] every first-aid call you go on, you feel for a pulse. You just can't believe somebody could do something like this (Poole and Pogrebin, 1991: 401).

In the statement above an officer describes a suicide scene in which a man put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The officer who recounts the incident has become emotionally detached. The circumstances, although tragic, appear to be routine. The second example is as follows:

... for several days, we put the group through every conceivable situation in which they could get hurt or deceived. They were lied to, argued with and shot... not one situation involved an honest person. (Southward, 1990:22)

In this scenario, an officer describes a class on vehicle stops which he taught. His instructional goal was to educate trainees based upon the worst imaginable occurrences. Preparation for uncertainty, confrontation, and death were the essentials of this training exercise.

Although in many ways different, these narratives illustrate how the occupation of policing is about living with danger. Officers are supposed to assume a calm presence and to be professional in the face of this danger. This expectation endures, despite the tragedy and/or despite the victim. After witnessing the most heinous of murder acts and crimes committed against young children, police officers "are expected to maintain a poised presence" (Poole and Pogrebin, 1991:395).

Another form of occupational stress can be found in the organization of the police force. Martelli, Martelli and Waters (1989:268) have considered how the authoritarian structure and management practices of police departments contribute to stress. Unpleasant job assignments and excessive disciplinary action alter the morale and communication of the department as well. The authoritarian structure of police organizations is further evidenced when officers are unable to participate in decisions that affect them. Orders are passed down from rank to rank and, typically, little input is sought from patrol personnel.

Another organizational stressor includes restricted police activity following major court decisions. Inciardi (1993:247), for example, notes that the decision in Weeks v. U.S. in 1914 limited officers' behavior by implementing the exclusionary rule. Following the ruling, any evidence illegally seized in a federal case could be suppressed in court. A decision such as this greatly affects the manner in which police and detectives collect evidence. Frustrated officers believe that some criminals are released on technicalities. Similar departmental problems can be linked to the decisions in Escobedo v. Illinois (1964) which ensures the presence of counsel during police interrogation and Miranda v. Arizona (1966) which requires that police make suspects aware of their rights before any questioning occurs.

Additional forms of organizational stress can be traced to departments that are targets of negative press. "Performing duties under the scrutiny of the public, press, and courts demands competence and decisiveness... mastery of these skills does not come without a potential price" (DiVasto and Saxton, 1992:12). There are many rules and report procedures that function to merely protect the department from criticism. Many times, however, an officer of the law must assume a false attitude (for example, being "nice" or ingratiating to the press in order to avoid departmental criticism). Not only does this false attitude conceivably create even more stress, but, as Myers (1983:331) reports, such stress has been found to decrease the immune system which increases the likelihood of health related problems. Again, in order not to tarnish the reputation of one's department, officers, subjected to the pressure of a media campaign, incorporate this false identity into their persona. The potential harm to the officer can be devastating.

Related to the nature of police work and the organizational structure of departments which generate stress, is the unavoidable psychological scarring. Psychic trauma is caused by constant suppression or repression of anxiety-producing events experienced by police officers. Following a shooting in which an on-duty officer was paralyzed, the officer's wife (also a police agent) described the experience of her husband's tragedy and how she copes with her life-long sorrow:

Sometimes when I lie in bed at night I just want to get up and run out the front door screaming, because I can see my life stretching on like this forever. I know things are improving and it has gotten considerably better, but sometimes I just think I would like to have somebody to go play with every now and then. I would like to have a normal loving relationship (Poole and Pogrebin, 1991:398).
Suppressing stress or keeping it “bottled up” inside can alter one’s mood, impair effective cognitive processes, and dramatically change personality (Coman, Evans, and Stanley, 1992:429-30). Some studies have shown that the immediate consequence of such stressors create higher levels of hopelessness and feelings of lack of control which are both primary determinants of suicide (Coman et al.:430).

The variable of hope or hopelessness is considered to be crucial to one’s decision to choose suicide (Wagner, 1983:10). When one’s ability to cope with stressful situations is affected by such constant suppression or repression, feelings of depression, anxiety, and desperation occur. A common police coping response is that of cynicism. Cynicism has been described as a “mocking disbelief of the police system” (Howe, Marshal and Violanti, 1985:107). Through cynicism, the officer lessens the impact of job demands by simply disbelieving them. With so many indicators of potential psychological trauma and mental deterioration, it would seem apparent that additional emotional support would need to be made available to officers. However, many times the department subculture denies such assistance. The following vignette as chronicled by Poole and Pogrebin (1991:399) amply demonstrates this point:

A young officer was chasing a drunk driver who hit another car and killed a young woman. The police officer involved in the chase was very upset when he saw the woman lying on the road by her car. I was on the scene right after the accident. I could tell right off he was pretty shaken up. I called the station and told the shift lieutenant that this officer needs to be ordered out of the scene. I remembered the lieutenant saying, ‘He’ll get over it.’ And he never did anything.

In addition to hopelessness and cynicism as manifestations of job-related psychic scarring and deteriorating policing coping strategies, is the interpretation of minor events as extremely stressful. For example, Southward (1990:20) reports that a Virginia police officer described feeling “keyed up, apprehensive and aggressive” while trying to teach his daughter how to drive. The father’s response to the daughter’s driving error was to admonish her as follows: “If you do that again, you won’t drive for a month!” As Southward comments, this was the same response the father made to a traffic violator a few years prior as a trooper (Southward, 1990:20). Clearly, the two events were different. Clearly, the affected participants (daughter versus traffic violator) were different. The behavioral response from the father/officer, however, was the same.

Coupled with the frustrating vagaries of police work, organizational demands, and feelings of hopelessness and cynicism as contributing to occupational stress in the police force, are the expectations of department employers. Pugh (1986:1) has examined the qualities, roles, and concepts related to being a “good” police officer. He lists several criteria which can be (and are) used for hiring and evaluation purposes. These criteria include:

1. React quickly and effectively to problem situations.
2. Exhibit initiative, problem solving capacity, effective judgment, and imagination in coping with complex situations.
3. Demonstrate mature judgment (common sense) in deciding to make an arrest, give a warning, or use of force.
4. Tolerate stress in a multitude of forms.
5. Maintain a balance perspective in the face of constant exposure to the worst side of human nature.

The first three criteria seem commonplace for an employer to expect from his/her employee. However, the fourth and fifth points are not typical job requirements. Police work is socially constructed as anxiety-producing and its participants (suspects and the general public) are perceived as dark, vile, and vicious. Framed as such, these understandings only invite stress in an officer’s already tension-filled work routine.

There are also various roles one assumes as a police officer. Individuals function as law enforcers and public servants. They have the responsibility of maintaining social order and keeping peace in neighborhood streets. All of these roles are regarded as primary when considering applicants for the police profession. However, these various duties may lead to role conflict and may result in problems for individual police officers. The conflict the officer confronts and its resolution is related to employer expectations of how best to remedy the dilemma. In his analysis of the “good” police officer, Pugh (1986:3) defines four types of role conflict:

1. **Internal Role Conflict**—An individual has internalized a role that includes contradictory expectations or when he occupies two or more positions that carry incompatible role expectations.
   - **Example:** A homicide detective elicits a confession from a ruthless killer without mirandizing the suspect. The officer internally wrestles with the demands of following appropriate criminal procedure (enforcing the defendant’s rights) while ensuring that the public is protected.

2. **External Role Conflict**—An individual is confronted with incompatible expectations from two or more persons in his position network.
   - **Example:** The precinct sergeant wants the patrol team to work desk duty but the supervising officer of the patrol team wants you and your squad car out in the field.

3. **Extra-Role Conflict**—An individual perceives that others hold different expectations for him as an incumbent of a single position.
   - **Example:** An officer feels she needs to be more proactive in her policing; be especially alert while patrolling. Fellow precinct officers believe that the officer is overly aggressive and should be more restrained while on patrol.

4. **Inter-Role Conflict**—An individual perceives that others hold different expectations of him as the incumbent of two or more positions.
   - **Example:** The public wants their neighborhood officers to be more community oriented while patrolling and more aggressive when engaged in arrests. The precinct chief wants field officers to be
more problem oriented in the community and less aggressive while engaged in arrests.

What Pugh's typology suggests is that the everyday discretionary decisions in which officers engage can create role conflict. This, in turn, can produce occupational stress. Our contention is that it is this stress, particularly when internalized and coupled with the other forms of job-related anxiety as described above, which functions as a catalyst for suicidal ideation and self-destructive behavior.

**Family Stress**

Success on the job does not always equate with success on the home front. This is true for many professions. It appears especially applicable to contemporary policing. According to Southward (1990:20), "the traits and dispositions that make exceptional police officers unfortunately make very poor spouses, parents, and friends." Patterned responses called "dispositions," help police to act quickly and without conscious thought of similar events. "Without dispositions, every event would have to be evaluated [individually] to decide the best course of action or think how to perform each action" (Southward, 1990).

Although these dispositions save many lives during patrol work, they become destructive when brought home. Southward's (1990) work on policing provides an excellent illustration of this point. An officer's wife was trying to get her son to do the dishes one night. While the two continued to argue, the off-duty officer walked into the kitchen, evaluated the situation, and immediately took control. The officer admonished his wife for being bossy, talked to his son about responsibility, and told everyone else to leave the room so that the dishes could get washed. In other words, the officer "issued a warning, dispersed the participants in the dispute, and got the job done" (p. 21). Even though the officer (a state trooper) did get the boy to do the work, the problem was that he could not simply drive away in his patrol car. He had to live with these same people. In this situation, the officer's disposition embarrassed his wife, undermined her authority, and alienated him from the entire family.

The spouse in a police marriage often undergoes stress from the police organization as well which in turn places extra stress on the police officer. There are some types of stress which are "inherent in the nature of [police] work . . . . [T]hey come with the territory" (Hartsough, 1991:131). Some of these inherent aspects include shift work, unpredictable absences from home (such as for court appearances), and the long, irregular hours a police officer usually works. Maynard and Maynard (1982:309) report that given police work schedules, spouses and family members often forgo making vacation plans for the near future. Husbands and wives of police officers also undergo psychological stress. Threats to the officer’s safety can create emotional fatigue for a spouse. These threats can reach a critical incident level when the officer is fired upon, severely injured, or taken hostage (Hartsough, 1991:131).

A debilitating injury or death is also mentally challenging for family members. However, officers are more routinely "emotionally distant and moody" if a life-altering injury or loss of life befalls a fellow officer (especially a partner) (Hartsough, 1991:132). Following such traumatic incidents, police personnel can become preoccupied with the tragic event and incapable of concentrating on their own lives, their work, or their families.

In addition to patterned responses, spousal attitudes toward organizational demands of police work, and job-related injury or death as features of family stress, is the activity of defusing at home. Hartsough (1991:132) describes this phenomenon as follows:

> Letting off steam about the workday is a healthy practice, especially if family relationships are supportive. The officer gets to vent his frustrations, and the family gets a more realistic sense of life on the job. This practice is a two-edged sword, however, because defusing at home can also become a source of stress for the family, especially if the emotions are mostly negative, the complaints prolonged, and the family becomes frustrated when nothing changes.

When an officer (especially a young one) becomes totally engulfed in and preoccupied with law enforcement, the officer’s spouse and family may feel left out of his/her life. The husband/wife may feel that they are second to the officer’s job and may become jealous and resentful. In Maynard and Maynard’s (1982:309) longitudinal study of stress in police families they found that there was a 70 percent divorce rate within the first five years for the department they observed. Fifty-seven percent of the spouses felt they were not as important as their husbands’ or wives’ occupations. Fifty-five percent felt the department had a negative attitude toward marriage and families. Forty-five percent of the spouses felt the department did not meet the needs of the family. Almost 52 percent of the spouses had given up other job opportunities and 60 percent were discouraged from making plans too far ahead in the future.

Another experience of stress in the family context occurs when the officers are trained in the academy to remain detached from the situations in which they are involved (Southward, 1990:22). The competing and emotionally wrenching demands of law enforcement work do not make it possible (let alone wise) for officers to become fervently invested in every situation they encounter. It would be personally devastating if they were so involved. The officer would lose all objectivity and would not be able to function effectively for the public, for the department, or for his or her partner.

Notwithstanding, it can be destructive when this level of emotional detachment is brought into the home. Southward (1990:22) relates an incident in which a police officer describes his feelings when his wife’s mother died. As the officer states,

> I wanted very much to comfort her, but all I felt was impatience with the whole matter. As hard as I tried, I could not empathize with her pain, and I knew she could feel my impatience and detachment.

This professional attitude is crucial when trying to maintain control while on duty; however, it is not appropriate in the context of familial living.
Indeed, the impact such sentiments could have on the spouse and how this impact could then subsequently affect the officer are potentially disastrous. Channelling this police professionalism to the home front is not addressed in academy training. As McCready (1983:37) reports, “the purpose of recruit training is to adequately prepare today’s police candidates for the rigorous demands of a changing profession.” However, even with such academy programs as field training where candidates are taught how to deal with complex situations and dangerous criminals, they are never instructed on how to decompress, go home, and enjoy the warmth and support of their families. Police professionalism can keep family and friends at a distance. Both may even feel that the law enforcement officer is unapproachable. One officer’s daughter admitted knowing “when to keep her distance” when her father first came home from work (Southward, 1990:19). The same father described a situation at home in which he misplaced his hairbrush. He found himself interrogating each family member as if he was conducting a criminal investigation. He responded like a “trooper,” not like a husband and father (Southward, 1990: 22-23). When an officer feels his family is unsupportive (real or imagined), s/he may lose all sense of intimacy with them. This can produce feelings of hopelessness which is a lethal elixir for suicidal thoughts.

Munchausen’s Syndrome has been found to be prevalent in law enforcement and can also be linked to suicide. Munchausen’s Syndrome falls into the category of mental illness known as factitious disorders (DiVasto and Saxton, 1992:11). A common illustration of Munchausen would include something like the following: an individual self-inflicts illness or injury (or complains of illness) and then defies medical treatment by remaining ill, despite the best efforts of doctors. An officer acquires this illness for two main reasons. The first reason is the need for sympathy. An officer, faced with overwhelming interpersonal stress or threat of loss, creates an incident in which he is the victim, and occasionally, the hero” (DiVasto and Saxton, 1992:13). In an attempt to be the focus of sympathy, care, and concern, an officer may inflict an injury (such as a laceration from a knife) to become the center of attention. Feeling unsupported from a spouse, sensing the bitter end of a marriage, experiencing alienation from a son or daughter may, in the context of work-related stress, produce this factitious disorder.

The second reason an officer may be subjected to this disorder relates to the configuration of the police organization as compatible with a college sorority/fraternity. “The rookie officer who has not been exposed to danger may feel the need to invent such an incident to achieve credibility” (DiVasto and Saxton, 1992:13), and hence acceptance into the police subculture. The need to be a member of the group may be so crucial to new officers, that they might adopt behavioral patterns that can only be described as unnecessarily dangerous.

Alcoholism and Stress

A suicide rate among alcoholics appears to be unquestionable (Wagner and Brzeczek, 1983:14). Alcohol can be used as a relaxing device or even as a sleeping aid for those who work long, irregular hours of shift work. Drinking is commonly practiced in order to numb or deaden feelings of depression. However, whatever one feels while sober, one is more likely to act upon those feelings while intoxicated (Myers, 1983:167). Feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness become exaggerated when alcohol is consumed. In a study conducted in Chicago on alcoholism, suicide, and policing, alcohol abuse was indicated in 12 of the 20 officer suicides (Wagner and Brzeczek, 1983:10). In addition, 9 of the 12 suicide cases had a substantial quantity of alcohol in their bodies at the time of death (Wagner and Brzeczek, 1983).

In the police subculture, alcohol consumption is not only accepted but is encouraged and reinforced (Stege, 1986). Within the rhythms, customs, and practices that constitute policing, alcohol maintains a high recreational value. It is not only used for socializing, but also for stress reduction (Stege, 1986:83). When asked to describe the place of alcohol consumption within the routine function of policing, a recovering alcoholic exclaimed the following: “After a particularly terrible night shift, it is not uncommon for the officers to get together for a [drinking] party” (Dietrich and Smith, 1986:302).

For novice officers and the other new hires of a department, alcohol may serve as a test of trustworthiness, loyalty, and masculinity. As one officer commented, “when you hang out with police officers, all they do is drink and talk about work . . . . It’s an easy thing to fall into” (Dietrich and Smith, 1986:303). This behavior is easily camouflaged within the subculture. The new workers are socialized so that drinking patterns become the norm. Thus, the behavior associated with these newly formed norms is not viewed by others within the police reference group as deviant. There is also a great deal of uniformity within the structure of the police organization. It is not surprising to find such uniformity within the police subculture in relation to alcohol as well. This concept of uniformity is best expressed in the following statement made by an officer describing membership in the police milieu: “either you drank or you didn’t belong” (Dietrich and Smith, 1986:302-3).

As previously discussed, there are many occupational stressors linked to police work. Not only do these stressors lead to suicidal tendencies in themselves, they also lead to alcoholism which has a dramatic impact on suicidal ideation. In their research on non-medical uses of drugs and alcohol by officers, Dietrich and Smith (1986:303) identify four occupational demands which relate significantly to police stress and, thus, indirectly affect alcohol consumption. The first is what they term deepersonalization. This is the process whereby officers learn to react unemotionally to the numerous unpleasant work situations they come in contact with on a daily basis. Depersonalization occurs when there is an apparent role conflict between job-related objectives and real human emotions. The second occupational demand which may drive an officer to drink is called authoritarianism. When an officer’s behavior is based upon and structured by a list of legal and organizational guidelines, then
authoritarianism exists. Here, it is the absence of control which induces the officer's stress. Organizational protection is a third occupational demand leading to alcohol abuse, according to Dietrich and Smith. It is defined as a network of departmental or precinct rules and reports that serve to protect the organization from criticism. Danger preparation is the fourth and final job-related demand which impacts on police drinking behavior. The realization that life-threatening risk or extreme personal jeopardy persists throughout one's on- (and off-) duty interaction is a stressor that continues everyday throughout an officer's career.

Another factor related to alcohol abuse among law enforcement personnel is found in their coping strategies. Cynicism, or a mocking disbelief, helps officers manage by discounting the demands of the police force. One method for controlling such deep-seated cynicism is through (excessive) drinking. Associated with cynicism is the strategy of secrecy. When deliberately withholding information or surreptitiously disobeying a directive from a supervisor, one's sense of autonomy increases. But these heightened feelings of independence come with a cost. For example, cultivating a scheme where the effect is that an officer does not report to a department psychologist to discuss job-related stress may promote feelings of toughness, coolness, and pride; however, the same officer may be alleviating unresolved anxiety through on-duty alcohol consumption. Lavish or otherwise, alcohol consumption while on the job is in direct violation of organizational rules. However, by being deviant, the strains of the occupation are somewhat lessened (Dietrich and Smith, 1986:304).

The use of alcohol among police officers not only serves as a vehicle for socialization and stress reduction, it also functions to promote questionable life management and faulty life adjustment skills. As Myers (1983:335–39) suggests, when conventional coping strategies fail (e.g., aerobic exercise, relaxation, and social support), one must find alternatives or one cannot go on living. In the case of police officers, the most common elective is alcohol which can also discourage someone from living (Myers, 1983). The profound demands placed on law enforcement officers are undeniable. Unfortunately, at times, such demands lack the requisite community appreciation and foster deleterious reactions from a community's officers. It is our contention that excessive drinking and its attendant features function as important determinants to police suicide.

Thus far we have provisionally explored how exaggerated levels of job dissatisfaction, non-supportive family structures, and alcohol consumption may work to effect police suicides. We have suggested that these determinants are more specific manifestations of social, psychological and interpersonal stress-related variables. Much of our commentary has been based upon speculation following the available, though limited, literature. In an effort to further expand our knowledge on this under-examined, albeit important, social problem, we now consider what preliminary steps might be taken in academy training and administrative policy setting which would more adequately prepare proactive police candidates and police departments for the demands of the profession.

Police Training and Policy Setting: Considerations for the Future

There are three broad suggestions we believe are warranted in the context of policing in society, stress, and suicide. These recommendations are based upon the absence of any meaningful procedures incorporated into general academy training. While the suggestions seem obvious and straightforward, they are not usually recognized as important features of one's readiness to assume a position as a police officer. Following the identification and discussion of our recommendations, we consider their overall likelihood for promoting an ongoing climate of suicide prevention and detection within departments. Further, we address how, if at all, policy setting within precincts can and must include on-going staff development designed to address stress related to police work, family life, and alcohol use.

Stress Management and Stress Reduction Techniques

The curricula for most police academy training facilities do not include any classes on decompression practices or procedures. Yet understanding how to cope with the pressures of police work is pivotal to job satisfaction, a good home life, and a healthy attitude toward alcohol. We contend that stress management and reduction extend beyond access to the gym. Physical exercise is a mechanism to channel stress. It is not, however, the entire solution. We recommend that a mandatory class explaining how to cope with and abate anxiety needs to be incorporated into all academy programs. Aspects of the course would include nutrition and dieting practices; physical health, fitness, and exercise routines; mental wellness, imaging, and relaxation techniques; recreational, leisure, and outdoor activities; and humor, play, and amusement strategies.

Group "Rap" or Process Sessions

Conventional police practices make psychological services available to officers experiencing job-related pressure. On occasion, group sessions are held for individuals coping with similar problems (e.g., the effects of using deadly force, the aftermath of a partner killed in the line of fire). Officers tend not to be enwrapped with therapeutic assistance. Often, participation in counseling is perceived by the individual as a statement of his/her weakness, troubled conscience, or ineffectiveness. The attitude of other officers can communicate these same sentiments. We suggest that exposure to group sessions as a mechanism of peer support must occur early in the candidate's training and regularly while on the job. We maintain that by instituting group process or "rap" sessions as a part of routine police work, the perception of what counseling is all about becomes de-mystified.

The focus of the sessions can vary depending on the needs of the participants. The aims, too, can vary but would essentially include: (1) to identify and explore individual officer concerns regarding all aspects of policing; (2) to listen to and counsel individual officers through peer support; and (3)
Conclusions

This chapter conceptually explored the relationship between policing, stress, and suicide. Despite the dearth of research available, we suggested that several social, psychological, and interdepartmental factors might be at play. We also considered the role of social isolation and the impact of stress on the police profession. Furthermore, we discussed the need for more research on the topic. The police profession is under significant stress, which can lead to suicide. Policemen are faced with difficult decisions and moral dilemmas, which can take a toll on their mental health. We emphasized the importance of preventive measures and the need for ongoing training and support. Research suggests that early intervention and support can help reduce the risk of suicide among police officers. We concluded that more research is needed to understand the complex interplay between stress and suicide in the police profession.

References


Police Monitoring

Non-policing officers learn about policing twice over: while in the academy and on the job. During training, officers are taught discipline and responsibility. However, as they gain experience, they often learn that discipline and responsibility are not always enough to succeed in the police force. In the academy, officers are often trained to follow orders and respect authority. However, in the field, they must also learn to make decisions and be accountable for their actions. The police academy teaches officers the importance of discipline and respect, but it is up to them to apply these principles in their daily work.

The academy emphasizes the importance of discipline and respect, but it is up to the officers to apply these principles in their daily work. The police academy places a great deal of emphasis on discipline and respect, which are important for officers to maintain the respect of the public. However, discipline alone is not enough to keep officers safe and effective on the job. Officers must also be able to make good decisions and be accountable for their actions.

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