

# **A Leadership Perspective for Understanding Police Suicide:**

**An Analysis Based on the Suicide Attitude Questionnaire**

**Orlando Ramos**

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A LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE FOR UNDERSTANDING POLICE SUICIDE:  
AN ANALYSIS BASED ON THE SUICIDE ATTITUDE QUESTIONNAIRE

by

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## Abstract

This study examines suicide perceptions of police officers from two groups, east coast officers and west coast officers. To investigate this problem, the researcher conducted a quantitative analysis utilizing a previously validated instrument. Participants of this study voluntarily completed the Suicide Attitude Questionnaire (SUIATT), administered by the National Police Suicide Foundation. The participants consisted of 75 sworn officers from each group varying in age, education, experience, and job description. This study also examined various leadership styles and makes recommendations for leaders to improve upon or implement police suicide prevention training. Risks factors and warning signs were identified by participating officers, which may assist supervisors in identifying potential officers at risk.



## Dedication

This study is dedicated in the memory of New Jersey State Trooper John Oliva, badge #5760. Trooper Oliva will always be remembered as a loyal friend, mentor, and co-worker. The tragedy of his suicide death will never be forgotten.

Your death motivated me to research the subject of police suicide and ultimately completing my PhD. You will always be remembered by how you lived, and not how you died.

## Points to ponder

When an officer commits suicide, there are many fingers pulling the trigger.

Leaders are held responsible for those entrusted to their care. These leaders are also accountable to God for those they influence and lead.

## Acknowledgments

The completion of this doctoral journey could not be accomplished alone. In fact, many people throughout my life have contributed to this milestone...Thank you.

I would like to thank God for giving the wisdom, courage, patience, and ability to complete this academic achievement. My faith has grown through this process and I pray that this study may potentially save officers lives.

I want to thank my wife Maggie. Although you initially disagreed with the decision to continue my education, you hung in there. I appreciate the additional duties and sacrifices you have made to keep our family functioning during this challenging time. I look forward to the additional time spent with our family now that I am completed. I hope our boys; Nicholas and Evan, grow to appreciate the importance of a formal education.

Thank you to my entire family for all of your support. I want to acknowledge my Mother for her sacrifices as a single parent. You taught me to never give up on my dreams and to always strive to be an honest and respectful man. My older brother Victor, I admire your tireless work ethic and I have always valued our friendship. My younger brother Jayson, I thank you for the quality time we spend

together and I cannot wait to present you with your badge when you become a New Jersey State Trooper.

Special thanks go to Mike Harris. You've groomed me from the start. I will never forget the memories and lessons learned as a police explorer.

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A special acknowledgment goes to the National Police Suicide Foundation, especially Executive Director Robert Douglas. Thank you for your contribution to the police suicide problem over the past 20 years. You are an inspiration to me and I have enjoyed working together to combat this problem. I look forward to continued contributions together in the future.

To my brothers from Trinity Alliance Church, I enjoy our weekly bible study and thank you for your countless support and prayers.

I want to thank my closest friends: Dee, Adam, Hojo, Juan, Bernie, and Danny. Thanks for great memories countless laughs, and fun times. Thank you to my doctoral friends from the KT. The e-mail and phone support during

this process has been priceless. You are a great group of talented scholars, best of luck in becoming the newest experts in your fields. I look forward to celebrating together with our new pillow hats.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments..... iv

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION..... 1

    Introduction to the Problem..... 1

    Background of the Study..... 3

    Statement of the Problem..... 4

    Purpose of the Study..... 4

    Rationale..... 5

    Research Questions..... 6

    Significance of the Study..... 6

    Definition of Terms..... 8

    Assumptions and Limitations..... 10

    Nature of the Study..... 11

    Organization of the Remainder of the Study..... 12

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW..... 14

    Background..... 15

    Discussion..... 17

    Training..... 20

    Leadership..... 23

    Transactional Leadership..... 28

    Transformational Leadership..... 32

    Servant Leadership..... 35

    Research Design..... 38

Data Collection Methods.....	40
Analyzing Data.....	42
Mixed Methods.....	44
Triangulation.....	47
Summary.....	48
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY.....	50
Research Design.....	53
Instrumentation.....	54
Data Collection.....	55
Data Analysis.....	55
Sample.....	58
Limitations.....	59
Expected Findings.....	60
Ethical Considerations.....	61
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS.....	63
Data.....	63
Demographics.....	64
Findings.....	67
Hypotheses 1.....	67
Hypotheses 2.....	69
Hypotheses 3.....	73
Hypotheses 4.....	75
Hypotheses 5.....	75

Summary.....	76
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.	79
Discussion.....	79
Implications.....	84
Background.....	86
Critical Reflection.....	86
Organizational Culture.....	88
Lens of Autobiographical Experiences.....	90
Lens of Learner's eye.....	91
Lens of Colleague's Perception.....	92
Lens of Theoretical Literature.....	94
Recommendations.....	97
References.....	100
APPENDIX A. REQUEST TO UTILIZE SUIATT.....	109
APPENDIX B. APPROVAL TO UTILIZE SUIATT.....	110
APPENDIX C. DEMOGRAPHIC DATA.....	111
APPENDIX D. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT.....	112
APPENDIX E. LETTER OF REQUEST.....	123
APPENDIX F. LETTER OF PERMISSION.....	125



## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

### Introduction to the Problem

Dr. David Satcher, United States Surgeon General and Assistant Secretary for Health published a call to action to prevent suicide in America in 1999 (Satcher, 1999). Suicide was identified as a serious public health problem and noted as the ninth leading cause of death in the United States, claiming 31,000 deaths annually. This was a rate of 85 Americans per day. The same year, the World Health Organization identified suicide as a worldwide problem and urged participating nations to address this growing problem.

The *USA Today* newspaper conducted a study of law enforcement suicides in 1999 and estimated 300 sworn police officers per year committed suicide in America. This suicide rate was two times greater than the rate of officers killed in the line of duty (Loo, 2003). Nearly ten years later, the problem of police suicide has become even worse. According to Robert Douglas (2006), Executive Director of the National Police Suicide Foundation, 447 sworn officers committed suicide in 2005. This is three times the rate of officers currently killed in the line of

duty or one officer every 17 hours. Lester (1992) notes police suicides are often under reported and classified as accidents. Police agencies do not have a comprehensive reporting system on completed suicides, suspected suicides, and attempted suicides. There is also a negative stigma, financial motivations with life insurance, and religious reasons why suicides may be classified as accidents. These factors present a dilemma in researching this sensitive topic.

The current literature completed is quantitative in nature. Loo (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of police suicide rates. His study viewed 101 samples of existing literature on police suicide rates. Loo concluded that the rates varied due to the scope of the research. The shorter the time period in the study, the higher the suicide rates. The short time frames and smaller size agencies can increase the mean of police suicides for that year. These quantitative studies show that police suicides do take place frequently. The current research fails to address the questions why officer suicides take place and if there are any training vehicles in place to prevent police suicides from occurring.

## Background of the Study

The United States Military is an excellent comparison group to the law enforcement community. Both agencies instill discipline, utilize a unified chain of command, possess stressful occupations, and are considered public servants. United States Air Force (2001) took a proactive approach in developing a suicide awareness program. It was determined that many, if not most suicides are preventable. Since implementing their suicide awareness program, a 37 percent reduction in Air Force suicides was achieved. The Air Force commissioned a suicide prevention integrated project team to research the suicide problem.

It is unconscionable that law enforcement leaders are not following the positive example set by the armed forces, specifically the United States Air Force. The success of the military is an indication that a police suicide awareness model may reduce suicides. The early phases of program development for the Military took understanding the problem. This research is designed to enlighten leaders to the exigency of the suicide problem, evaluate and analyze current law enforcement perceptions on suicide. The

information gained may be valuable in creating a suicide awareness model in a law enforcement agency.

#### Statement of the Problem

The problem is addressing police suicide from a human resources perspective. This study seeks to examine the perceptions of police officers towards suicide. This study additionally seeks to discover information that may assist leaders in identifying risk factors and warning signs in their subordinates that may be a precursor to suicidal ideation.

#### Purpose of the Study

In order to address the problem of police suicide, leaders must acknowledge that a problem exists and be willing to understand and address it. Currently, less than two percent of the police agencies in America have a formal suicide awareness training program. However, officers are killing themselves at a rate of three times greater than being killed in the line of duty. Recently, California Highway patrol suffered the loss of 14 officers in a 16 month period to suicide. Annually, over 400 American officers a year commit suicide.

The purpose of this study is to measure the perceptions of sworn law enforcement officers, positive or negative related to attitudes toward suicide. The importance of this subject is to address the problems of police suicide from a human resources perspective. Understanding the attitudes toward suicide will enable leaders to better understand the police suicide problem and develop future suicide awareness and suicide prevention training for police officers.

#### Rationale

The National Police Suicide Foundation recently administered the Suicide Attitude Questionnaire, (SUIATT) to various police departments across the country. This research intends to utilize the raw data collected from the foundation to compare and contrast two groups. The two groups consist of an agency from the west coast and an agency from the east coast.

The benefit of using this previously collected data is the data comes from a reputable source, it is cost effective, time efficient and manageable. It would not be feasible for the researcher to travel across the country and collect data on this large of a scale.

## Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Is there a difference in suicide perceptions based on geographical locations, specifically west coast compared to east coast?

2. Is there a difference in suicide perceptions among demographic categories such as gender, time of service, rank, and job description?

3. What circumstances are more likely to make an officer consider suicide or not consider suicide as an option?

4. Is there a difference in suicide prevention training based on geographical locations?

5. Is there a need to improve upon suicide prevention training?

## Significance of the Study

This research is significant for many reasons. First, the profession of law enforcement is known to be very stressful and sometimes dangerous profession. Officers receive formal training in a military style environment to prepare them for the rigors of the profession. This formal training includes proficient use of firearms, self defense,

physical fitness training, conflict resolution, and basic police tactics. All of these subjects have one common theme, officer survival. Officers are trained in the academy that their safety is primary and their goal is to go home at the end of their shift.

This research seeks to address a gap in the officer survival training curriculum. According to the National Police Suicide Foundation, less than two percent of American law enforcement agencies have a formal police suicide awareness training program (Douglas, 2006). Resources are keenly focused on training officers to survive armed encounters and dangerous suspects. The reality is American officers kill themselves at a rate of three times higher than officers who are killed in the line of duty annually.

This research seeks to significantly address this problem from two areas, leadership and training. By understanding the perception of officers toward suicide, formal training can be improved and implemented. Discovering additional risk factors, warning signs, and indicators identified by this research may be a valuable

resource to law enforcement leaders, and may potentially save lives.

#### Definition of Terms

**Attempted Suicide:** Refers to an unsuccessful attempt to end a human life using unspecified methods (Douglas, 2006).

**Calls for service:** Is defined by the day to day events officers are exposed to which can range from low risk community contacts to high risk car stops and dangerous situations.

**Completed Suicide:** Refers to a successful attempt to end a human life using unspecified methods. This term is synonymous with committing and committed suicides.

**Critical incidents:** Refers to stressful and traumatic events that provoke a emotional, physical or stress related response (Violanti, 1996).

**Depression:** Refers to sadden, sullen mood, or lower feeling state of mind that can affect a person physically, psychologically and emotionally (Thrasher, 2001).

**Occupational Stress:** Refers to internal and external factors, pressures and burdens as a result of handling calls for service, adjusting to the organizational culture,

and interacting with supervisors and administrators (Violanti, 1995).

**Organizational Culture:** Is the personality of the organization. Culture is made up of the assumptions, values, norms, and identifiable signs of organization members, their behaviors and attitudes (Caldero & Crank, 2004).

**Psychological Autopsy:** Is defined as a post investigation of a suicide which includes the review of personal and medical records, and interviewing of co-workers and family members to determine factors leading to the suicide (Sewell, 2001).

**Risk Factors:** Professional and personal life events that can cause elevated stress and or depression (Douglas, 2006).

**SUIATT:** Is an acronym for Suicide Attitude Questionnaire (Diekstra & Kerkhof, 1988).

**Suicide Awareness Training:** Refers to a formal suicide training program which educates on prevention, risk factors, and warning signs (Douglas, 2006).

**Suicidal Ideation:** The fascination and preoccupied thought of attempting suicide (Douglas, 2006).

Sworn Officer: This term represents a full time member of a police agency and is not specific in jurisdiction, such as municipal, county, state or federal law enforcement. The terms Police Officer, Officer, Law Enforcement Professional are used to add variety and are not used to distinguish professional differences.

Warning signs: Identifiable changes in personal and professional behavior which may be an indicator of elevated stress and or depression.

#### Assumptions and Limitations

It is the researcher's assumptions that the participants in this study may be guarded in their responses due to the strong organizational culture of the police community. As a result of formal training and exposure to highly stressful situations, the participants may minimize their feelings and justify them as part of the job.

There may be differences in suicide perceptions based on experience, education, and time of service. Religion may also be a contributing factor to the officer's perception on suicide in general.

Limitations to this study include the methodology. Although quantitative methods can be more statistically significant and have greater reliability than qualitative, the information can be restrictive. Qualitative research delves deeper into understanding relationships and correlations between variables. Qualitative results may show that a relationship exists but does not qualify why it exists. The subject matter is very sensitive in nature. Officers may be reluctant and suspicious to answer honestly in fear of negative repercussions from their respective organizations.

Existing data on officer suicides is another limitation to this study. Currently there are no local, state or federal requirements that accurately memorialize officer suicides or demand agencies to report them. This discrepancy is noted in the difference in documented suicides by the Federal Uniform Crime Reports as compared to validated officer suicides recorded by the National Police Suicide Foundation.

#### Nature of the Study

This research entails the analysis of voluntary responses from participants completing the SUIATT instrument. The participants include sworn members of the