

POLICE SUICIDE

POLICE SUICIDE
ACUITY OF INFLUENCE

Michael J. Alicea

DISSERTATION.COM



Boca Raton

Police Suicide: Acuity of Influence

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ABSTRACT

According to the CDC (2005), suicide claims approximately 30,000 lives each year in the United States. The law enforcement profession is a dangerous profession that oftentimes dramatically influences an officer's perceptions of incidents often related to the repeated exposure to trauma. The intention of this research project was to explore the lived understanding of police officers regarding their acuity with respect to the subject of officer suicides. A qualitative phenomenological research was conducted, consisting of nine demographic and nine open-ended interview questions. Data were audio-recorded and transcribed throughout the interview process. The research project examined the awareness levels of police officers in a local metropolitan agency in Miami-Dade County, Florida. A review of the information provided by this research study resulted in five major themes focusing on (a) suicide prevention, (b) talking about suicide, (c) prevention training, (d) identifying available outside resources, and (e) understanding the police culture. The conclusions reached as a result of this research project could broaden the existing literature of suicide and may assist police administrators who may face the issue of police officers considering suicide.

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DEDICATION

Good-bye, brother in blue all of us are thinking of you.

You left this world way too soon, for reasons only known to you.

If only one of us knew, we certainly would have reached out to you.

Good-bye, brother in blue. Rest in peace

(Johnson, 2010)



Officer Thomas G. McEvoy
Coral Gables Police Officer
09/27/52 – 10/22/99

“Rest in Peace”

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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Problem Background

According to Kelly's (2005) research findings, the law enforcement profession is a hazardous occupation. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, Violanti, Castellano, O'Rourke and Paton's (2006) work also asserted that police officers who are often exposed to repeated distressing incidents over time may consider suicide as an option. Violanti's (2008) work on the issues of police suicide revealed that continual, demanding and distressing situations could eventually lead a police officer to be disposed to psychological issues. Police officers suffering from unresolved issues, as Kelly (2005) has asserted, in time risk their ability to make sound decisions and appropriate choices on the job, as well as in their private lives.

Research conducted by Kelly and Martin (2006) on the subject of whether suicide is real or not, in combination with Violanti's (2007) work on what he described as an epidemic in blue on police suicide, concluded that it was the foremost cause of death for police officers in the United States. When considering the subculture that is often characteristic of the law enforcement community, Burke and Mikkelsen (2007) have described the omnipresent nature of the profession. Kelly (2005) and Violanti et al. (2006) have described law enforcement as a profession that perpetuates an increased level of tension and distress which can lead to suicide as a real possibility. Tate's (2004) research revealed that the rate of suicide in the United States for police officer follows a trend that puts it at a higher frequency than the general population. Kelly and Martin, along with Violanti (2007) and Waters and Ussery (2007), suggest that the largely increased statistics on police suicides are related to the influences of alcohol, family conflicts, seclusion from one's fellow officers, hopelessness, and the accessibility of firearms. These trends and alarming statistics point out the need for a qualitative phenomenological study. It was hoped that this research model may help reveal and appreciate the lived experiences of police officers at a specific agency (The Coral Gables Police Department) in relation to the effect of a suicide that occurred there. This model may help comprehend the effect it had among other officers of the organization.

Significance of the Problem

According to Cross and Ashley (2004) and Waters and Ussery (2007), people who work in professions with increased levels of stress and trauma, as well as identifiable social role expectations, are often vulnerable to suicide ideation. Violanti and Samuels' (2007) research on the psychological perspectives associated with suicide, as well as Waters and Ussery, concluded that the law enforcement profession consistently makes vulnerable its employees and exposes them to a proliferation

of stress-related heights of suffering. Waters and Ussery put forth the notion that the longstanding effects of stress often lead to an inability to cope effectively with daily situations.

According to the Officer Down Memorial Pages (ODMP, 2004 - 2010), a significant number of police officers (well within the 100+ range) die in the line of duty each year. Of noteworthy significance, within that length of time, police officer suicides averaged 400+ per year, contributing to what O'Hara (2009) concluded is a significant increase in law enforcement deaths nationwide. Waters and Ussery (2007) have also concluded that substance and alcohol abuse, as well as marital issues are major contributors of police officer suicide. Crank's (2004) research on police culture, as well as Lejoyeux et al.'s (2008) work on the characteristics associated with attempted suicide, asserted that it was often preceded by the use or abuse of alcohol when performed in union with a common police practice called "choir practice". Crank further asserts that the ritualistic performance of choir practice is usually associated with the excess consumption of alcohol by police officers in an effort to minimize the stress often associated with their work, and in the process facilitates an increased bonding with fellow officers.

Kelly and Martin's (2006) research on police suicides found that oftentimes, police officers who suffer from psychological disorders will often go to great lengths to disguise any signs of distress through the abuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications. By far, depression is the most common disorder related to suicide. Andrew et al. (2008) and Bertolote, Fleischmann, De Leo and Wasserman (2004) reviewed psychiatric diagnoses and the evidence associated with suicide; nationwide, those who are successful in committing suicide are often diagnosed with depression. While depression is a treatable disease, Andrew et al. and Cross and Ashley (2004) have indicated that it is an affliction that is often problematic at best to diagnose because it imitates the symptoms of other debilitating disorders, such as alcohol abuse, melancholy, exhaustion, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Accordingly, uncharacteristic symptoms of depression will very often mask the underlying disease. DePaulo Jr. and Horvitz (2002) indicate that a skilled therapist might misinterpret the hidden symptoms of depression and may make a misdiagnosis in the process. O'Hara (2009) and Violanti's (2009) research on suicide in general affirmed Tuck's (2009) findings with regard to integrating a spiritual element into law enforcement. They asserted that medicating oneself heightens the prospect of further disguising the symptoms of depression which frequently are ignored by a police officer's family and fellow officers.

According to Andrew et al. (2008), police officers who commit suicide, do so because they are often depressed. Waters and Ussery (2007) support the idea that an adequate peer support group system facilitates and can help overcome a police officer's inclination for isolation, in part due to learned helplessness caused by depression. Kelly (2005) concurs with Waters and Ussery that very often police

administrators are uncertain as to how to effectively address problematic circumstances that can arise in their officers. Kelly, as well as Violanti (2003) and Hackett and Violanti (2003) concluded that the limited availability to psychological resources often leaves a police officer susceptible to depression and suicide. As is often the case, police officers are reluctant to seek the aid of police administrators and/or line supervisors and will oftentimes agonize alone. Crank (2004) suggests that there exists a concern with respect to trust and occupational segmentation between police officers and the administration. Police officers and police administration have distinct cultural norms; police administrators will insist on conformity of conduct through what is perceived as coercion. Crank goes on to say that cultural and operational differentiation will very often exist between the police officer and those in the administration and these disparities have a tendency to be noticeable over a period of time reinforcing a police officer's suspicion of the administration.

The administrative system is often difficult to deal with for many police officers, and is considered the leading cause of stress for many officers (Crank, 2004). Schafer's (2008) research concluded that administration and its managers represented a micro-managing quandary for most police officers. Schafer further asserts that micro-managing takes place when administrators do not permit police officers to develop as decision makers in their own right. He asserts clearly that police officers must be allowed to meet with failure from time to time. The ability to make mistakes in the field facilitates a police officer's professional growth, and can assert confidence in a police officer's judgment to make independent decisions. Schafer also states quite clearly that the inability of a police officer to exercise discretion in the way of decision-making practices can lead to stress and can cause officers to doubt their own competency levels.

In the process of demonstrating or masking the signs and symptoms of stress, Tuck's (2009) research revealed that there is a direct correlation to the declining mental health function of a police officer and the consequent vulnerability to any negative contact with the public. Kappeler, Sluder, and Alpert (1998) described this as the dark side of law enforcement. Kelly's (2005) research revealed that as a rule, police administrators are normally more concerned with out-of-place behavior and/or the misconduct of a police officer rather than with officers' health and ability to function at an optimum level. Waters and Ussery (2007) noted that although there are a wealth of preventative treatment programs available that focus on stress reduction, many police officers do not avail themselves of these programs.

In police departments, there is an overwhelming cultural negativity often associated with attending a mental health program and or seeing a trained mental health counselor. There is also an overriding correlation to what Kelly (2005) has described as deteriorating mental health functioning and relationship concerns at work and home. In addition, illnesses and mishaps on the job, and depression

associated with self-medication compound the issue. The ability to function optimally in one's profession requires what Kelly has asserted is a well-balanced mental health attitude. Blum (2000) affirmed the concept that police officers live and work under pressure and are discouraged from seeking help. Accordingly, Diamond's (2003) research on the barriers to treatment and police officer suicide indicate that a police officer has no special immunity to depression.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research project was to explore the lived experiences of police officers concerning their perceptions and or consequential effects with respect to police officer suicide. Neuman's (2005) social research methodology indicates that qualitative research facilitates the gathering of facts and evidence that would be recognizable in the form of signs, subjects and significance. The use of a phenomenological approach can facilitate detecting a police officer's ideation for considering suicide as a remedy when in turmoil and despair. Moustakas (1994) recognized the significance of being mindful of the role that perception plays in phenomenon research.

This research project examined the awareness levels of police officers from a local metropolitan agency in the Miami-Dade County, Florida. The Centers of Disease Control (CDC, 2005) classified police officers as being a high-risk population with a high propensity rate of suicide. Male police officers are more apt to commit suicide than their civilian population counterparts and twice as likely to commit suicide as their female counterparts (CDC). Because of this alarming statistic, further study is warranted.

Research Question

The following research question constituted the core of this dissertation project:

What are the lived experiences concerning the incidence of suicide among law enforcement officers?

Open-Ended Interview Questions

Data collection consisted of a series of interviews whereby police officers were queried on nine demographic items in addition to nine interview questions. It was hoped that having police officers involved in this research project may prove useful in providing awareness and acquaintance of their lived experiences. As such, this may in fact contribute to understanding the probable factors that mental health plays on police officers, and the level that stress plays when personal safety is an issue.

The interview questions were comprehensive, permitting the police officers to expand upon them when needed. The demographic questions were:

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your race?
3. What is your age?
4. Are you a sworn law enforcement officer with Coral Gables Police Department in the County of Miami-Dade, Florida?
5. What kind of law enforcement organization are you working with (State, County or Municipal Agency)?
6. What title (Police Officer Sergeant, Lieutenant, Major, Assistant Chief or Chief of Police) or position do you have with your law enforcement organization?
7. How many years have you been employed as a sworn law enforcement police officers?

The list of open-ended questions that were used in this research project included the following:

1. What type(s) of difficult situations have you or another police officer come across in your law enforcement career that would lead you to consider suicide as a choice?
2. In respect of your experience with your present law enforcement organization, what type of in-service educational program did you undertake concerning the topic of suicide?
Thinking back on the training you received with your present agency, what could have been done to improve and enhance the efficacy of the suicide education (if any)?
3. Considering your experience with the agency with which you are employed with, what ways does your police organization demonstrate concern about your welfare including the issue of suicide?
4. What efforts do your peers make to diminish the strains that depression often exerts on fellow officers who may consider suicide as an option?
5. How do you view the police culture encumbering an officer from the ability to look for help on the subject of suicide?
6. In respect of your experiences with your present law enforcement organization, what types of training programs have you had that would have addressed the issue of suicidal thoughts?
7. How do police supervisors and command staff speak to the issue of police officer suicide in your law enforcement organization?
8. How can police supervisors and command staff ward off the risk of suicide as an option for your fellow officers?

Limitations and Delimitations

As Neuman (2005) has asserted, in-person interviews limit a police officer's ability to be honest, given the time constraints that are often a precipitating factor. Allowing for time constraints, police officers may have been inclined to hurry through an interview for the sake of completing the process. Very often, time was measured with respect to one's particular work issues; these were easily resolved accordingly by prearranging appointments at a time that is appropriate for the police officers. On the whole, individuals may be prejudiced, and these feelings and opinions may have a place in a qualitative research study. Qualitative investigators do not endeavor to oversimplify the results acquired; rather, complexity can afford a distinguishable degree of examination of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In the face of scant research on police officer suicide and the misclassification of police officer suicides, it was reasonable to assume that there was a significant limitation of truthfulness by police officers with regard to the questions offered.

Crank (2004) asserts that a participant's reluctance to being forthright when answering sensitive questions may be in part due to the subject matter. The somatic and sometimes emotional difficulties encountered can create limitations and may deter a police officer's ability to be open. In an effort at thwarting such limitations, the following steps were taken with all police officers in order to safeguard their participation in the interview process.

1. Police Officers were permitted sufficient time to answer all questions.
2. Police Officers were permitted sufficient time to have any of their requests answered.
3. A participant's questions or concerns were addressed when solicited.
4. In an event that a participant requested a break, adequate time was afforded for the request.

Moustakas (1994) indicates that qualitative research design allows for copious explanation of the phenomenon being researched, which provides reliability and credibility to the responses. Taking into consideration all the steps needed to facilitate openness, appreciating that a police officer's explanations can adjust with time was weighed.

In recognizing the generalizability of this type of research, Creswell (2005) asserts that the preparation and assessment of a qualitative research project requires an aptitude for drawing accurate interpretations from the data, and subsequently applying them to the research conditions. Creswell advances the concept that for external credibility, participants should be randomly selected.

In order to increase the transferability of the research, a random sample of participants was selected from the Coral Gables Police Department. Transferability was correlated to the results of the research and were applied to the population of the law enforcement community on a larger scale, i.e., within the County of

Miami-Dade (Neuman, 2005). According to Crank (2004), since law enforcement organizations are generally regulated by their various jurisdictions, they can have differences in training and educational requirements, as well as in the police culture itself. A smaller sample size limits the possibility of transferability to the greater population.

Definition of Terms

The following is a list of definitions which are a part of the familiar lexicon often associated with the law enforcement community. Terms and jargon that are emblematic to a particular profession, in particular law enforcement, very often have dissimilar meanings to the public in general.

Brotherhood denotes a sense of solidarity between the men and women of a police organization. It represents a form of honor and solidarity in the law enforcement organization, encouraging allegiance and constancy and *esprit-de-corps* (Cranks, 2004).

Choir Practice denotes a ceremonial time that police officer's drink with one another as a way of reveling together with no consideration to rank differences (Crank, 2004). Choir practice often happens during off-duty hours.

Code of Silence is what Hall (2002) has described in his research on police culture as the perception that police officers will never inform on another police officer in spite of the fact that a police officer may have compromised him/herself.

Completed Suicide as defined by Shneidman (1985) involves the act of taking one's own life.

Critical Incident Stress (CIS) as described by Kureczka's (1996) research on stress in law enforcement denotes a type of stress ensuing from situations which in time become overpowering. Such events are sudden and powerful and fall outside the range of ordinary human experiences. Because they happen so abruptly, Kureczka asserts that they can have a strong emotional impact even upon an experienced and well-trained officer.

Critical Incident Stress Involvement as described in Mitchell and Everly's (1993) research on stress debriefing among emergency service workers, is an all-inclusive support group that interacts accordingly with police officers to assist with issues associated with the emotional elements often caused by stress.

Culture is defined as aspects of human cognition and activity that are derived from what we learn as members of society, keeping in mind that one learns a great deal from what one is never explicitly taught (Monaghan & Just, 2000).

Line-of-Duty Death (LODD) denotes the death of a police officer while on duty. It usually includes, but is not limited to, deaths that are accidental in nature: assaults, crash accidents, duty-related illnesses, shootings, heart attacks, motorcycle accidents, being struck by a vehicle, vehicle pursuit chases, and

vehicular assaults, as defined by the Officer Down Memorial Page, Inc. (ODMP, 2009).

Quasi-Suicide denotes attempted suicide with less than total lethality (Shneidman, 1985).

Rookie is a term used by Henry (2004) with respect to a member with limited tenure and experience as a police officer. The probationary period, according to Henry, for a rookie police officer is usually a 1.5 to 2-year process.

Suicide Ideation denotes the consideration of suicide as an option as defined by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2009).

Veteran is a term used to describe an officer who is no longer on probation (Henry, 2004).

The-Thin-Blue-Line is a phrase that symbolically denotes a sense of responsibility by the police officer that separates order from anarchy (Crank, 2004).

Road Warrior denotes a person in a police organization who recognizes the connection between the organization and the police officers who are principally involved in the work of providing public servant duties.

Importance of the Study

It is hoped that this project may yield evidence that could benefit police organizations and management and may shed light and awareness of a police officers' sense of concern with regard to the complex issue of police suicide. Moreover, this research project may provide educational opportunities that address the difficult issue of suicide in police departments and the related mental health issues of depression, stress and or mental illness. The potential for a compulsory preemptive training program could significantly diminish the stigma often connected with the psychological issues associated with suicide among police officers. Kelly (2005) asserts that the recognition of police officer suicide by administrators may provide eligibility for acquiring federal monies for additional training on the issue of police suicides. The conclusions reached in this research project may assist administrators who face the issue of police officers who are prone to depression and who may consider suicide as an option. Overton and Medina (2008) believe that the stigma of mental illness could be minimized by further discussion and exploration of suicide ideation.

Kelly's (2005) research on the incidents of police officer suicide is a subject that is often avoided by many law enforcement departments. Violanti (2007) discovered a propensity by some law enforcement departments to misclassify, misrepresent and or conceal the incidence of a police officer's suicide. Violanti asserts that many law enforcement suicides are often intentionally misclassified. This speaks to what Douglas (1997) has asserted is the lack of attention concerning the prevalence of police officer suicide in this country.

Summary

This chapter provided information on suicide in the law enforcement community. It is hoped by the researcher that this project will add to the existing literature on police officer suicide and help identify factors that could conceivably reduce the number of suicides throughout the law enforcement culture. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2005) has identified suicide as a public health concern. In addition, Satcher (1999) noted that suicide has grown to epidemic proportions in retrospect to the law enforcement community, a further reason to expand research on the topic. Further, Shneidman's (1996) research on the suicidal mind has affirmed that the general increase of suicide rates often happens in an environment or system where the theme of suicide is considered a forbidden subject. This is further compounded by the law enforcement community's tendency to disguise and misinterpret suicide as an accident because of the taboo-like nature of suicide, and in consideration of insurance compensation. By failing to acknowledge the vicarious liabilities shared by police officers and administrators alike, this further promulgates what Clark and White (2003) have asserted that depression and suicide remain virtually "made-up."

Violanti and Samuels (2007) noted that within the very ranks of the law enforcement community, a seemingly negative overtone is oftentimes associated with the suicide of a fellow law enforcement officer (ODMP, 2009). Lejoyeux et al. (2008) have indicated that a significant contributor to law enforcement suicide as a viable option for some is the associated abuse of alcohol and or controlled substance abuse. Waters and Ussery (2007) have also subscribed to this opinion, further asserting that person(s) in general working in high-risk and or high-stress occupations and who are repeatedly exposed to traumatic events throughout their careers, run the risk of making themselves vulnerable to suicide as an option (Violanti, 2007). Cross and Ashley (2004) have put forth the notion that the law enforcement culture continually perpetuates suicide as an option of choice through a series of factors often associated with silence, dishonor and an ubiquitous acceptance of the unwritten code of silence.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Plumbing police officers' perceptions about suicide may facilitate what Kelly (2005) sees as a means towards developing an effective intervention program that addresses the phenomenon of suicide among police officers. The prevailing absence of consideration and emphasis on identifying the triggers that lead a police officer to consider suicide communicates what Hackett and Violanti (2003) have described as a resounding message to the rank-and-file that suicide is not important enough for consideration by police administrators.

This literature review includes an examination of the past, as well as the current information concerning the perception of police officers with regard to depression and suicide. Cross and Ashley (2004) and Violanti (2007) all assert that an examination of risk factors would be beneficial to more understanding of police suicide. This researcher project examined scholarly works that are relevant to the subject of suicide, with an emphasis on investigating why police officers commit suicide.

The Law Enforcement Culture

Waters and Ussery (2007) have asserted that the law enforcement culture influences an officer's perceptions of incidents of trauma. Prolonged contact with distressing incidents can lead to outcomes that Gray and Lombardo (2004) characterize as making police officers vulnerable and susceptible to the psychological issues associated with suicide among police officers. In addition, Waters and Ussery clarified the importance of the impact of traumatic incidents over a repeated period of time and how they are experienced by police officers. According to Blum (2000), a police officer learns to diminish and even disregard these emotional disturbances, and in so doing insulates him/herself from stressful and traumatic events. Nonetheless, the denial of these emotions, according to Weisinger's (1985) research on anger, makes the officer in fact more susceptible to stress induced psychological disorders. In the absence of support from one's peers, a police officer subsequently learns to maneuver away from what Weisinger describes as any form of dialogue that could conceivably explore their feelings with respect to the traumatic events experienced throughout their career. Cross and Ashley (2004) assert that this reluctance underscores how silence can contribute to an officer's distress, thereby contributing to an increased risk of suicide as a way out.

Hassell's (2006) research on police organizations infers that "culture" is difficult to describe. Hassell defines it as a process that facilitates an appreciation for what Crank (2004) has also described as the behaviors, rituals, and structure that