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Police Officer Suicide: Where are we now?

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Take a guess: How many police officers commit suicide each year? Before you settle on your final answer consider that some studies indicate that police officers are eight times more likely to kill themselves than to die by criminal assault and the National Police Suicide Foundation reports that two to three times as many cops end their own lives than are killed on-the-job. (Dave Grossi, Law Officer, April 1, 2007) Also, consider that the average citizen is twice more likely to kill themselves than to be killed by someone else, suicide is the 11th highest cause of death for all demographic groups, and in 2005 there were 32,637 reported suicide deaths. (Pamela Kulbarsh, Law Officer, August 21, 2008)

Thinking twice about your original answer? You should, because the conservative number for estimated police officer suicides in the U.S. each year is 300, compared with 132 Line of Duty Deaths in 2008. We can only guess at a conservative number for several reasons. First, not all suicides look like suicides. Not all suicides are gruesome gunshot scenes that may be easily identified as a self-inflicted gunshot wound, but the tragic vehicle accident that happened for no obvious reason or the many other questionable situations where a death occurred that makes you wonder. Second, law enforcement agencies have been prone in the past to classify even an apparent suicide as an accidental death to uphold the honor of the agency, to preserve the memory of the officer, or just to support the mourning family. Don't get me wrong, probably honorable and sincere, but it does make it difficult to track actual numbers. This brings us to the third reason; no one tracks statistics on police officer suicides. While some groups may try, there is no standardized reporting or documentation standards in place and no one in particular tasked with this responsibility.

In Dalton, Georgia just before 7:15 AM an officer shoots himself in the department locker room on a Saturday morning. The Chief stated, "We're pretty shocked, saddened and bewildered. Police Officers have a high level of camaraderie and this is going to take us some time to work through." To his credit, the Chief provided counseling to help his officers deal with this situation.

In Chicago, Illinois on a Monday morning an officer shoots his two children in the head, killing one, and then kills himself. One woman interviewed said, "We knew about his problems, but every time he talked about his kids he would have a smile on his face. He was so proud of his job. He was a great cop. I can't believe he would do something like this, especially to his kids."

While apparently no one saw what was coming, probably this person's first statement tells us a lot when she recognized that he had problems and someone knew about it.

Why? This is always a question for which there are no easy answers. Many experts have various reasons: easy access to firearms, the nature of the job, police bureaucracy, the criminal justice system, odd hours, unpredictable overtime, alcoholism, marriage problems, and violent behavior are just a few. For every possible reason that can be imagined there often is a reason for someone to think the opposite. I think that it is a culmination of many problems that would bring someone to harm themselves in such a manner, especially police officers. It has always been my belief that the average police officer often sees more violence in one day than the average citizen sees in a lifetime and I have no doubt that this is a contributing cause. No matter the particular reason, or conglomeration of reasons, it is happening and we, as police officers, need to be aware and be prepared should we enter the danger zone.

My first venture into this subject matter was over 10 years ago when I authored an article for the Southern Lawman magazine. Over the past 10 years not much has changed. One positive change is a growing awareness among law enforcement officers and agencies. More training, awareness, and intervention takes place now than ever before. Possibly the nightmare of September 11, 2001 had an impact. After that tragic day it was estimated that over half of the emergency responders involved in that event would commit suicide within a 10-year period. Unfortunately many have, but statistical data is not completely correct because many of those brave souls were taken by catastrophic illness before the time frame indicated will run its course.

What can we do? Be aware of the daily emotional status for us and our partners. Should any sign of serious problems become apparent, they must be confronted. It takes peers and professionals to break through all the barriers that we build to hide our problems as police officers. We must be aware of any demon that kills from within as vigilantly as we train to challenge the criminal element that has the potential to kill us daily. Agencies must be prepared to deal with these types of problems and train their officers to be aware of this potential killer. We must get away from the stigma that we are stronger than steel and realize that we have emotions that must be dealt with in a healthy, not destructive, manner. While we cannot stop all tragedy, we can slow it down, learn more coping skills, and be more vigilant in our attempt to prevent this from happening as often as it does.

I read an article within the past week that deals with budget cuts and the current economic crisis. It points out that agencies always have the money to pay for an officer's funeral when it could have been much better spent on equipment and training that may have kept the officer alive. Same point here!

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