

“Can the Fitness-for-Duty Evaluation be Useful in Assessing Risk of Death by Suicide for Police Officers?”

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2019 COPPS Conference Presentation Proposal

April 25-27, 2019

While there has been much concern over the problem of suicide in the general U.S. population and other sectors of society, (e.g., the military), less attention has been focused on the increase in suicides among law enforcement officers. Yet, combining data compiled by non-profit organizations Badge of Life and Blue H.E.L.P suggests suicides among police officers increased 30% in 2017 (140 in 2017, up from 108 in 2016) and another 14% in 2018 (159 in 2018, up from 140 in 2017). A common explanation in the law enforcement community for the incidence of police suicide is that unaddressed emotional pain among police officers compounds feelings of ineffectiveness in the workplace and home environments. Police officers are called upon, repeatedly, as first responders in crisis situations they must face involving trauma, violence and death (Hollar, Daniels & Dawkins, 2018). These factors, and others, may place law enforcement officers at greater risk of death by suicide than members of the general population and specific subgroups. Among efforts to address the problem of police suicides, a review of the literature and responses of police departments reveal a need: a) to gain better understanding of suicidal behavior by drawing upon leading theories of suicide and applying them to the law enforcement community; b) to develop workshops on suicide prevention for educating and training of police officers in identifying potential risk factors for suicidal behavior; and c) to develop practical strategies such as attempting to reduce the number of stress-provoking encounters to which individual officers may be exposed on a frequent basis or increasing the availability of psychological services for law enforcement personnel. Although suicide ideation (i.e., a serious suicidal desire) has been identified as a major proximal psychological cause of suicide (Joiner, 2005), no empirical research can be found which directly addresses other risk factors that may be involved in gaining better understanding of death by suicide among police officers.

The present study proposes to address this shortcoming by using data from fitness-for-duty- evaluations of police officers conducted over the past 15 years (Dawkins et al., 2007) to identify factors that may place officers at risk for attempted or actual suicide. The research question is: Do police officers who attempt or commit suicide exhibit characteristics that differ from their counterparts who do not attempt or commit suicide? In this exploratory study, the research question will be addressed by comparing two groups of police officers in a large, urban police department who underwent fitness- for-duty evaluations between 2003 and 2018. The first group includes officers who attempted or committed suicide after the evaluation, while the second group will be officers who underwent fitness-for-duty-evaluations over the same time period but did not, subsequently, attempt or commit suicide. The comparisons will include: a) reasons for referral for the fitness evaluation, b) situational factors and life circumstances at the time of the referral and c) personality characteristics based on clinical interview findings and psychological test results. Despite the small size of the subsamples, appropriate controls (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) will be introduced where possible. Based on results of the analysis showing the extent to which the group involved in suicidal behavior differs from the non-suicidal group, it may be possible to identify a set of factors that placed the officers in the suicidal group at greater risk for engaging in suicidal behavior. Implications for using data from fitness-for-duty evaluations to make recommendations related to suicidal risk potential, along with theory (understanding suicide among law enforcement officers) and practice (devising strategies for education and prevention) will be discussed.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives are as follows:

1. To gain an understanding of the proximal and distal causes of suicide in the general U. S. population based on theories of suicide behavior and recent research on the problem;
2. To identify situational factors, life circumstances, personality and other psychological characteristics which may place police officers and other law enforcement personnel at risk for suicidal behavior;
3. To devise education and prevention strategies which can serve as protective mechanisms against situational factors, life circumstances, personality and psychological characteristics, and other factors that may place police officers and other law enforcement personnel at risk for suicidal behavior.

References

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