

# Leadership's Role in Curbing Law Enforcement Suicide

*by* Scott Sanders

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TIME SUBMITTED	18-NOV-2018 09:38AM (UTC-0500)	WORD COUNT	8366
SUBMISSION ID	1041185903	CHARACTER COUNT	49237

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Scott D. Sanders

Granite State College

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore what role leadership plays in curbing law enforcement suicide. Suicide has become a prevalent problem within the law enforcement community, and this paper first sets out to establish a foundation of the problem and identify possible causes for this trend. Research has established the seriousness of the problem. Several studies and articles point to the necessary and critical role law enforcement leadership needs to play in order to address this issue. Specifically, leadership needs to embrace the ideas of organization-wide change by making the issue of suicide a priority. Most importantly, leaders must prioritize the creation and adoption of training and prevention programs with a heavy focus on intervention.

*Keywords:* suicide, law enforcement leadership, prevention, intervention, culture

## Leadership's Role in Curbing Law Enforcement Suicide

### **Introduction**

Suicide is a topic that can be difficult to talk about for most people. I believe that it would be challenging to find an adult in our country that hasn't been affected in some capacity by the suicide of a peer, friend, or a loved one. It's a problem that knows no barriers as far as; gender, race, socioeconomic status, or culture. Unfortunately, certain groups among our society experience mental health conditions and suicides at an elevated rate compared to the general population, and one of those groups is our nation's law enforcement officers. According to the Ruderman Family Foundation (n.d.), they found the rate of suicide amongst law enforcement officers to be 17/100,000, compared to the general population at a rate of 13/100,000.

Efforts by organizations, like the Badge of Life (n.d.), have helped to bring much-needed attention to the problem of suicide within the law enforcement community by presenting hard to ignore facts and statistics. What makes this trend seen within the law enforcement community so concerning was well expressed by John Violanti (2014), who stated:

One would expect that the police suicide rates should be lower than they are, given that they are an employed, healthy, and psychologically tested group. Certainly, they should be lower than the U.S. general population, because this reference group includes the institutionalized, mentally ill, and unemployed (p. 116).

The law enforcement community is a group of people that on paper should be well suited for the stress and trauma they encounter daily within their profession, but the numbers paint a very different picture.

Having been a law enforcement officer for over 10 years, the topic of law enforcement suicide is personally significant to me. Professionally, my role as a police chief takes this issue

from being a matter of personal importance to a matter requiring my full and immediate attention. I'm entrusted with providing a safe and welcoming environment for the residents and the visitors of our community, but I also have an obligation to provide the same environment within the walls of our police department, to take care of the men and women of our agency who selfishly put their physical and mental well-being on the line every day. Fostering a healthy working environment for our employees is so critical to the foundation of our department that it is listed as one of three tenets on our department's mission statement. Having a concern for the well-being of our employees and including it in our mission statement is a great first step in making everyone's overall health a priority, but this can only serve as a foundation for is to build upon.

The information gained through this research will provide a deeper understanding of the problem of law enforcement suicide and the role that leadership can play in curbing it. This information will help law enforcement leaders be more aware of the issue and will provide them with different perspectives and tools to be able to serve better the people that they lead and work with day-to-day. The findings of this research will be a vital component in further developing law enforcement leadership abilities and assist leaders to be more effective for their officer's and the community they serve.

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the role leadership can play in curbing law enforcement suicide. Every day in our country, law enforcement officers and other first responders put their physical safety on the line to help members of the communities they serve. What is often forgotten is the physiological impact these incidents, coupled with other stressful aspects of their professions, have on the mental well-being of the first responders involved. This literature review will help shed light on this important topic in an attempt to put forth recommendations to address the issue of law enforcement suicide. In this review, I will discuss the problem, the cause, barriers, and ultimately a robust discussion on the role of law enforcement leadership.

When considering the significant amount of information on the topic of law enforcement suicide and some of the identified and apparent contributing factors, I believe that it becomes critically important to understand what role leadership can play in curbing law enforcement suicide. It is my hope that through my research I can further identify instances where leadership has failed officers or entire organizations and also search out examples of where leadership has been successful to help further put forth best practices that can be applied in any law enforcement organization across the globe.

#### **The Problem**

Law enforcement suicide isn't a new problem, in fact, it has been a matter of concern within the law enforcement community for decades. In 1996 the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released a bulletin titled "Preventing Police Suicide" by Baker and Baker (1996). Almost twenty-five years later, the topic of law enforcement suicide has remained a common theme in law enforcement publications and research studies. Despite the continued attention, the number

of law enforcement suicides in the United States is increasing and outpacing other causes of work-related deaths. This point was further emphasized in a white paper authored by Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018), who stated, “both police officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty” (p. 7).

According to the Officer Down Memorial Page (n.d.), sixty-four police officers were killed by firearms in the line of duty, and another twenty-one died in automobile accidents in 2016. These two causes of death are consistently the two leading causes of line of duty death for law enforcement officers in the United States. During that same year, according to Kulbarsh (2017), one hundred and eight officers committed suicide. The information contained in Kulbarsh's article is based on statistical information collected by the Badge of Life (n.d.), a non-profit organization, which tracked law enforcement suicide. The Badge of Life (n.d.) had released statistical reports on law enforcement suicide every two years, starting in 2008, though, in 2018 announced they would no longer collect this information; rather they would continue to focus their efforts on awareness and prevention. As part of this announcement, the Badge of Life (n.d.) expressed the need for “mandatory reporting of all suicides by chief law enforcement executives into a national repository, possibly the Center of Disease Control (CDC), National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) or other another body with the capabilities to manage this important data”. The Officer Down Memorial Page (n.d.), on the other hand, provides up to date information on line of duty law enforcement deaths that is updated within hours of a reported death.

The work done by both the Officer Down Memorial Page (n.d.) and the Badge of Life (n.d.) is essential to both the law enforcement profession as a whole and their families, but they also provide a stark reminder of how the issue of law enforcement suicide is viewed in the



profession and beyond. Despite the alarming numbers and apparent frequency, the personal stories and overall statistics are much harder to find in regards to law enforcement suicide.

Unlike line of duty deaths, according to Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018), "the vast majority of first responder suicides are not covered by the mainstream media, and the public is not given the opportunity to celebrate the lives lost" (p. 8). This stands as a significant reason as to why the issue of law enforcement suicide is not a widely recognized problem in our society.

### **Population Comparisons**

When considering the issue of suicide in the law enforcement community, it is necessary to analyze and evaluate suicide statistics compared to other populations. This allows for a further analysis that may help to identify consistent patterns in regards to both causation and prevention/treatment. A broader range of statistics as to whether or not law enforcement officers actually commit suicide at a higher rate than the general population is found in the literature. There are several possible explanations for the difference in statistics, as Violanti (1995) explained, "researchers often find that information on officer suicide either is not collected or departments are reluctant to allow access to such data, and in addition, police suicides may be misclassified routinely as either accidents or undetermined deaths" (p. 19).

According to the Ruderman Family Foundation (n.d.), "PTSD and depression rates among firefighters and police officers have been found to be as much as 5 times higher than the rates within the civilian population, which causes these first responders to commit suicide at a considerably higher rate (firefighters: 18/100,000; police officers: 17/100,000; general population 13/100,000)". In the white paper, authored by Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018), they state that depression rates among law enforcement officers range between 9%-31% of that population, versus the general public, 6.7% (p. 12). They also stated that the prevalence of PTSD

in the law enforcement community is around 35% compared to 6.8% in the general public (p. 12).

While these statistics are undisputedly alarming, there is research that shows that increased rates of police suicide have not always historically been detected. For example, according to Mishara and Martin (2012), "New York City police officers who died from 1977 to 1986 had suicide rates equal or slightly lower than the city's resident population. A Province of Quebec study found similar findings: The male suicide rate was equivalent to the standardized rate for males in the general population," and the authors went on to explain, "more recent reports confirm the substantial variations in police suicide rates" (p. 162). Based on this research, it requires further consideration as to whether solely being a law enforcement officer places member of this community at an increased risk; there are other possible attributing factors that must be considered like organizational structure, size of the organization, training, and the department's region/location. The need for this further consideration was evident as a result of the research of Violanti, Robinson, and Shen (2013), who explained, "smaller police departments, for example, had a significantly higher suicide rate than larger departments" (p. 290).

### **Causation**

Working as a law enforcement officer is one of the most physically and mentally challenging professions in our modern society. The profession regularly presents officers with stressful situations that can pose a danger to their long-term overall health and mental well-being and force them to make life-altering decisions in a matter of seconds. Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018) explain that "first responders witness horror on a daily basis. These men and women, including firefighters, law enforcement personnel, and emergency medical services (EMS)

workers, have front row seats to the horrendous aftermath of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, violent domestic disputes, traffic accidents, and more” (p. 8-9). Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018) ultimately conclude, “these professionals embody astounding bravery and resilience, but at the end of the day, they are only human” (p. 9).

The literature reveals several consistent themes as to possible significant contributing factors that lead to law enforcement suicide. The most widely mentioned contributing factor was job-related stress. According to Violanti (1995), “the high stress of police work generally is cited as a primary contributing factor. The constant barrage of stressors inherent with danger, and for police managers, the pressures of administration, can overwhelm even the strongest person” (p. 19). Violanti, Robinson, and Shen (2013) draw a connection between depression, as previously outlined, and stress when they stated, “depression, possibly associated with stress and suicide ideation, may be possible precipitants of increased police suicide risk” (p. 290).

Another often mentioned contributing factor to law enforcement suicide is connected to the availability of firearms. Violanti (1995), explained, “another factor that distinguishes police officers from the general population also has been implicated in the high number of police suicides. That is, most law enforcement officers carry or have access to firearms. An ongoing study of police suicides in the United States reveals that 95 percent involved the use of the officer's service weapon” (p. 19). Further evidence of the correlation between the availability of firearms and suicide was made by Violanti (1995), when he stated, “another study compared suicides in New York City and London. While the police suicide rate in New York City was twice that of the general population, the police suicide rate in London, where officers do not carry firearms, was similar to that of the city's civilian population” (p. 19).

Though compelling arguments as to the significant contributing factors of law enforcement suicide can be made, there is research that challenges these theories and offers alternative factors for consideration. As a result of their research, Rouse et al. (2015), offered an alternative theory that stated, "exposure to traumatic on duty critical incidents was not a primary theme" (p. 79) associated with law enforcement suicide. Rather, Rouse et al. (2015) concluded, "the findings challenge the dominant theoretical perspective that law enforcement training, vocational culture, and exposure to traumatic on-duty events generate cognitive restriction and then patterns of substance abuse for those who complete suicide within this vocation" (p. 79). The authors concluded that more attention must be paid to pre-employment testing to help identify individuals that show signs of potential mental health or substance abuse problems before being hired. Their assessment appeared to be supported by a statement made by Violanti et al. (2009), who concluded, "further inquiry is necessary to help clarify precipitating factors or exacerbating conditions which account for unexplained variance in police suicide rates" (p. 42).

### **Barriers**

While the problem of law enforcement suicide may not be as obvious or realized by many, both internally and externally to the law enforcement community, the barriers that exist within the profession that restrict or prohibit an officer from seeking assistance are much more evident to everyone. Law enforcement, much like the military, function in an extremely rigid hierarchal environment, which in and of itself can significantly impact the resources available to a member of an organization based on where they find themselves in the hierarchy. Throughout the literature, the culture within the law enforcement community is a continued area of focus when looking at law enforcement suicide and often cited as a significant barrier. Baker (2011),

proclaimed that, “we must acknowledge and investigate the role police culture has in suicide prevention and intervention” (p. 36).

Baker and Baker (1996) placed particular emphasis on the problem of overcoming obstacles to intervention. They explained how difficult obstacles could be to overcome: “even when a problem eventually is acknowledged, the affected officers often resist seeking help for fear of losing their jobs, being demoted, or having their personal problems exposed for public ridicule” (p. 2). In two decades since Baker and Baker (1996) authored this bulletin, the barriers they described are still widely acknowledged as significant obstacles contributing to the broader cultural problem towards law enforcement suicide.

In July of 2013 the International Association of Chiefs of Police, in partnership with the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), U.S. Department of Justice, hosted *Breaking the Silence: A National Symposium on Law Enforcement Officer Suicide and Mental Health*. The symposium set out to establish a national strategy to address mental health problems and suicide with the law enforcement community. A report was published in 2014 by the IACP that provided what was established as best practices and recommendations as a result of the symposium. One of the four tenets they determined needed to be addressed in order to prevent officer suicide further was a culture change.

The IACP (2014) report specifically identified and addressed three barriers that prevent law enforcement officer from seeking help, “fear of consequences for seeking help, confidentiality laws and policies may be unclear, or officers may be misinformed, and limited resources” (p. 6). These barriers are obstacles that can exist in any organization, regardless of their size, anywhere across our country and throughout the globe. The IACP (2014) report further states, “unfortunately, in many law enforcement departments, the culture toward mental

wellness or addressing emotional problems of any kind is one of disdain and avoidance. The presumption with this culture is often that the mere presence of an emotional problem indicates a weakness on the officer's part" (p. 5).

The conclusions made in the IACP (2014) report in regards to the significant role that barriers play in contributing to law enforcement suicide was also echoed in the white paper written by Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018). They concluded that:

There are several barriers that prevent first responders from accessing mental health services, including shame and stigma. These barriers prevent families from talking openly about the suicide of a loved one, thereby contributing to silence and lack of awareness around the issue of first responder suicide (p. 8).

While both of these documents are essential resources for generating more awareness to the issue of law enforcement suicide and possible solutions, most importantly, they leave little doubt as to cultural barriers that need to be overcome in order to make any considerable progress on curbing suicide in the law enforcement community.

Not all of the barriers faced by law enforcement personnel originate or exist within the cultural restraints of their organization or profession. In the state of Connecticut, for example, a legislative bill was passed that added additional restrictions on gun ownership and possession for people with mental health problems after the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. According to a report written by Veronica Rose (2014), for the Office of Legislative Research, firearm prohibitions include anyone who, "beginning October 1, 2013, was voluntarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital within the past six months for care and treatment of a psychiatric disability, and not solely for being an alcohol or drug-dependent person" (p.1). While the legislation was clearly well intended, this law provides no statutory exceptions, specifically, no

exceptions for law enforcement officers seeking mental health treatment or assistance, even voluntarily. Thus, placing law enforcement officers at the risk of losing their job should they come forward for help and creating a disincentive to do so.

Since this legislative bill was passed, there have been several attempts to add a provision that allows for first responders to be exempt from the law. Despite the irony of this law being precipitated by an unimaginably traumatic event for both the victims, community, and first responders, all efforts to have the law modified have been defeated. The most recent proposal put forth in 2018 was titled, "SB No. 278 An Act Concerning Mental Health Wellness Training and Suicide Prevention for Police Officers" (Dorman, 2018). The proposed legislation, would, among other things, "protect employment so that no officer can be terminated or disciplined for seeking mental health treatment and allow officers to get back their firearm if a licensed mental health professional signs off on it" (Dorman, 2018).

### **Moving Forward**

The literature speaks to many recommendations and proposed solutions to address the problem of law enforcement suicide. One study documented the efforts of the Montreal Police Department to curb officer suicide versus other police organizations in Quebec. Mishara and Martin (2012), documented the Montreal Police Department's implementation of an organization-wide suicide awareness program, and as a result, the authors note, "in 12 years since the program began the suicide rate decreased by 79%, while other Quebec police rates had a nonsignificant (11%) increase. Also, knowledge increased, supervisors engaged in effective interventions, and the activities were highly appreciated" (p. 162). The leaders of the Montreal Police Department recognized and embraced the necessary organizational and leadership changes to make a substantial impact on the lives and mental well-being of their officers.

Mishara and Martin (2012) explained that the Montreal Police Department embraced a three-tier plan to combat the issue of law enforcement suicide, starting with the training of all of the department's supervisors and union representatives and then all of the department's rank and file officers. The training given to supervisors and union representatives were, "conducted by psychologists focused upon improving supervisors' abilities to identify officers at risk of suicide and how to provide help" (p. 163). Another critical component of their plan was a publicity campaign titled, "together for life", which set out to, "inform police officers about suicide prevention" (p. 163), by utilizing publications and other literature throughout their organization. Thirdly, Mishara and Martin (2012) explained that, "a telephone helpline for police officers was established". This allowed for a confidential means for officers to seek help, "in complete discretion" (p. 163). The results of their efforts and success provide critical insight into the need for full organizational engagement to address and prevent law enforcement suicide.

The IACP (2014) report recommended several agency action items as a result of their symposium, of which one significant action item was, "make suicide prevention a top priority for executives" (p.6). It went on to state that, "chiefs should be proactive and speak directly to their officers about mental wellness and officer suicide" (p. 6). Another recommendation of the IACP report was to increase training available to officers. The IACP (2014) further stated, "officers may be surprisingly ill-trained or not trained at all in recognizing signs of or effectively responding to emotional distress, PTSD, or other mental illness or suicidal behavior, particularly when such signs and behavior involve peers" (p. 20). In order to adequately address the issue of law enforcement suicide, the IACP (2014) stresses the importance that an effort must be made at every turn within an agency to adopt and deploy measures that make mental health a top priority that starts during the hiring process and continues throughout an officer's career.



**The Role of Law Enforcement Leadership**

The most comprehensive resource as far as defining the role leadership can play in law enforcement suicide is the IACP (2014) report. The International Association of Chiefs of Police facilitated and participated in the symposium for the purpose to, “develop a national strategy built on the following four cornerstones to address officer mental wellness and suicide prevention: culture change; early warning and prevention protocols; training; and event response protocols” (p. xi). One of the objectives of the symposium was to, “create a strategic plan to guide police chiefs in taking proactive measures to mitigate the risk of suicide and openly address officer mental health as a core element of officer safety” (p.viii).

The IACP (2014) report referenced the impact culture within the law enforcement profession has on this problem. They also recognized that, in order for there to be cultural change, the change must be initiated from the top of law enforcement organizations and further stated the need to, “refine the leadership role for law enforcement on this issue and empower leaders to change a culture that is dismissive of mental health issues” (p 1). In order for these cultural changes to take place, the IACP (2014) report proclaimed the necessity to, “recruit leaders who care about the mental wellness of their officers and who unequivocally endorse physical and mental wellness parity as critical to a resilient and healthy police force” (p. xii).

According to Ramchunder and Martins (2014), “leadership involves persuading other people to set aside, for a period of time, their individual concerns and to pursue a common goal that is important for the responsibilities and welfare of the group” (p. 2). This statement made by Ramchunder and Martins (2014) appears to strengthen the recommendations made by the IACP (2014) as to the importance of addressing the issues from an organizational and broader community perspective in order to begin having an impact on law enforcement suicide

throughout the profession. The matter of culture change was also reinforced by Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018), who stated, "indeed, culture change is necessary in order for our first responders to feel encouraged and not ashamed to access the care that they need" (p. 31).

The IACP (2014) report explains that leaders should approach law enforcement suicide along a, "continuum of prevention, intervention, and postvention" (p. 27). When addressing the component of prevention, the IACP (2014) made a statement about the need to, "recruit and hire resilient officers who have demonstrated a commitment to public service and proven stress management skills" (p. 27). This recommendation was consistent with the conclusion made by Rouse et al. (2015), who as a result of their research, stated more attention must be paid during the hiring process to catch underlying mental health problems prior to them being hired. This is also coupled with the need, as explained by the IACP (2014), for leaders to, "audit the existing psychological providers, and determine whether they are effective in identifying early warning signs of mental crisis or illness, and suicidal behavior and ideation" (p. 27).

The most widely written about prevention tool in the literature is training. Training was the primary tool utilized by the Montreal Police Department which resulted in a significant decrease in suicides within their organization as previously outlined by Mishara and Martin (2012). In the case of the Montreal Police Department, as explained by Mishara and Martin (2012), the department took the approach of first training it's supervisors to be able to detect and intervene if they observed subordinates or peers exhibiting suicidal behavior. Violanti (1995), reinforced the importance of this approach by stating, "training supervisors to recognize the warning signs of suicide can afford agencies an opportunity to intervene before it is too late" (p. 19). The critical role mid-level supervisors can play was also explained by Baker (2011), who stated, "formal suicide prevention training helps facilitate successful interventions. The police

sergeant is in a unique position as a supervisor to demonstrate human relations and leadership skills necessary to take action” (p. 76).

The literature also pointed to the importance of having intervention protocols for law enforcement organizations. Specifically, the IACP (2014) speaks to the necessity of leadership creating, “intervention protocols tailored to assist officers at risk of mental health crisis and illness, as well as suicidal behavior and ideation. Again, ensure these protocols are institutionalized via established written policies, training programs, and agency awareness campaigns” (p. 28). Violanti (1995), also expressed the importance of intervention when he stated, “not only can an effective intervention effort save officers' lives, but it also can safeguard agencies from the devastating effects of suicide” (p. 19).

Baker (2011), speaks to the critical role leadership needs to play in suicide intervention. Specifically, he stated that in the case of a supervisor identifying or suspecting suicidal behavior, that the leadership approach they should take “is one of directing and telling,” and goes on further to explain, “supervisors must use their relationship and authority to tell officers what action they expect. Furthermore, supervisors should insist that officers respond to their directions” (p. 77). Baker (2011) provides an example of further action the supervisor should take by stating, “supervisors should refer officers to a certified mental health professional, even setting appointments and arranging for the officer to appear” (p. 79). Due to the essential role that leadership and supervisors play in intervention, the IACP (2014), stated there exists a necessity to, “train supervisors on the words to say when they encounter an officer in emotional trauma” (p. 28). Though, according to Baker and Baker (2016), “the department’s responsibility does not end there, however. Supervisors should monitor the situation to ensure that officers are evaluated and receive continued support and counseling” (p. 6). Baker (2011), concludes, “first -

line supervisors, police sergeants, and corporals are in the best position to apply leadership interventions. They are very close to officers and are in the best position to intervene and prevent police suicide” (p. 145).

Other literature served to reinforce further the importance of law enforcement executives making suicide prevention a priority and embracing organizational-wide prevention and intervention programs, as well as empowering first-line supervisors to take action when they are concerned for one of their subordinate's mental health. According to Friedman (n.d.), “seeking good physical, social, and mental health has to be directed from the top. That's the only way it works”. Friedman (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of law enforcement executives giving mental health the same level of consideration and concern as other health factors and implementing an initiative like “the Mental Health Check (MHC)”. The MHC consist of 6 components that serve to establish critical boundaries and outlines the organization's commitment and approach in addressing mental health. Some of the components of the MHC, as explained by Friedman (n.d.), are:

The Mental Health Check is part of your normal maintenance routine. Take it seriously. It's a chance to review your current and/or past mental health status, and receive professional support. The Mental Health Check is fully voluntary and encouraged by your chief and all first-line supervisors.

Friedman (n.d.) concludes, “acceptance and permission from the chief relieves the officer from any doubts that they may have about obtaining mental health support when needed”.

Postvention is the third approach identified by the IACP (2014) for leaders to utilize and they point to the necessity of law enforcement organizations to, “establish effective postvention policies to help support the families and the department when an officer dies by suicide” (p. 27).

Baker (2011), explains, "one police suicide can devastate a police organization and generate emotional ramifications throughout the community" (p. 134). For this reason, the IACP (2014), stated that department leadership must do the following, "be physically present at the funeral, establish the agency's funeral protocol, and ensure the entire department is well-informed of and routinely updated on these protocols" (p. 24). The IACP (2014) concludes, "leaders should also take the time to advocate strongly for the value of officers using the department's mental health resources, to offer specific and available mental health education opportunities and resources, and to provide post-event counseling to affect officers" (p.23).

### **Leadership Approach**

When considering what the research says about both the problem of law enforcement suicide and the proposed solutions, it becomes necessary to review further what leadership styles are being utilized and what changes, if any, need to be made in order to effect cultural change within individual law enforcement organizations and the profession as a whole. The leadership approach most often referenced as being used by law enforcement executives throughout the literature is an authoritative or autocratic style of leadership. According to Decker (2018), "police departments are paramilitary-based organizations, the autocratic style would presumably be the consistent approach based on the nature and cultures of the organizations" (p. 39). In an article written by Morgado (2017), it describes authoritative leadership as a, "rule-based preference combined with a hierarchical (military-like) approach in which orders are given and orders are followed".

The literature indicates that an autocratic approach may potentially be at odds with empowering first-line supervisors and subordinates in making decisions and expressing their concerns/opinions outside of the strict boundaries put forth by senior law enforcement

executives. Decker (2018) supported this notion by stating, “this type of management stifles the development of leadership abilities in subordinates because they are rarely allowed to make meaningful independent decisions” (p. 37). For this reason, McCartney and Parent (2012), states that “a more democratic style of leadership is required in order to effectively lead the officer who exercises more discretion” (p. 7).

While the literature states that there are instances where law enforcement leadership style may be situational, Decker (2018) explains that law enforcement leadership would benefit from taking “on a more human resource-based leadership approach to include emphasis on developing strong work relationships and empowering employees to improve the work environment through morality and motivation – the tenets of transformational leadership” (p. 21). According to Campbell and Kodz (2011), transformational leadership, “engages higher values, with leaders seeking to motivate subordinates by setting out an organizational vision, providing a good example and appealing to moral values and desire to fulfill individual potential and contribute to organizational aims” (p. 6). Decker (2018) expands on the far-reaching benefits of transformational leadership by stating, “transformational leadership principles of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and the subsequent positive impact on the organization, its employees, and ultimately, their communities” (. 38).

Though the literature seems to actively support the idea that law enforcement leaders could use transformational leadership to positively impact the culture within their organizations, Campbell and Kodz (2011) bring awareness to some possible challenges to utilizing this approach. They raise the question of whether or not leaders who, “possess such qualities are being naturally gifted and suggests that one is either born with the trait or not, which renders it a

valuable commodity” (p.7). Campbell and Kodz (2011) further explain, “the notion that transformational leaders are born, not made, presents a problem for law enforcement agencies that need sergeants and other managers to possess both operational knowledge and transformational qualities” (p.7). Another challenge identified by Campbell and Kodz (2011) is that, “police culture is generally characterized by cynicism toward leadership, and this is especially true toward leaders who are charismatic and are purveyors of transformational leadership values” (p. 7).

### **Conclusion**

The literature, supported by a report written by Baker and Baker (1996), concludes that suicide and mental health problems are plaguing America’s law enforcement officers and is a problem that has been on the radar of law enforcement executives and academia for decades, though little progress has been made in addressing the problem. Statistical information, as noted by Heyman, Dill, and Douglas (2018), opined that law enforcement officers are at a higher risk for contemplating and/or committing suicide than being killed in the line of duty. Violanti (1995) and Baker (2011) both advocate that action needs to be taken by law enforcement leaders broadly across the profession in order to impact this trend.

As a result of the research conducted by Rouse et al. (2015), more information as to the causation of the phenomenon of law enforcement suicide, as outlined in the literature, needs to be conducted. There was insufficient information and research to counter the alternate theory put forth that Rouse et al. (2015), that law enforcement officers are committing suicide at a higher rate due to either nonexistent or inconsistent hiring practices which are resulting in the employment of people predisposed to psychological problems and not suited to handle the stress and trauma associated with police work. Other sources, to include Violanti et al. (2009), also

indicated that more research needs to be conducted to identify the causes of law enforcement suicide.

At the conclusion of a national symposium conducted by the IACP (2014), it indicated that leaders need to make training, prevention, and intervention organizational priorities. Decker further (2018) articulates that most importantly an evaluation of their leadership approach while facilitating these initiatives is critical to making necessary cultural shifts. Decker (2018) and Campbell and Kodz (2011) highly recommend that the law enforcement community must embrace less authoritative styles in order to cultivate supportive environments that will ultimately help to erode the cultural barriers of seeking help. The literature also provided examples, such as the efforts of the Montreal Police Department, as detailed by Mishara and Martin (2012), that serve as a model of success and a roadmap to facilitate organizational-wide change in an attempt to curb law enforcement suicide.

#### **Framework for Analysis**

This research relies on existing quantitative and qualitative data. When looking at the specific numbers associated with law enforcement suicide, it will be in the form of quantitative data, as it is measurable and documented. This information is generated and published by organizations, both public and private. These statistics and data points are critical in helping to establish the foundation of the problem in regards to law enforcement suicide.

Qualitative data also played a vital role in my research efforts, mainly, when considering how leadership and culture are involved. During my research, I found that most of my information in regards to qualitative data originated from peer-reviewed articles and journal articles. These sources were located primarily via the Granite State College library, though, Google Scholar did provide some relevant information. Keywords that were utilized in searching



these databases include: law enforcement suicide, suicide law enforcement leadership, and police suicide. This information helped to identify different perspectives and techniques that was instrumental in further evaluating what methods and practices do or do not appear to be working, to conclude areas that require further research.

### **Discussion**

Engaging in the process of researching law enforcement suicide, specifically, what role leadership can play in curbing it, has been a continually thought-provoking endeavor as I compare my own personal experiences with the information collected and put forth by researchers and authors on the subject. There have been many instances when I have shared the concept for this paper, and I was met with surprise that the issue of law enforcement suicide is prevalent enough of an issue to warrant the time and energy. I would argue that suicide, in any population within our society, should get equal care and attention, though, it is not always the case. The awareness of the issue of law enforcement suicide is a perfect example of a population of people where the issue is so infrequently acknowledged or addressed that its not a commonly recognized problem despite the visible public role law enforcement officers play on a daily basis within communities the communities they serve across our country and the globe.

There are several factors that likely contribute to the lack of awareness by the general public and one of the reasons for this appears to be significantly tied to the culture of silence that exists in the law enforcement profession. As pointed out in the literature by the Officer Down Memorial Page (n.d.), eighty-five officers died feloniously or in motor vehicle accidents in 2016, compared to one hundred and eight officers who committed suicide (Kulbarsh, 2017). While the line of duty deaths often receives much attention and press coverage, law enforcement suicides often are handled quietly with little to no information released to the public. For that reason, the

statistics regarding law enforcement suicide are difficult to come by; the literature explains that inconsistent reporting is further complicated by misclassification of law enforcement suicides in an attempt to protect the officer, their family, and their department. When taking just these few factors into consideration, it appears less surprising that the general public may not be aware of the prevalence of the problem within the law enforcement community.

Despite the statistics and information confirming the problem, there also appears to be a lack of direct acknowledgment by professional entities which focus on suicide awareness and prevention. When visiting several nationally recognized suicide prevention organizations, there is little to no mention of information specific to law enforcement officers or other first responders. On the other hand, finding information related to the military and services available to veterans is very prevalent. Though there are many aspects of these two professions that are different, there are also many that are consistent, like the potential for frequent exposure to job-related trauma and stress. It would seem that many of these same resources could be shared and that the people trained to speak to veterans would likely be able to utilize that same training to offer support to first responders.

As far as the law enforcement profession, the IACP (2014) stands as one of the only voices for law enforcement executives to turn to in order to find recommendations and guidelines on how to implement prevention and intervention programs. While their work is critically important, little traction has been generated since they released their report in 2014. No national initiative or mandate has been able to gain any traction, leaving individual law enforcement organizations and executives to navigate the problem on their own. Even in New Hampshire, with a very small population of law enforcement officers whom all attend a centralized police academy, no unified effort has been made to address the issue of law enforcement suicide.

There is though, examples of organizations who have successfully addressed the problem of law enforcement suicide and their efforts should be championed. The literature spoke of the efforts of the Montreal Police Department and their training centric approach to prevent law enforcement suicide within their organization. The literature seemed to support, in several sources, the necessity, and importance of embracing organizational-wide training programs that focus on training both officers and supervisors about the importance of caring for their own and their peer's mental well-being, coupled with the instruction of early intervention techniques.

A critical component of making a program similar to what was enacted by the Montreal Police Department successful lies significantly in the leadership approach utilized by the senior leadership of an organization. The autocratic leadership approach commonly associated with the law enforcement profession is not one that creates an environment that is supportive of giving supervisors the necessary discretion to intervene or make decisions when needed. I would agree that a transformational approach, as outlined in the literature, seems to be a more logical fit for changing the culture within an organization and help to create a more open and supportive environment where all members feel empowered to speak up or take action to help another member of the organization.

From my perspective, as both a law enforcement officer and a police chief, that the literature was able to articulate how the culture of silence within the profession and accurately identify it as a significant barrier to addressing the issue of law enforcement suicide. I do though, believe there is an opportunity, even if it is done one department at a time, to begin to turn this tide and change the culture within the profession to one that fully embraces the mental well-being of officers from the moment they begin the hiring process till long after they retire.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

I conclude, in order to curb law enforcement suicide, law enforcement leaders must first and foremost assess their current leadership style and realign their approach and their organizational mindset towards a transformational leadership approach. Transformational approaches and behaviors should be modeled consistently at all levels of management and throughout the organization. The institutional barriers that are associated with autocratic leadership methods should be eliminated to allow an environment where everyone within the organization feels that they have a voice when it comes to the well-being of their fellow officers and the organization as a whole.

I believe the law enforcement profession would significantly benefit from a centralized repository for the collection of data on law enforcement suicide and suicide attempts. This would accomplish several things, the first of which, would be accurate, consistent, and timely information on law enforcement suicides similar to the work done by the Officer Down Memorial Page (n.d.). This information would help researchers conduct more thorough research to help identify causation, as well as establish a better understanding of programs or initiatives that appear to be working. Secondly, it would allow for a place for these officers to be remembered and honored. This will help to lift the stigma associated with suicide that is often experienced by the officer's family and their organization long after their death. I would further recommend exploring the implementation and funding of a centralized repository at the federal level, to include all first responders, with legislative action.

It is my recommendation that Law enforcement leaders need to embrace the consistent application of pre-employment mental health screenings and psychological assessments for every officer they hire, regardless if they are someone new to the profession or lateral transfer from a

different agency. When an officer is hired, regardless of their prior level of experience, the hiring organization assumes all responsibility for that officer and their mental well-being. It would be essential to identify disqualifying information prior to putting them on the street, but also it serves as a critically important baseline to refer back to throughout their career, especially after a critical incident. Once a mandatory screening and assessment policy are in place, continued screening should continue into the future as part of a prevention/intervention program. Further attention should be paid to the question if these screenings should become part of the required hiring/certification process by the certifying authority. Presently in New Hampshire, the certifying authority, New Hampshire Police Standards and Training Council, does not require mental health screenings or psychological assessments as a condition of certification/employment.

Coupled with mandatory mental health screenings and psychological assessments, I believe that law enforcement leaders and organizations need to most importantly prioritize the creation and adoption of training and prevention programs with a primary focus on intervention. All levels of law enforcement organizations need to be trained to identify the warning signs of suicidal behavior and know what resources are available to them and their peers. This training needs to be continual and reevaluated regularly to ensure that the resources officers are turning to are current and available. Policies must be put in place to protect officers seeking assistance and an outlined plan of action as to what happens when an officer falls into intervention protocol that offers them and their family privacy while preserving the opportunity for them to return to work. Law enforcement leaders need to partner their organization with a psychological practitioner who fully supports and understands the organization's approach and perspective to preventing officer suicide.

While I believe that the issue of law enforcement suicide is one that will continue to need much research going forward, I firmly believe that law enforcement leaders can have an immediate impact on their organization by considering and applying some of the recommendations in this paper. It appears safe to say that the methods and approaches being utilized most often throughout the profession are not best suited to protect and nurture the psychological well-being of our nation's law enforcement officers. While national initiatives exist to decrease line of duty deaths, no such initiatives exist to curb law enforcement suicide. The focus of the profession and its leadership must evolve to include the prioritization of all law enforcement deaths and ensure they are all given the same level of importance and attention in order to begin making measurable strides in curbing law enforcement suicide.

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