Reflections & Resources; Suicide in Law Enforcement Leaders

By Cherie Castellano, CSW, LPC, AAETS

Reflections

For 25 years I have responded to law enforcement suicides as a psychologist and director of the Cop2Cop program in NJ. Besides being an LEO wife, I am also a proud Catholic and humble servant in my efforts to support New Jersey's LEO's who serve all of us so heroically every day. In the recent tragic loss of Sheriff Berdnick I had a day like no other. I witnessed a spirit filled church with Monsignor Salvo's magnanimity in a homily that literally healed hearts and broke through barriers and stigma regarding law enforcement suicide like never before.

When I began my career in 1999 many leaders, chiefs and priests, would not support honor guards, formal masses or ceremonies due to the stigma around police suicide.

Myself and my Cop2Cop team respond often to suicides offering crisis counseling and critical incident stress debriefing services to stunned, broken hearted officers and their families in the wake of a suicide. After too many funerals to count and many years of serving, I was weary in the aftermath of this tragedy in Passaic County. Prayerfully I found my way to the church in desperate need of an increase of faith.

The officers in this unique mass seemed lifted up in grief and hope because the priest had the courage to say the "suicide word" and acknowledge anger as a normal reaction to complex grief after a suicide in his homily. This public magnificent funeral for a magnificent man and public servant highlighted the way he lived not just how he died. It was unprecedented and perfectly framed in mercy and love and I could see the grief in every participant dissipate. One obedient servant, a life altering priest, renewed my spirit and I will always cherish the words shared, the stigma exposed and the chance to witness mercy and faith firsthand with grace and gratitude.

But then I went back to work, and the suffering, trauma and suicides continue. Therefore, I am compelled to share information and resources for you, our law enforcement leaders, NOT just for your officers in your agency, but for YOU.

In the FBI Bulletin article "Police Chief Suicide: An Overlooked Issue" (Salvatore 2021) the author recounts that in 2020, a well-respected police chief of a township in suburban Philadelphia took his own life. Like most suicides, no one close to him saw any warning signs. This death came just 3 months after the chief of a department one county over also died by suicide. Losing police chiefs in this way occurs far more commonly than people think. It also raises questions: How widespread is the problem? What are the risk factors? What can be done?

We need to talk about it. A lack of attention on law enforcement leader suicide in the literature is one of the problems. A considerable amount of literature exists pertaining to suicide and suicidal behavior among officers. There appears to be no research specifically addressing the same for police chiefs. There are articles on how chiefs can prevent suicide in their departments, but none on preventing it among themselves and their peers.

Reporting is another issue. Law Enforcement leaders are prominent municipal officials, their appointments, resignations, retirements, terminations, and deaths are generally reported in the local media. Issues that arise during their tenure are also considered newsworthy. A lack of clarity characterizes initial media reports of police chief suicides, often described as sudden or unexpected deaths or sometimes as an "apparent suicide."

The fact is this is a serious issue according to the numbers for the population of law enforcement leaders. According to Salvatore, police chiefs represent a small subset of law enforcement professionals in the United States. In 2016, there were 15,322 "general purpose law enforcement agencies" in the United States, of which 12,251 were municipal police departments. A "local police chief" has overall command of each agency.

The only other statistical data for police chiefs is that when last surveyed, in 2008, 97% were men and 90% were white. These demographic features have likely changed significantly since that tabulation. However, the prevailing gender/race makeup of police chiefs as a group remains pertinent to their suicide risk because adult white males account for most suicides in the United States.

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Blue H.E.L.P.is a Massachusetts-based, volunteer-run nonprofit that works to "acknowledge the service and sacrifice of law enforcement officers...lost to suicide." It has tracked police suicides since 2016. The agency's database includes reports of 120 "command staff suicides," including those involving 22 chiefs, culled from the media and other sources. This suggests there are four to five police chief suicides annually in the United States.

Another measure to determine the suicide rate is computed by dividing suicides in a given time period by the population in which the deaths occurred and multiplying by 100,000. Using available data, the crude annual suicide rate for police chiefs is as follows:

$$\frac{\text{4.4 estimated police chief suicides per year}}{\text{12,251 municipal police chiefs}} \text{ X } 100{,}000 = 35.9$$

This rate is far higher than that of many other high-risk groups. It is almost twice the rate for officers and other law enforcement professionals—estimated at 18.1 per 100,000 annually. For all branches of the U.S. military in 2019, the overall rate was 25.9 per 100,000. Among military veterans, the rate in 2017 was 27.7 per 100,000.

Police chiefs may have the same suicide risk factors as adults in the general population, although aspects of their position may amplify some factors. These include:

- Mental disorders, particularly clinical depression
- History of alcohol and substance abuse
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Aggressive tendencies
- Isolation (i.e. a feeling of being cut off from other people)
- Barriers to accessing mental health treatment
- Loss (relational, social, work, or financial)
- Physical illness
- Easy access to lethal methods

Ironically in Salvatore's article he makes a powerful point. "There are articles on how chiefs can work to prevent suicide in their departments, but none on preventing it among themselves and their peers."

Several factors may contribute to suicide risk in police officers and, by extension, chiefs.

- Job-related values may "take over" and affect behavior and relations outside of police work.
- Social relations and trust may narrow over time to the department, promoting isolation and loneliness.
- Positivity may be lost because of continuous contact with the most negative sides of society.
- A tendency may develop toward control, problem-solving, and fixing things.
- The danger exists of becoming psychologically worn down by always being on duty, dealing with constant stress, and routinely coping with frustration and potential danger.

Military service is another strong suicide risk factor that may be common in police chiefs.

Chiefs may have any of the outlined risk factors pertaining to the public, as well as the role drift, professional insularity, negative perspective, and wrap-around stress that can affect law enforcement officers. Maladaptive coping styles may also add to their "suicide nexus."

Media reports on police chief suicides sometimes mention circumstances that may bear on suicide risk. Professional misconduct, criminal behavior, a gambling or other addiction problem, and retirement are often cited. Each of these may involve involuntary or voluntary loss of status and affiliation with the law enforcement community. Losing both social connectiveness and self-value may increase suicide risk.

Police chiefs facing retirement may experience suicidal thinking pending loss of identity and going "from a life of leading and contributing to one of standing on the sidelines."

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Blue H.E.L.P. found that almost 40% of retired officers who killed themselves had been retired for less than 1 year. The first year of retirement may be similarly hazardous for former police chiefs. Risk may especially accrue among those retiring amid controversy or being forced out.

Politics is another stressor that may have suicide risk implications for police chiefs. A survey of police chiefs identified the "most discouraging, dissatisfying aspect of their job as being frustrated by working in the political environment and dealing with politicians." Mayors and municipal managers may see the police chief as their "servant."

Resources for Hopeful Leader Outcomes

In the FBI Bulletin article by Salvatore New Jersey's Cop2Cop program is referenced as a model for solutions to the LEO suicide problem. He suggests the following:

1. Raise Awareness

Police chief suicide must become part of the ongoing conversation. Programs and strategies for prevention must include all levels of law enforcement, from cadets to chiefs. Prevention starts with raising awareness of the problem, especially because it is not widely recognized. Law enforcement leaders hear much about the suicide risk borne by their personnel but little about their own.

Leadership programs for aspiring chiefs, executive training for current chiefs, and orientations for new chiefs often touch on police officer suicide. Participants should also be introduced to the reality of it in their ranks, learn about the risk factors and warning signs, and recognize what they should do about it.

When the "buck" stops with you and you are lonely at the top, who and how do you navigate the impact on your mental health and resilience?

Just starting that conversation can raise awareness of risk and challenges.

2. Provide Support Training

Peer support should be extended to police chiefs nationally. While peer support has proven an effective resource for LEOs, it is not yet typically available to chiefs.

The Mid-America Regional Council has operated the Command Level Peer Support Team in the greater Kansas City, Missouri area since 2018. Participants from police, fire, EMS, and dispatch complete a 4-day training program covering topics such as command stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide risk, and line-of-duty deaths. During the program, they can talk to a colleague at their rank with insight into command-specific stressors.

3. Implement Peer Hotlines

Regional or statewide toll-free, closed suicide crisis hotlines should exist for police chiefs. In 1998, New Jersey created Cop2Cop, the first confidential 24-hour hotline for police officers in the United States, in conjunction with Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care, to provide a crisis intervention resource for law enforcement personnel in the state. Calls from every community in New Jersey are answered by retired police officers, mental health clinicians, and peer support specialists.

4. LEO Leadership Family Programs

IACP has developed several tool kits and resources in the area of officer wellness to include suicide preventions, resilience and LEO families so we may look to engage law enforcement leader families as part of the solution by teaching them QPR or offering confidential resources to them as the high profile nature of the job may restrict access to care.

Most successful law enforcement leaders will attribute their success to their family support but who is supporting their families?

Law enforcement leaders suicide is a serious and long-neglected concern. Changing this and moving toward evidence-based prevention starts with raising awareness of the problem through advocacy, research, and education. Salvatore adds, "Police chief suicide must become part of the ongoing conversation."

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Summary
My mantra in the wake of law enforcement suicide is always the same. From working and supporting individuals who have attempted suicide and lived they have shared their truths. Suicidal people often experience life as suffering so when they are in crisis, ending their life is the solution to ending their suffering. There is no place for judgment, stigma or shame when we lose a loved one to suicide.

Beyond surviving suicide includes the never-ending questions, the "Why's" and What Ifs…" Let's replace that with how he lived, how he served, and how he loved. Then let's try to stop the next one.

New Youth Program Strengthens Community Relationships with Law Enforcement

By Timothy Woody, Youth Community Navigator, Office of Resilience, NJ Department of Children and Families

The NJ Department of Children and Families' (DCF) Office of Resilience has partnered with eight South Jersey police departments to pilot a Police-Youth Initiative (PYI) aimed at building positive and trusted relationships between law enforcement and community.

The pilot, which launched in July 2023, is an innovative initiative that brings together partners from different sectors of society to address the needs of their community—together. The goal of this partnership is to support new projects and expand existing programs and services that foster meaningful connections among children, youth, and families and members of the law enforcement community.

DCF's Office of Resilience provided technical assistance to the eight participating police departments during the planning process. Each law enforcement agency created a one-year plan that would develop youth and community engagement programs and services. Officers from some of the police departments admitted that although it was their "dream" to implement these types of community outreach programs, it had not been made possible until the opportunity for partnership with the DCF Office of Resilience presented itself.

Since the pilots' launch, there has been great feedback! Officers have noted how much they enjoy participating in more activities with the community. For instance, Willingboro Police Department officials shared that "this initiative has resulted in better knowledge of the police by families, and better knowledge of the community by our officers."

Officials from the Pemberton Police Department stated, "Officers are asking for giveaways—such as water bottles, stick badges, and stress relief balls—they come in from patrol and say the park looks a little busy, I was looking to hand out some giveaways and shoot hoops with the youth."

Hearing this feedback validated that this initiative was making inroads and facilitating important connections in high-risk communities.

In another agency, Penns Grove Police Department, officials shared that they had not sponsored any community engagement activities prior to the partnership with the Office of Resilience, but thanks to this initiative, there's much greater interaction between the officers and community members. Officers are now seen waving to kids and family members they have come to know well. Parents are learning to trust officers, report community concerns and change some previously held beliefs about law enforcement.

Thanks to the engagement of the eight South Jersey police departments, and support from the staff of the Office of Resilience, a renewed sense of hope, responsibility, support, and connectedness has evolved that will help build resilience for these communities—children, youth, and families—for generations to come.

The mission of the Office of Resilience (OOR) is to be an incubator and advocate for community-developed solutions, grounded in positive and adverse childhood experiences' (PACEs) science, that helps and creates a healing-centered ecosystem in which all New Jersey residents can thrive. The OOR works at the local and state levels to raise awareness about PACEs, provide education about trauma-informed care, and facilitate collaborative partnerships to promote community resilience.