Unspoken Pain: Addressing Suicide in Law Enforcement Officers
Dr. Julia L. Whisenhunt, Dr. Catherine Y. Chang, Dr. Laura Shannonhouse, Dr. G. Ned Watson
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ABSTRACT

“More officers die of suicide than die of shootings and traffic accidents combined” (O’Hara, 2017), but very little attention has been paid to law enforcement officer (LEO) suicide within the research and mental health communities. Accordingly, in this presentation, we will address the following topics: (a) suicide in LEOs, (b) law enforcement culture, (c) occupational hazards, (d) barriers to treatment, and (e) recommendations for addressing suicide with LEOs.

Suicide in LEOs:
- Suicide rates in LEOs are difficult to determine.
  - Range from 17/100,000 to 12/100,000, compared to a recent public suicide rate range of 11/100,000 to 13/100,000 (Badge of Life, n.d.)
- In 2017, more LEOs died by suicide than in the line-of-duty (Ruderman Family Foundation, as cited in Hayes, 2018).
- Rufo (2016) identifies cultural factors in LEOs that may contribute to elevated risk of suicide:
  - Feelings of isolation
  - Elevated stress levels
  - Conflict
  - Deteriorated relationships
  - Minimal self-reporting
  - Limited early detection
- Chae and Boyle (2013) identified five factors that are positively associated with LEO suicide:
  - Critical incident trauma
  - Organizational stress
  - Shift work and atypical work hours
  - Relationship problems
  - Alcohol use and abuse

Distress in LEOs:
- Rate of depression for LEOs is significantly higher than for the general public (Anshell, 2000; Bishopp & Boots, 2014; Pienaar & Rothmann, 2005)
- Highly elevated trauma exposure rates
  - As much as 80% of LEOs may see seriously injured victims or dead bodies within a given year (Hartley, 2013)
  - As many as 60% of LEOs may experience 5+ traumatic events per year (Hartley, 2013)
- As much as 27% of LEOs may experience PTSD or clinically significant post-trauma symptoms (Chopko, Palmieri, & Adams, 2016)
- Elevated rates of substance misuse (Ballenger et al., 2011), likely to cope with job-related stress

Law Enforcement Culture:
- Rufo (2016) describes law enforcement culture as characterized by the following:
  - Feelings of isolation from civilian society
  - Feeling unappreciated by society
  - Fearing lawsuits
  - Having minimal positive reinforcement
  - Involving minimal mentorship
  - “Laying low” for self-preservation
  - Encouraging conformity
  - Establishing solidarity with other LEOs to cope with isolation

- LEO culture does not allow for weakness (Ingram, Paoline & Terrill, 2013; Lombas, 2001)

Occupational Hazards:
- Law enforcement is one of the most stressful jobs in the U.S. (Anshell, 2000; PR Newswire, 2018)
  - High exposure to trauma (Colwell, 2009)
  - High exposure to critical incidents (Chae & Boyle, 2013)
  - Feelings of isolation within the profession (Ramos, 2010)
  - Paramilitary and bureaucratic culture (Ménard & Artar, 2013)
  - Lack of support from the local community (Anshell, 2000)
- Highly elevated illness and injury rates (BLS, 2018)
  - Emotional Rollercoaster (Rufo, 2016):
    - Highs: Adrenaline rushes
      - helping to save lives
      - catching perpetrators
    - Lows: Facing trauma and death
      - finding deceased persons
      - being unable to help people
      - threats to own life
    - These highs and lows can lead to talking only with colleagues (not to loved ones), emotional and physical exhaustion, and being disconnected at home.

Barriers to Treatment:
- Low acceptance of help-seeking in LEO culture (Rouse et al., 2015)
- Perceived lack of support from administration (Chae & Boyle, 2013)
- Fear of losing job/promotion eligibility (Ruderman Family Foundation, as cited in Hayes, 2018)
- Fear of peer-to-peer stigmatization
- Less than 5% of law enforcement agencies have suicide prevention programs (Ruderman Family Foundation, as cited in Hayes, 2018)
- Limited debriefing following critical incidents (Chae & Boyle, 2013)
- Skepticism of counseling (Cross & Ashley, 2004)

Addressing Suicide with LEOs:

Prevention:
- Pre-hire screening that includes trauma history
- Periodic fitness for duty evaluations
- Creating an environment conducive to holistic wellness (Malin, 2012)
- Training related to effective and healthy self-care and coping strategies (Chae & Boyle, 2013; Malin, 2012)
- Increasing suicide awareness within the law enforcement community (Larved, 2010)
  - C-SSRS ACE Card for LEOs
- Developing and implementing a standardized LEO suicide prevention program
- Enhancing social support (Chae & Boyle, 2013)
- Promoting awareness of resources
  - COPLINE: 1-800-COPLINE
  - Veteran’s Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255, #1

Intervention:
- Administer valid screening tools (e.g., C-SSRS)
- Adapt interventions to the LEO subculture
- Utilize concrete, evidence-based interventions (i.e., ASIST): explain intentionality in interventions
- Integrate social support system into treatment