

ADDRESSING A NATIONAL CRISIS AFFECTING FIRST RESPONDERS



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Police officers perform a multitude of complex tasks, from detecting and preventing crimes to arresting criminals. In the line of duty, they witness many incidents: theft and fraud, car accidents, drug trafficking, abuse, murder, rape, the loss of co-workers due to dangers/violence, and more. Firefighters also respond to tough calls, such as fires and human tragedies. Though they are trained to deal with serious situations,

trauma takes a toll on the human psyche. In response to some disturbing statistics on the suicide rates of first responders, researchers have begun to focus on crisis resolution.

Per the Ruderman Family Foundation, police and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty. In 2017, there were at least 103 firefighter suicides and 140 police officer suicides. During that same year,

93 firefighters and 129 police officers died in the line of duty. Though suicide is a result of mental unwellness, it is believed that work-related exposures to violence, injury, death, and/or destruction may play a part in increasing suicide rates. In some US metro areas, violent crimes have more than doubled, ultimately heightening the challenges faced by America's first responders and increasing the amount of work-related stress.



People frequently associate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with combat, but PTSD is not limited to military service. The stress disorder can happen to anyone who experiences or witnesses a terrifying or life-threatening event. Symptoms of PTSD can include the reliving of traumatic experiences from the past. One may have nightmares or experience disturbing thoughts. Traumatic events often trigger a fight-or-flight response that can affect behavior. Thus, it is likely that PTSD is key to the alarmingly rising rate of suicide among first responders.

PTSD and depression (major depressive disorder) are distinct conditions that may commonly co-occur. Depression is characterized by low mood, loss of interest and pleasure, and changes in energy and outlook. It is well understood in the scientific and medical communities that biochemistry and genetics may increase the risk factors of depression and associated disorders. It has also become increasingly evident that environmental factors and personality may come into play. WebMD shares that untreated clinical depression increases the chance of risky behaviors, such as drug or alcohol addiction, and may lead to troubled relationships and serious illnesses.

In August 2019, AP News shed light on a rash of suicides by police officers that shook the New York Police Department. The tragedies led the commissioner to declare a mental health emergency and brought national attention to PTSD and untreated depression in police officers. AP News shared, "The suicides have been a recurring nightmare for the nation's largest police force and have driven a discussion about the psychological toll of police work, a profession in which discussing mental health was long seen as taboo."

First responders play pivotal life-saving roles in community-based suicide preventions. Despite outreach to others, some first responders may not adequately address their own mental health needs. A 2018 study revealed that police and firefighters die by suicide at a rate of 17 per 100,000 people. This is higher than the general public's rate of 13 per 100,000. The Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance (FBHA) estimates that incidents of suicide are being undercounted by a whopping 60%. The stigma attached to mental health issues may contribute to the underreporting of suicides.

Police and firefighters typically face challenging workloads, sleep deprivation, personal safety concerns, equipment deficits, chronic workplace problems, and more. International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) President Paul M. Cell explains, "We choose a career in law enforcement because we are driven by a calling to help others and to protect and serve our communities. We know when we take the oath that our job comes with certain risks; however, that does not mean we do not need adequate support for emotional and physiological impact that can result from the job." Negative publicity related to misconduct has, in some cases, exacerbated anti-police sentiment. This directly places officers under greater scrutiny and pressure.

On April 30, 2019, the National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide gathered to raise awareness and prevention of law enforcement suicide. The Consortium is tasked with leading a groundbreaking national conversation around the issue of law enforcement suicide. Prevention,

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that one suicide death occurs in the United States every 12 minutes. Per the American Association of Suicidology, it is the second leading cause of death among 15- to 34-year-olds. Overall, suicide ranks as the 10th leading cause of death in the US.

We take note when suicide affects a celebrity, such as travel expert Anthony Bourdain or fashion icon Kate Spade. From the outside looking in, they may seem to have it all. But, inside, something is sadly broken.

The CDC's numbers demonstrate the far-reaching impact of suicide and that no single group is immune. Yet, suicide is one of the most difficult topics in America to discuss.

The combination of grief, hurt, blame, and stigma makes losses hard to process. However, there are signs of hope. A reported 80% to 90% of people who seek treatment for depression may see a successful recovery.

The key is for society to shatter the stigmas—and embrace treatments that can make the difference between life and death.





May 23, 2019: Orlando firefighter Jimmy Reyes poses for a portrait next to a firetruck in Orlando, FL. Reyes enrolled in a program, UCF RESTORES, a clinic at the University of Central Florida that helps first responders, members of the military, and some others who've been diagnosed with PTSD. He says he was haunted by the memory of tending to people who'd been shot in 2016 at the Pulse nightclub. The mass shooting left 49 dead. Reyes says the program helped, but he still deals with anxiety. "I'm a completely different person," he says.

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intervention, and postvention are part of their mission. Likewise, the FBHA works to provide firefighters with easily accessible and confidential sources of information aimed at behavioral health awareness, prevention, intervention, and post-crisis strategies. As a provider of behavioral health work-

shops to fire departments and emergency medical services organizations, the FBHA places a strong emphasis on suicide prevention among its main goals.

Suicide is a destructive force that robs us of our future. It's time we remove

the stigmas of the past and let our nation's heroes know that we support their well-being.★

Eileen MacNalich

RESOURCES FOR HELP

National Suicide Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Cop 2 Cop: 1-866-COP-2COP (267-2267)

Copline: 1-800-COP-LINE (267-5463)

Safe Call Now (for first responders & families): 206-459-3020

Fire/EMS Helpline: 1-888-731-FIRE (3473)

Veterans Crisis Line: 1-800-273-8255 (Press 1)

This information is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.