

# Survey: What is the state of officer mental health in 2020?

The findings of a recent survey reveal a profession that is deeply suffering under the weight of the events of this year

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By Dr. Michelle Lilly and Sergeant Shawn Curry

Research over the past decade has made clear the potential for negative psychological outcomes as a result of work in law enforcement. Conditions such as [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#) and depression have been estimated to affect police officers at rates that vary between 7% and 35%. [1, 2] However, the prevalence of mental health symptoms during a period of relative crisis for law enforcement has rarely, if ever, been captured.

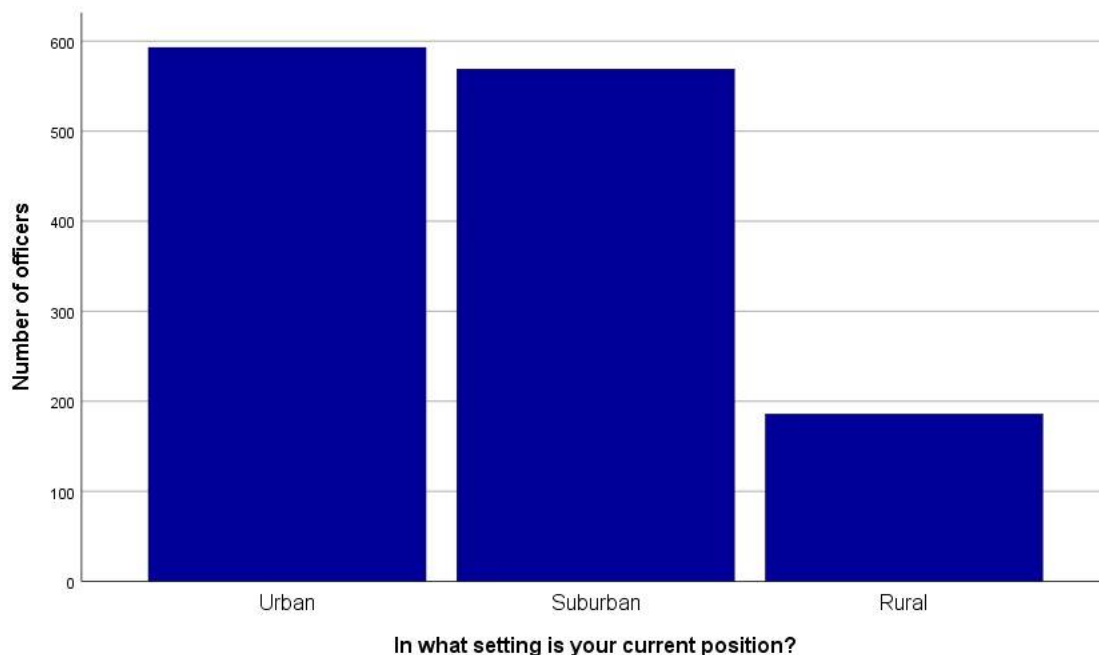
The year 2020 has presented numerous challenges for law enforcement, beginning with the management of the first wave of the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and then a rapid transition to [rioting, looting and ongoing civil unrest](#). The emotional impact of being hailed as essential workers to then all of law enforcement being “blamed” for the death of George Floyd can have a significant impact on psychological health. This is complicated further by the increased number of verbal and physical assaults perpetrated against officers.

To assess current psychological health in law enforcement officers, a brief survey using well-validated measures was distributed for a two-week period in August. The results indicate a high level of current suffering among law enforcement. This information is integral to consider in ongoing discussions regarding [police reform and defunding](#).

## LAW ENFORCEMENT SAMPLE

A total of 1,355 active-duty law enforcement officers participated in a brief online survey. Among those who completed the survey, 84% identified as male and 21% identified as a veteran of the armed services. The majority of the sample identified as White (85%) and non-Hispanic/Latino(a) (87%).

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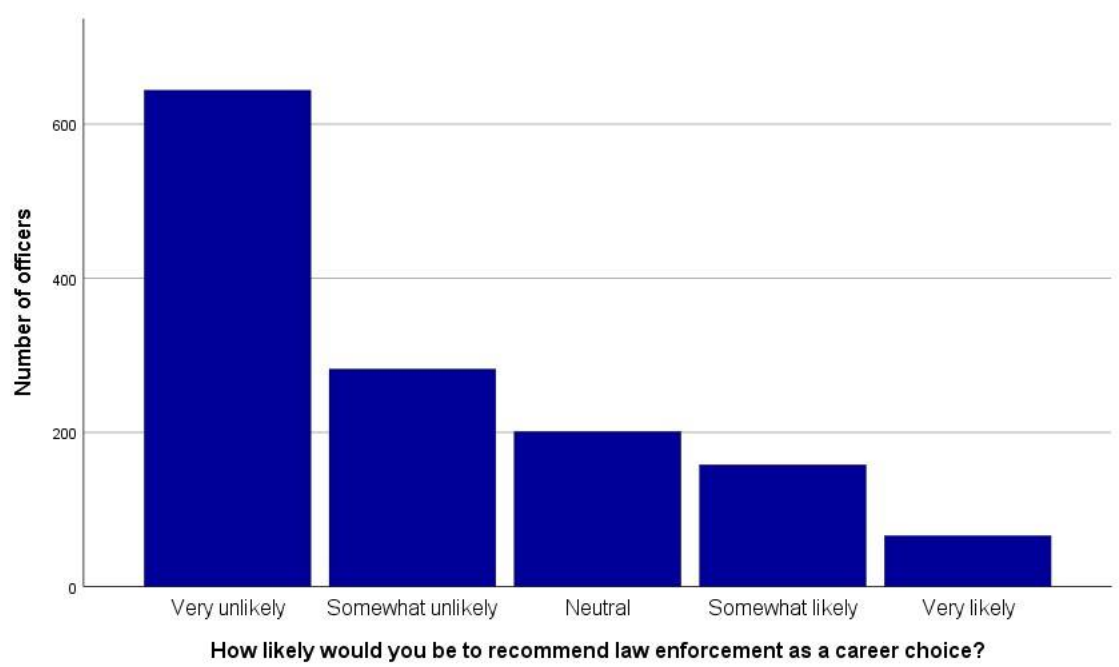
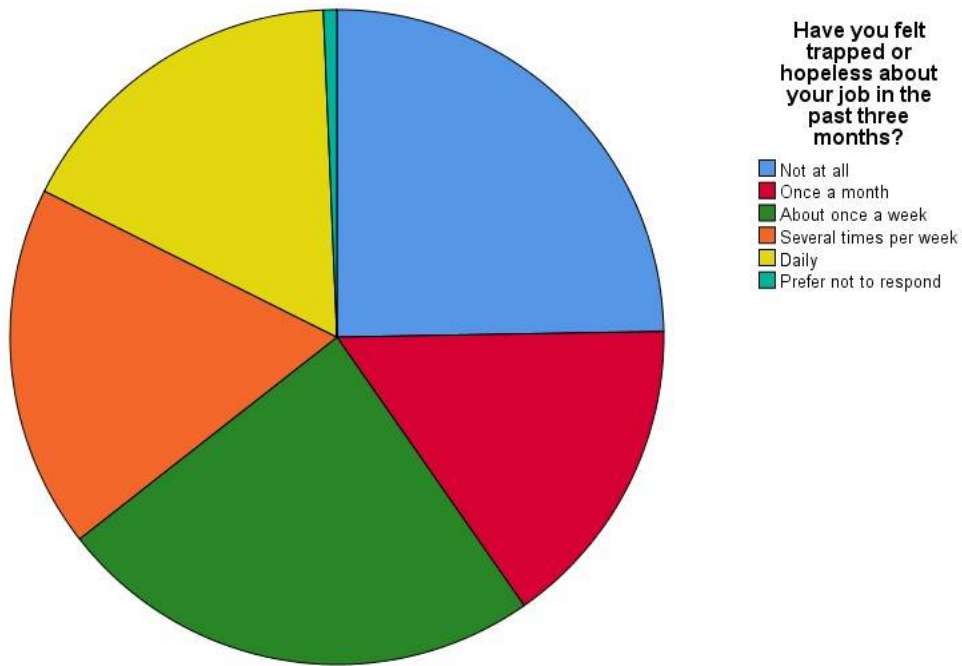
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In total, 47% of the sample screened positive for PTSD, which is approximately 9 to 10 times greater than the prevalence seen in the general population. Further, 29% of the sample was in the moderate to very severe range of anxiety, which is approximately 2 times greater than the prevalence seen in the general population. Finally, 37% of the sample was in the moderate to very severe range of depression. This is approximately 5 times greater than the prevalence seen in the general population.

### **IMPACT ON JOB PERCEPTIONS**

The events of 2020 and current mental health are associated with a number of other adverse outcomes for officers. For instance, 63% of the sample reported that recent events have impacted their work productivity on a daily or weekly basis. Further, 55% of the sample reported that they consider quitting their job on a daily or weekly basis. The majority of participants reported that they often feel trapped or helpless in their job at least once per week and indicated they are [unlikely to recommend a job in law enforcement as a career choice](#). Notably, 38% of the sample reported that their department does not provide adequate mental health services, with an additional 8% indicating that they would prefer not to respond.

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## AT-RISK OFFICERS

Some officers may be at particular risk for psychological suffering. Officers were grouped based on the number of years of service, and results showed that officers in the 5-10 years of service range were at heightened risk for symptoms of PTSD and depression when compared to officers with fewer than 5 years of experience or officers with greater than 10 years of service. However, many officers indicated that they would be reluctant to seek services. When asked why officers may be reluctant, the most frequently cited reasons were [stigma](#) and fear that seeking assistance is a sign of personal weakness, followed by fear of job loss or repercussions in the workplace.

## A SENSE OF BETRAYAL

In the past few months, officers have been at enhanced risk for verbal and physical assault on the job as a result of the rioting and looting that has occurred across the country. These events alone can enhance a sense of threat among officers, having a direct impact on psychological health. However, the current social climate has a much more insidious impact than the threat of violence alone. After all, law enforcement is trained to manage threats in the environment.

More specifically, the rapid shift in public perception of law enforcement can lead to a sense of betrayal. A sense of betrayal can be amplified further if an officer does not believe that their department will have their back in the event that their actions become politicized. However, betrayal is a strong emotion connected with negative psychological outcomes such as PTSD and depression. Officers may also be struggling if they believe they have been unable to protect their community, a job that officers are sworn to do. Further, affiliating with a profession that has been labeled as abusive can threaten one's sense of identity and purpose, leading to increased stress, anxiety and shame.

## SUICIDE RISKS

The findings of this brief survey are deeply concerning. Distress and mental health symptoms are strongly connected to risk for suicide, which is already an [epidemic among police officers](#). This may be an especially concerning time when officers report feeling trapped or hopeless about their job, as hopelessness is a leading predictor of risk for suicide, [3] particularly among police officers. [4] The results are also important to consider from a public health perspective, as symptoms of PTSD, depression and anxiety negatively impact [sleep](#), decision-making, concentration and problem-solving, all of which are integral to officer performance in the field.

## SURVEY LIMITATIONS

It is important to recognize a few limitations of the project. Perhaps most importantly it is possible that officers who are currently suffering the most were more likely to participate in a study on mental health. Conversely, it is also possible that these numbers are an underestimate, as officers who are struggling the most may be unwilling to acknowledge or share their experience. It is also possible that the sample does not adequately reflect the demographic composition of the police force, though this likely varies based on geography. As such, some caution should be taken in interpreting the findings. Further, we assessed for symptoms in the past month. Whether this means that, for instance, 47% of law enforcement will be suffering from PTSD in one year is speculative. The study is measuring only acute stress symptoms that may naturally abate if and when the current crises diminish.

## NEXT STEPS

This study reveals a profession that is deeply suffering under the weight of the events of 2020 and will likely continue to suffer as negative perceptions of police continue and discussions regarding police reform and defunding persist. As stigma presents a barrier to officers seeking assistance,

2. Yuan C, Wang Z, et al. Protective factors for posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in a prospective study of police officers. *Psychiatry Research*, 2011, 188:45-50.

3. Ribeiro JD, Huang X, et al. Depression and hopelessness as risk factors for suicide ideation, attempts, and death: Meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 2018, 212:279-286.

4. Violanti JM, Andrew ME, et al. Correlates of hopelessness in the high suicide risk police occupation. *Police Practice and Research*, 2016, 17, 408-419.

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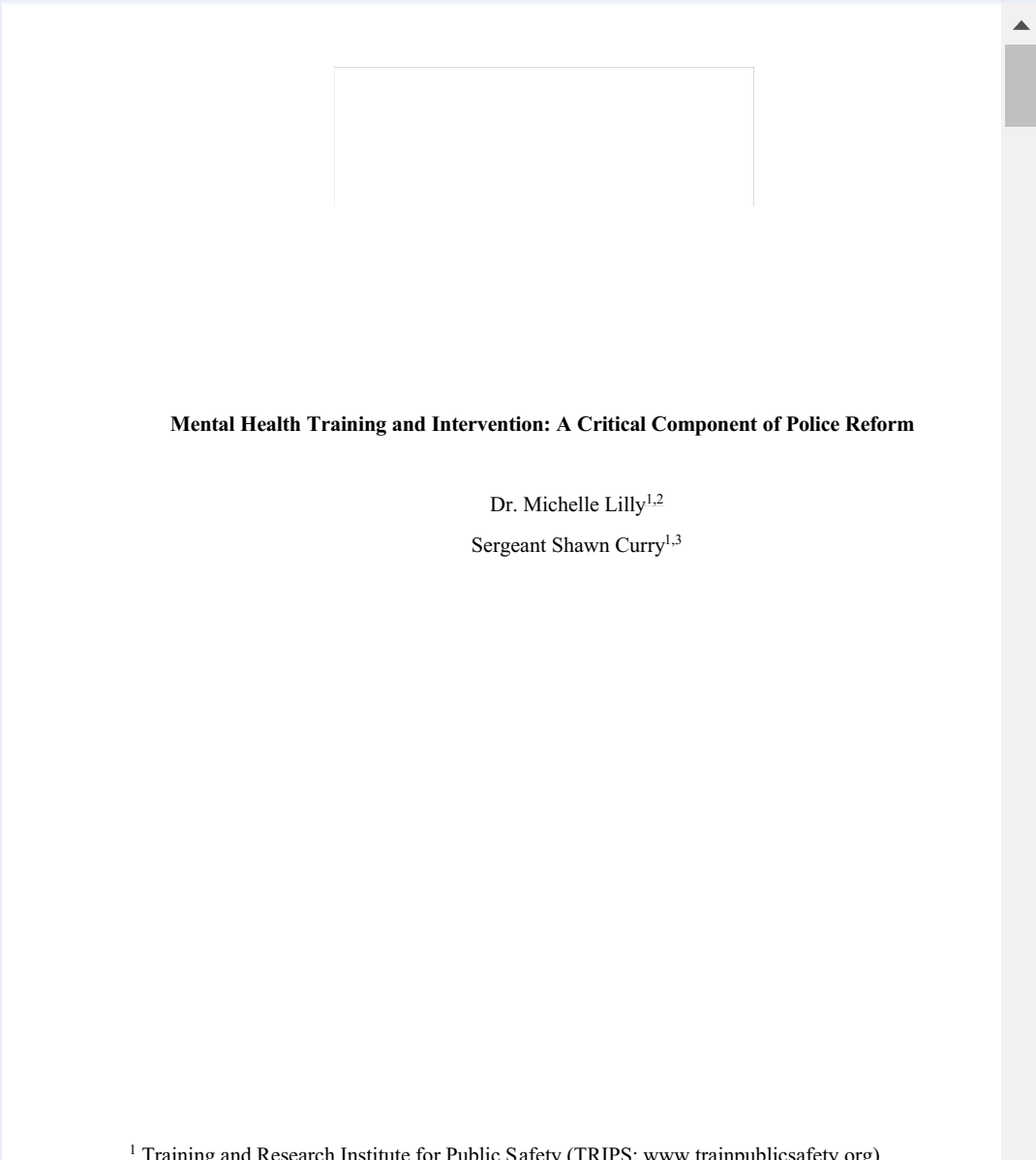
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conversations regarding how to support officers through greater training and intervention resources are imperative and urgent. There is a longstanding perception among public safety that conditions such as PTSD are untreatable, and that experiencing PTSD means that an individual can no longer do the job. This is a fallacy. PTSD, depression, and anxiety are treatable conditions. If you are suffering, or you know someone who is suffering, reach out for help.

A full version of the white paper describing study results is available below.

***NEXT: [When red flags are too late: Police leaders must act now to save their officers](#)***

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**Mental Health Training and Intervention: A Critical Component of Police Reform**

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<sup>1</sup> Training and Research Institute for Public Safety (TRIPS; [www.trainpublicsafety.org](http://www.trainpublicsafety.org))

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## References

1. Ruderman Family Foundation. [The Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide in First Responders](#), 2018.