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Passion for the Job

When red flags are too late: Police leaders must act now to save their officers

Leaders must not assume that the stoicism and strength shown by their officers is a sustainable strategy for wellness

Sep 14, 2020

What's worse than a crisis? A crisis inside a crisis. Law enforcement may be on the verge of losses far deeper than even anti-cop activists could imagine.

Recognizing the unique characteristics of the recent era of [COVID-19 threats](#) and existential threats facing law enforcement as a whole and police officers individually, Dr. Michelle Lilly of the Department of Psychology at Northern Illinois University and Sergeant Shawn Curry of the Peoria (Illinois) Police Department [recently conducted a survey of police officers regarding these contemporary stressors](#). The results reveal a frightening spike in mental health concerns from the effect of recent events.

COMPARISON TO PREVIOUS STUDIES



The celebration of first responders during the COVID-19 crisis turned to denigration of police officers at whiplash speed. (AP Photo/Christian Monterrosa)

As a good research document does, this report, under the auspices of the [Training and Research Institute for Public Safety \(TRIPS\)](#), recites previous studies documenting the prevalence of PTSD and trauma experienced in the general public compared to police officers. While those statistics are revealing, this new survey data is a very compelling call to police leadership to take immediate action.

The survey sample population for this study was made up of a diverse set of over 1300 active-duty police officers serving in a variety of agency types. The questions designed to screen for PTSD were limited to a two-week period in August 2020 in order to measure officer mental health in the middle of the pandemic, political upheaval and public vilification.

FINDINGS

Nearly half of the responders to the survey [screened positive for PTSD](#), a figure that is as much as 10 times greater than the general population.

Nearly half of those responding tested in the high range for anxiety, which is approximately double that seen in the general population.

Over a third of officers responding scored in the moderate to very severe range of depression, five times greater than the general population.

SO WHAT?

The prevalence of these stressors, whether transient or not, do not fail to exact a toll on the minds and bodies of police officers. The survey quantifies the intuitive sense that police cannot perform with a high degree of proficiency under extreme, chronic stress. A significant 63% say that recent events have impacted their productivity on a daily or weekly basis, and 55% report considering quitting their job on a daily or weekly basis. It is the most productive segment of officers, those with 5-10 years of service, who have the most severe risks.

The [calls for defunding or eliminating police](#), more prosecution of police, and limits on the ability of police to protect themselves from physical and financial disaster, could be having a success that anti-police activists hadn't anticipated, or maybe they have – the destruction of the very spirit of those who serve and protect. Officers report feeling trapped in a sense of hopelessness, which is a known associated risk of [suicide](#).

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES LACKING

For those with experience in the law enforcement profession, it may be surprising that the survey showed that only 38% of agencies do not have adequate mental health services. It would be no surprise that the survey confirmed that 90% of respondents believed that officers are reluctant to seek mental health services.

Ranking barriers to [seeking and getting mental health services](#), the survey indicated the leading barriers are fear of stigma, being considered weak, and fear of job or assignment loss.

Apparently, the lack of services within departments and communities is not the greatest threat to officer mental health.

EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES, INTERNAL STRESS

The increase in the risk of assault, both physical and verbal, has a cumulatively negative effect on mental health. Feelings of betrayal are common and complex. The loss of confidence by the public, and lack of trust and support by communities, leadership and individuals have a very personal effect on officers. The celebration of first responders during the COVID-19 crisis turned to the denigration of police officers at whiplash speed. Officers feel vulnerable and unprotected based on the very real circumstances evoking those thoughts.

Moral injury is described in the document as a sense of failure, guilt and shame contrasted with the highest ideals and rewards sought after by police officers. A loss of their sense of identity as noble protectors can have severe mental health ramifications.

THE FUTURE OF RECRUITING AND RETENTION

One of the keys to [sustaining a flow of recruits to the policing profession](#) is the mentorship and encouragement by those already in law enforcement. Physical danger has little deterrent effect on those who seek to protect and serve through law enforcement. The social and psychological dangers present in the current circumstances are increasing retirements, relocations and resignations that have the ripple effect of increasing the workloads and decreasing the morale of the officers remaining.

[Retention of good police officers](#) is the most cost-efficient way of staffing a police agency. Losing a trained and productive officer is costly in dollars and many other ways. Leaders must provide services and encouragement in very tangible and sincere ways to stem the tide of hopelessness.

WHAT LEADERS MUST DO NOW

Given the urgency reflected in the survey, police leaders must make efforts to determine the level of crisis their officers are experiencing.

Agencies can use a survey instrument like that used in the TRIP report, or they can use existing data such as absenteeism, work production, errors and supervisor observations for comparison with previous time periods.

Leaders must not assume that the stoicism and strength shown by their officers is a sustainable strategy for wellness. Preventive intervention in tangible ways must be intentional and immediate. Whether that looks like mere acknowledgment and encouragement, making holistic health services more available, or making public affirmations of their service, the cost of failure to act could be high for the public and for the officers.

About the author

Joel Shults operates [Street Smart Training](#) and is the founder of the National [Center for Police Advocacy](#). He retired as Chief of Police in Colorado. Over his 30-year career in uniformed law enforcement and criminal justice education, Joel served in a variety of roles: academy instructor, police chaplain, deputy coroner, investigator, community relations officer, college professor and police chief, among others. Shults earned his doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri, with a graduate degree in Public Services Administration and bachelors in Criminal Justice Administration from the University of Central Missouri. In addition to service with the U.S. Army military police and CID, Shults has done observational studies with over 50 police agencies across the country. He has served on a number of advisory and advocacy boards, including the Colorado POST curriculum committee, as a subject matter expert.

His latest book *The Badge and the Brain* is available at www.joelshults.com.

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