

Purpose

America's First Responders are tasked with dealing with work that is highly stressful, where one continually faces the effects of murder, violence, accidents, serious injury, and death. The day in, day out effects of these situations wreak havoc both personally and professionally on those who serve their communities. Work as a first responder is a combination of extreme boredom with incidents of mind-numbing terror. No individual, no matter how highly trained or well-adjusted, is immune to the long-term effects of cumulative stress or sudden critical incidents.

Since 9/11, the role of the First Responder has changed dramatically. First responders have become teachers, advocates, counselors, enforcement, and safety to those within their jurisdictions. Yet year after year, police and fire always rank at the top of the most stressful jobs in America. The demands of shiftwork, change in politics and public policy, and having to make life-changing decisions within seconds are all contributing factors in the mental welfare of our public servants. Alcoholism, divorce, depression, PTSD, moral injury, stress-related health issues, and suicide among first responders are constantly well above the national average. The health and well-being not only affect the individual officer, fireman, or child welfare agent, but also those who work around them and the public they serve and protect.

The purpose of the First Responders Suicide Prevention Act is to allow agencies to train personnel in peer counseling and support. This would allow the responders access to trained individuals within their respected fields to speak to, and seek guidance during difficult and challenging times in their careers and lives. Most first responders feel comfortable speaking to others within their professions that have experienced similar situations and stressors. Allowing this type of interaction will give the public servant the ability to seek help during trying times and with the confidence of knowing their issue is held in confidence with someone who understands. No longer should these public servants have to suffer in silence.

Maintaining an emotionally and mentally healthy class of first responders should be a priority goal to achieve. Healthy police and fireman will make better decisions, increase productivity, create better working environments, and will respond to society in a much more open and effective manner.

Policing across the United States receives a lot of attention in the media, and has always been a major topic of conversation among media outlets. What is never discussed is the persistent and devastating issue of mental health and stress-related ailments associated with the profession. Highlighted below are some of the staggering facts research has shown to be common in public safety officers.

Studies have shown that there is an average of over three times as many police officer suicides per year than the number of officers killed in felonious acts ("Police Suicide Myths," n.d.). This is well above the national average. The American National average for suicide is 12/100,000 and amongst police officers is 17/100,000 ("Suicide Statistics, 2016"). It's also important to note that the national average also includes those who are considered high-risk for suicide. Data has also revealed that 25% of female officers and 23% of male officers reported more suicidal thoughts

than the general population, which holds around 13.5% (Baker, 2008). As part of the discussion of suicide, it is important to understand the nature of mental illness in first responders.

In a study completed in 2012, of officers surveyed, 24% had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, 9% had depression, and 19% reported frequent alcohol usage. They also found that 30% of officers reported having intrusive thoughts or nightmares, while 22% avoided places or situations that reminded them of traumatic events. 14% of officers believed they should cut down on their drinking and 3.3% reported drinking first thing in the morning to steady their nerves. It is also critical to note that of the officers surveyed, only 46% sought any kind of help due to concerns about confidentiality and the impact it would have on their career. In regards to the financial impacts to the departments, there was a productivity loss at an economic cost annually of \$4,489 per officer (Fox et al., 2012). Another study found around 10% of the officers had PTSD and 48% met at least the first criteria for PTSD. The same study addressed sleep issues among officers and found 46% reported falling asleep while driving at least once a month, and 287 of the officers were involved in a vehicle crash during the study. Almost 41% of the officers tested positive for at least one diagnosable sleep disorder (Watson, J. 2012). Both studies highlighted the alarming prevalence of mental health related problems amongst first responders and the associated sleep issues that accompany that.

Not only are mental health related issues more prevalent in emergency personnel, stress-related health issues are also much more common. In officers over the age of 40, there was a significant higher 10-year risk of a coronary event compared to the general populace. Recommended cholesterol levels were 72% higher in female officers and 43% higher in male officers. Police officers as a group had higher pulse rates and diastolic blood pressure compared to the public (Baker, 2008). The fact that officers are subjected to moments of intense stress, in conjunction with periods of extreme boredom, coupled with large amounts of overtime and shift work, wreaks havoc on the mental and physical aspects of officers.

Many experts in the medical field feel the statistics on mental and physical health of police officers are suppressed. Many cite that officers are reluctant to take part in many studies, and those that do tend to minimize answers to many of the questions asked. It's also suspected by some that the suicide rates among police officers are higher than reported, many times hard to track due to the way the incidents are officially reported. Among retirees within the first five years after retirement, the suicide rate is estimated to be as much as four times higher than active duty officers.

Police departments across the nation have done an outstanding job hiring the best possible candidates for their respected departments. Officers go through rigorous testing, both mentally and physically. The overwhelming number of police officers hired today are much more psychologically and physically fit to perform the duties required than the average citizen. Yet what should alarm administrators, politicians, and the public, is that within years of service those who once were above the norm always fall behind. Since the economic collapse of 2008, departments across the nation have gotten smaller and the numbers of officers has steadily declined, yet the rate of crime has statistically stayed the same and in some areas, increased. The pressures of less officers and more crime places the individual officer in a much more demanding role, with a greater risk of injury and illness. Social desires and views change faster than legislation can keep pace. Officers are placed in positions of enforcing the laws that are written or adhere to the social

flavor of the day. The public mood toward American law enforcement changes with every flashing news headline, most of which are based on opinion and not fact. Most officers work 50+ hours a week taking care of everyone else's problems, and they rarely take the time to take care of their own. It's time every officer looks at those who stand firm alongside of them and begin to take care of one another and ourselves.

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