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# Police Officer Suicide: Frequency and Officer Profiles

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*Law enforcement suicide rates were computed and compared to suicide rates in the general population. The best estimate of suicide in the law enforcement profession is 18.1 per 100,000. This figure is 52% greater than that of the general population but 26% lower than that of the appropriate comparison group (white males between the ages of 25 and 55). Thus, the notion that suicide rates are abnormally high in law enforcement was not supported by the data.*

*Keywords: suicide rates, law enforcement, police, suicide methods*

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Data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) indicate Americans commit suicide at a rate of about 12 per 100,000 residents (Fields & Jones, 1999). This rate makes suicide the 9th leading cause of death in the United States. Recently, the law enforcement community has taken a close look at suicide following a rash of well-publicized suicides in the New York City Police Department in 1994 and heavy media coverage of police suicides. The purpose of our paper is to examine suicide rates in law enforcement to determine if police officers have higher suicide rates than the general population, and if there is a common profile of officers who commit suicide.

## **DO POLICE OFFICERS HAVE HIGHER SUICIDE RATES THAN THE GENERAL POPULATION?**

At first glance, the answer to this question would appear to be yes. The statistics commonly cited in the media suggest the suicide rate for law enforcement personnel is 22 deaths per 100,000 officers compared to 12 deaths per 100,000 in the general population. This estimate of police suicide is based on a 1995 Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) study of insurance claims by 92 local chapters in 24 states (Langston, 1995). Furthermore, "experts" quoted in newspaper articles consistently state there are about 300 suicides each year by law enforcement personnel or that the police suicide rate is at least double that of the general population (see for example, Aurizio, 1997; Gold, 1999; Loh, 1994)

To get an idea if this commonly cited suicide rate for law enforcement personnel is accurate, we looked at the data published in the June 1, 1999 issue of *USA Today* in which the paper listed the suicide rates for the New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio police departments as well as for the FBI. As shown in Table 1, the annual suicide rate for officers in these agencies is a combined 16.34 per 100,000, well below the 22 reported in the FOP study.

In September of 1999, one of the researchers (Aamodt) phoned the 22 law enforcement agencies in the Roanoke and New River Valleys in Virginia to investigate the local law enforcement suicide rate. From the period 1990-1998, there was only one law enforcement suicide, a rate of 10.0 per 100,000, also well below the FOP rate.

**Table 1: Law Enforcement Suicide Rates from the *USA Today* Article**

Department	Dates	Years	Size	Suicides	Rates per 100,000
San Diego P.D.	1992 - 1998	7	2,000	5	35.7
FBI	1993 - 1998	6	11,500	18	26.1
Los Angeles P.D.	1990 - 1998	9	9,668	20	20.7
Chicago P.D.	1990 - 1998	9	13,500	22	18.1
New York P.D.	1985 - 1998	14	40,000	87	15.5
San Antonio P. D.	1994 - 1998	5	1,871	0	0.0
Houston P.D.	1994 - 1998	5	5,441	0	0.0
Dallas P.D.	1994 - 1998	5	2,845	0	0.0
Phoenix P.D.	1994 - 1998	5	2,500	0	0.0
TOTAL				152	16.3

To get further data, we used such sources as InfoTrac, Lexis-Nexis, and Dow Jones Interactive to conduct an extensive search of media articles reporting on suicides by law enforcement personnel prior to October 1, 1999. As shown in Table 2, the suicide rate for the 9 agencies is 37.05. Caution must be taken in interpreting this figure as the articles only covered agencies reporting a recent suicide.

**Table 2**  
Law Enforcement Suicide Rates from Other Media Sources

Department	Dates	Years	Size	Suicides	Rate	Source
San Francisco P.D.	1988-1997	10	2,185	7	32.0	Sward & Wallace (1997)
Boston PD	1987-1998	10	1,977	12	50.6	Armstrong (1998)
Brevard Co. SO (FL)	1986-1999	14	780	2	18.3	Tamman (1999)
Noblesville, PD (IN)	1949-1999	51	59	1	33.9	Frederick (1999)
Newark PD (NJ)	1997-1999	3	1,500	2	44.4	Gold (1999)
Newark PD (NJ)	1978-1988	11	1,500	3	18.2	Associated Press (1988)
Henrico Co PD (VA)	1968-1990	13	353	2	25.8	Johnson (1990)
Lehigh Valley (PA)	1983-1997	5	1,064	3	18.8	Boyle (1997)
Kansas City PD	1988-1993	6	1,143	4	58.3	Dillon (1993)
TOTAL			10,561	36	37.1	

Finally, we combined the data provided in published studies of law enforcement suicide. This analysis was limited to "more recent years" which we defined as being from 1950 to the present. To use some of these studies, it was necessary to obtain additional information. For example, Danto (1978) reported that 12 Detroit police officers committed suicide in the eight years from 1968 through 1975. To compute a suicide rate for this study, we used the *Uniform Crime Report* to determine the number of sworn personnel in the Detroit P.D. for each of those eight years, and then computed an average number of sworn personnel for those eight years. The Detroit suicide rate of 28.45 was then calculated by dividing the number of suicides (12) by the average number of sworn personnel (5,272), multiplying this quotient by 100,000, and then dividing by the number of years in the study (8). Similar calculations were conducted for any study with incomplete data.

Because the suicide rate of 203.66 reported by Nelson and Smith (1970) appears to be abnormally high, we used the *Uniform Crime Report* to obtain the number of law enforcement personnel in Wyoming for the relevant years and then recomputed the suicide rate. The rate of 117.6 we computed is still very high, but more reasonable than the 203.66 originally reported.

As shown in Table 3, the annual law enforcement suicide rate across these 30 studies is 17.83 per 100,000. In computing the average suicide rate across studies, each study was weighted by the size of the department and the number of years included in the study. Though the international studies are included in the table, they were not included in the analysis.

As shown in Table 4, when all of our sources are combined, our best estimate of the annual law-enforcement suicide rate is 18.1 per 100,000.

## **COMPARISON TO POPULATION FIGURES**

Now that we have an estimate of the law enforcement suicide rate (18.1 per 100,000), the next task is to determine how this rate compares to the national rate. In the media, the law enforcement suicide rate has been compared to the national suicide rate of about 12 per 100,000 people (Fields & Jones, 1999). However such a comparison is not proper as suicide rates vary greatly across genders, races, and age groups. For example, as shown in Table 5, in 1997 (the most recent data available) the suicide rate for white males, which is what most police officers are, is 20.2 per 100,000. Comparing the law enforcement rate of 18.1 per 100,000 to the 20.2 per 100,000 paints a very different picture than comparing the law enforcement rate to the 11.4 per 100,000 in the general population (Hoyert, Kochanek, & Murphy, 1999). Furthermore, the suicide rate for white, males between the ages of 25 and 55 for 1997 is 25.5 (Hoyert, Kochanek, & Murphy, 1999).

If we adjust these figures to take into account the fact that as of 1997, 72.1% of law enforcement personnel were white males, 8.9% were white females, 16.9% were non-white males, and 2.1% were non-white females (*Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1997), the expected suicide rate for law enforcement would be 21.89 per 100,000. Thus, if we compare the law enforcement suicide rate to the appropriate population rates rather than the general population rate, it is clear the suicide rate for law enforcement personnel is actually lower than the appropriate comparison group!

**Table 3**  
Law Enforcement Suicide Rates from Published Research

Department	Years	Size	Suicides	Rate	Source
<b>Local Rates</b>					
Buffalo, NY	1950-1990	2,611	24	22.9	Violanti et al. (1998)
Chicago PD	1977-1979	13,314	20	43.8	Wagner & Brezeczke, 1983
Chicago PD	1970-1978	13,150	39	29.5	Cronin (1982)
Chicago PD	1934-1939			48.0	Heiman (1975)
Albuquerque	1960-1977	491	0	0.0	Heiman (1977)
Albuquerque	1988-1998	900	1	10.1	Deutsch (1999)
Atlanta	1960-1977	1,225	0	0.0	Heiman (1977)
Austin	1988-1998	1,100	2	28.5	Deutsch (1999)
Boston	1960-1977	2,166	4	10.3	Heiman (1977)
Dallas	1960-1977	2,004	0	0.0	Heiman (1977)
Denver PD	1934-1939		0	0.0	Heiman (1975)
Detroit	1968-1975	5,272	12	28.5	Danto (1978)
Honolulu	1960-1977	1,471	5	18.9	Heiman (1977)
Little Rock	1960-1977	262	0	0.0	Heiman (1977)
Los Angeles PD	1970-1976	7,136	4	8.1	Dash & Reiser (1978)
Los Angeles PD	1977-1978	6,972	10	12.0	Josephson & Reiser, 1990
Miami Beach	1960-1977	210	2	52.9	Heiman (1977)
Newark	1960-1977	1,463	5	19.0	Heiman (1977)
NYPD	1928-1933	18,096	51	46.9	Friedman (1968)
NYPD	1934-1939	18,346	93	84.5	Friedman (1968)
NYPD	1950-1965			22.7	Territo & Vetter (1981)
NYPD	1960-1973	27,597	74	19.1	Heiman (1975)
Philadelphia	1960-1977	8,188	1	0.1	Heiman (1977)
Phoenix	1960-1977	1,533	2	7.2	Heiman (1977)
Portland	1960-1977	693	1	8.0	Heiman (1977)
Rochester	1960-1977	645	1	8.6	Heiman (1977)
Salt Lake City	1960-1977	370	0	0.0	Heiman (1977)
San Diego	1960-1977	1,082	2	10.3	Heiman (1977)
San Francisco PD	1934-1939			51.8	Heiman (1975)
Seattle	1960-1977	1,036	5	26.8	Heiman (1977)
St. Louis PD	1934-1939			17.9	Heiman (1975)
Topeka	1960-1977	215	0	0.0	Heiman (1977)
<b>State Rates</b>					
Vermont	1986-1998	1,000	5	38.5	Deutsch (1999)
IL, IN, MN	1980-1999	3,736	9	12.7	Campion (1999)
Tennessee	1972-1974	2,319	5	72.0	Fell et al. (1980)
Wyoming	1960-1968	667	7	117.6	Nelson & Smith (1970)
Washington	1950-1971		40		Hill & Clawson (1988)
16 states	1985	128,738		26.6	Stack & Kelley (1994)
<b>International Rates</b>					
RCMP, Canada	1984-1985			16.0	Andrews (1996)
RCMP, Canada	1960-1983	20,000	35	14.1	Loo (1986)
Germany	1992-1996	136,684	159	23.5	Fricke & Lester (1999)
London	1960-1973	19,634	16	5.8	Heiman (1975)

**Table 4**  
 Combined Suicide Rate for All Sources

	# Agencies	Total Sworn	Suicide Rate
USA Today Study	9	89,325	16.3
FOP Study	92	38,800	22.0
Roanoke/New River Valley	22	1,105	10.0
Published Research	30	237,566	17.8
Media Articles	9	10,561	37.1
TOTAL		377,357	18.1

**Table 5**  
 General U.S. Population Suicide Rates 1997 (Source: National Vital Statistics Reports)

Race	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
White	20.2	4.9	12.4
Black	10.9	1.9	6.2
TOTAL	18.7	4.2	11.4

A second way to compare suicide rates is the Proportionate Mortality Ratio (PMR). Table 6 shows the PMRs for each of the studies in our analysis. The PMRs were computed by dividing the law enforcement suicide rate by both the rate for the general population and the rate for white, males between the ages 25-54 for the years in which the study was conducted. These rates were obtained from the *Federal Statistical Abstracts* for each of the past 40 years. A PMR below 100 indicates that the law enforcement suicide rate is lower than the age adjusted comparison group. Likewise, a PMR above 100 indicates that the law enforcement suicide rate is higher than the age adjusted comparison group. As shown in Table 3, the average PMR across the studies is 152 when compared to the age-adjusted general population rate and 73 when compared to the rate for white, males between the ages of 25 and 54. Thus, law enforcement personnel have a 52% higher suicide rate than the general population and a 27% lower rate when compared to white males between the ages of 25 and 54. If we adjust for the percentage of females and non-whites in law enforcement, law enforcement personnel have a PMR of 82.69 compared to the appropriate population rate.

**Table 6**  
Proportionate Mortality Ratios for Law Enforcement Suicide

	Rate	General Population		White males, 25-54	
		Rate	PMR	Rate	PMR
USA Today Study					
San Diego	35.7	11.8	303	25.3	141
FBI	26.1	12.0	217	25.3	103
LAPD	22.9	12.0	192	25.3	91
Chicago	18.1	12.0	151	25.3	72
NYPD	15.5	11.8	132	25.1	62
San Antonio	0.0	12.0	0	25.6	0
Houston	0.0	12.0	0	25.6	0
Dallas	0.0	12.0	0	25.6	0
Phoenix	0.0	12.0	0	25.6	0
FOP Study	22.0	11.9	185	26.1	84
SW Virginia Study	10.0	12.1	83	25.4	43
Published Research					
Buffalo	22.9	11.9	192	24.8	92
Chicago	43.8	12.2	359	24.9	176
Chicago	29.5	12.1	244	24.8	119
Detroit	28.5	12.0	238	24.7	115
Albuquerque	0.0	12.1	0	24.9	0
Albuquerque	10.1	11.8	86	25.1	40
Atlanta	0.0	12.1	0	24.9	0
Austin	28.5	11.8	242	25.1	114
Boston	10.3	12.1	85	24.9	41
Dallas	0.0	12.1	0	24.9	0
Honolulu	18.9	12.1	156	24.9	76
Little Rock	0.0	12.1	0	24.9	0
Miami Beach	52.9	12.1	437	24.9	212
Newark	19.0	12.1	157	24.9	76
Philadelphia	0.1	12.1	1	24.9	1
Phoenix	7.2	12.1	60	24.9	29
Portland	8.0	12.1	66	24.9	32
Rochester	8.6	12.1	71	24.9	35
Salt Lake City	0.0	12.1	0	24.9	0
San Diego	10.3	12.1	85	24.9	41
Seattle	26.8	12.1	221	24.9	108
Topeka	0.0	12.1	0	24.9	0
Tennessee	72.0	12.0	600	24.6	293
Wyoming	118.0	11.1	1059	23.8	494
New Jersey					73
IL, IN, MN	12.7	11.7	108	25.0	51
Washington			113		
Vermont	38.5	11.8	326	25.1	153
16 states	26.6	11.5	231	24.7	108

LAPD	8.1	12.0	68	24.7	33
LAPD	12.0	11.8	102	24.9	48
NYPD	19.1	11.9	161	24.2	79
Media Articles					
SFPD	32.0	12.0	267	25.2	127
Boston	55.2	11.9	464	25.2	219
Brevard Co., FL	18.3	11.9	154	25.2	73
Noblesville, IN	33.2	11.9	279	24.8	134
Newark	44.4	10.8	412	26.1	170
Newark	18.2	11.7	155	24.8	73
Henrico Co., VA	43.6	11.9	366	24.8	176
Lehigh Valley, PA	18.8	11.8	159	25.1	75
Kansas City, MO	58.3	12.0	486	24.9	234
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>152</b>		<b>73</b>

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## DISCUSSION

On the basis of the data mentioned in this article, the differences in suicide rates between law enforcement agencies and the general public can be explained by the fact that the vast majority of police officers are white (81%), males (89%) between the ages of 21 and 55 (Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1997) characteristics associated with higher suicide rates. After accounting for sex, race, and age, differences between law enforcement personnel and the general public are not only reduced, but change direction indicating that law enforcement personnel are 26% less likely to commit suicide than their same sex, race, and age counterparts not working in law enforcement. Thus, attempts to attribute suicides by law enforcement personnel to unique characteristics of the job are not supported by the data in this paper.

### IS THERE A COMMON PROFILE OF OFFICERS WHO COMMIT SUICIDE?

We used two strategies to answer this question. The first strategy was to review published literature providing information about law enforcement personnel who committed suicide. This review yielded data on 396 law enforcement suicides from 12 articles: Ivanoff (1994), Aussant (1984), Heiman (1975), Friedman (1968), Cronin, (1982), Violanti, Vena, and Petralia (1998), Danto (1978), Loo (1986), Josephson and Reiser (1990), Dash and Reiser (1978), Cantor, Tyman, & Slater (1996), and the FOP study (Langston, 1995).

The second strategy was to use such sources as Infotrac, Lexis-Nexis, and Dow Jones Interactive to locate media stories about police suicide. This strategy yielded data on 299 law enforcement suicides. As shown in Table 7, the "typical" officer who committed suicide was a white, 36.9 year-old, married male with 12.2 years of law enforcement experience. As shown in Table 8, the typical suicide was committed off-duty (86.3%), with a gun (90.7%), at home (54.8%).

The reason the officers committed suicide is more difficult to determine. Each study used different categories to code the reason for the suicide and thus comparisons among studies are difficult. For example, in our national media study, legal problems were a major reason for the law enforcement suicides yet no other study separately coded legal problems. As shown in Table 9, relationship problems accounted for the highest percentage of suicides at 26.6% (relationship

problems plus murder/suicide), followed by legal problems at 14.8%. In nearly a third of the suicides, no reason was known.

**Table 7**  
The Officers Who Commit Suicide

	Literature Review		Our National Media Search		Combined	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	265	95.7	273	91.3	538	93.4
Female	12	4.3	26	8.7	38	6.5
<b>Race</b>						
White	149	81.0			149	81.0
Black	27	14.7			27	14.7
Hispanic	7	3.8			7	3.8
Asian	1	0.5			1	0.5
<b>Marital Status</b>						
Married	231	62.7	68	55.7	299	59.6
Divorced	34	7.4	12	9.8	46	9.2
Separated	19	5.4	27	22.1	46	9.2
Single	89	22.5	15	12.3	104	20.6
Widowed	7	2.0	0	0.0	7	1.4
<b>Rank</b>						
Officer/Deputy	196	72.8	189	70.0	385	71.4
Sergeant	43	16.0	21	7.8	64	11.9
Lieutenant	5	1.9	11	4.1	16	2.9
Captain	3	1.1	7	2.6	10	1.9
Detective	22	8.2	20	7.4	42	7.7
Chief/Sheriff	0	0.0	8	3.0	8	1.5
Dispatcher	0	0.0	3	1.1	3	0.6
State trooper	0	0.0	8	3.0	8	1.5
Federal agent	0	0.0	3	1.1	3	0.6

**Table 8**  
 Characteristics of the Suicide

	Literature Review		Our National Media Search		Combined	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>When</b>						
On-duty	16	21.6	28	11.3	44	13.7
Off-duty	58	78.4	220	88.7	278	86.3
<b>Where</b>						
Home	115	67.6	100	45.0	215	54.8
Other's home	3	1.8	18	8.1	21	5.4
Station house	17	10.0	24	10.8	41	10.5
Shooting range	0	0.0	3	1.4	3	0.8
Jail	0	0.0	4	1.8	4	1.0
Court house	0	0.0	1	0.5	1	0.3
Police academy	0	0.0	1	0.5	1	0.3
Personal car	3	1.8	19	8.6	22	5.6
Police cruiser	3	1.8	8	3.6	11	2.8
Street	0	0.0	9	4.1	9	2.3
Motel	3	1.8	4	1.8	7	1.8
Wife's workplace	0	0.0	2	0.9	2	0.5
Hospital	2	1.2	2	0.9	4	1.0
Cemetery	0	0.0	6	2.7	6	1.5
Desolate area (e.g., park)	0	0.0	10	4.5	10	2.6
Store/restaurant	0	0.0	3	1.4	3	0.8
Parking lot	0	0.0	4	1.8	4	1.0
Other	24	14.1	4	1.8	28	7.1
<b>Method</b>						
Shooting	<b>334</b>	<b>88.4</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>94.2</b>	<b>578</b>	<b>90.7</b>
Service weapon	176	46.6	96	37.1	272	42.7
Off-duty weapon	0	0.0	10	3.9	10	1.6
Personal handgun	7	1.9	19	7.3	26	4.1
Unspecified handgun	17	4.5	93	35.9	110	17.2
Rifle	1	0.2	2	0.8	3	0.5
Shotgun	2	0.5	6	2.3	8	1.3
Unspecified gun	131	34.7	18	6.9	149	23.3
Non-shooting	<b>44</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>9.3</b>
Overdosing	6	1.6	3	1.2	9	1.4
Hanging	13	3.4	5	1.9	18	2.8
Jumping	3	0.8	1	0.4	4	0.6
Cutting	3	0.8	2	0.8	5	0.8
Crashing	2	0.5	1	0.4	3	0.5
Carbon-monoxide	8	2.1	3	1.2	11	1.8
Other non-shooting	9	2.4	0	0.0	9	1.4

**Table 9**  
Reason for the Suicide

	Literature Review		Our National Media Search		Combined	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Legal trouble	0	0.0	59	21.2	59	14.8
Committed murder then suicide	4	3.1	33	12.3	37	9.3
Relationship problems	41	31.8	28	10.4	69	17.3
General personal problems	0	0.0	18	6.7	18	4.5
Work-related stress	13	10.2	14	5.3	27	6.8
Death of a fellow officer	0	0.0	5	1.9	5	1.3
Death of a friend/family member	0	0.0	5	1.9	5	1.3
Critical incident	7	5.4	0	0.0	7	1.8
Physical pain/illness	3	2.3	4	1.5	7	1.8
Shame over minor work problem	0	0.0	4	1.5	4	1.0
Financial problems	9	7.0	2	0.7	11	2.8
Psychological problems	16	12.4	0	0.0	16	4.0
Alcohol abuse	6	4.7	0	0.0	6	1.5
Unknown	30	23.4	97	36.1	127	31.9

## CONCLUSION

The data in this paper suggest that, although the suicide rate of 18.1 for law enforcement personnel is higher than the 11.4 in the general population, it is not higher than would be expected for people of similar age, race, and gender. Thus any difference between law enforcement rates and rates in the general population can be completely explained by the race, gender, and age of people who enter the law enforcement field. This is an important point because it suggests that speculation about such factors as job stress and the availability of weapons are not factors that are exclusively associated with law enforcement suicide. Although even one suicide is too many, allocating mental health resources to law enforcement personnel at the expense of other professions does not appear justified. Furthermore, the reasons that officers commit suicide are similar to those of the general population with the possible exception of legal problems.

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