

Suicide Prevention in Law Enforcement

The Toronto Police Service Experience

Original Report - August 1999
(Suicide Statistics Updated to current year, 2004)

Jaan Schaer BA
Retired Manager - Employee and Family Assistance Program
Toronto Police Service

Introduction

There have been countless articles written about stress in Law Enforcement. It doesn't seem to matter which country or jurisdiction has a Law Enforcement Agency, outcomes of stress are similar. One of these outcomes seems to be a significant higher suicide rate among men and women wearing the "BLUE," than in comparison with the general public. This observation appeared to be no different within the uniform ranks of the Toronto Police Service, until seven years ago.

When Community Mental Health Professionals became aware of the fact that the Toronto Police Service has survived over seven years without one uniformed member committing suicide, the question that always arises is how or why? This paper will examine the past and recent history of suicide within the Toronto Police Service. The writer will offer observations and suggestions as to what factors have contributed to this phenomenon.

Toronto Police Service

The Toronto Police Service in 1998 had 4,904 uniform and 2,162 civilian members for a total of 7,066 members.

The Service policed a city population of 2,425,947 responding to 1,741,954 calls for assistance with a Gross Operating Budget of \$522,145,800.

History of Suicide by Uniform Members

The author researched information regarding Police Officer suicide through the Toronto Police Service Records Unit, Toronto Police C.O. Bick College, Toronto Police Medical Advisory Services and the Toronto Police Employee and Family Assistance Program.

Since 1975 the Toronto Police Service has experienced a total of twenty-two (22) Officer suicides. The most recent occurred in June of 1992.

1975 - 1	1976 - 2	1977 - 1
1978 - 1	1979 - 1	
1980 - 1	1981 - 1	1982 - 0
1983 - 3	1984 - 0	1985 - 0
1986 - 2	1987 - 4	1988 - 1
1989 - 0		
1990 - 0	1991 - 2	1992 - 2
1993 - 0	1994 - 0	1995 - 0
1996 - 0	1997 - 0	1998 - 0
1999 - 0		
2000 - 0	2001 - 0	2002 - 0
2003 - 0	2004 - 0	

Comparison to General Public

The following figures compare the suicide rate with the Toronto Police Service to the general population.

	1975	1976	1980	1987
Canada	17.8	18.4	19.5	22.1
Province of Ontario	19.0	16.6	17.2	16.3
Toronto Police Service	19.8 (1)	37.7 (2)	18.4 (1)	74.8 (4)

Method of Suicide for 1980 - 1992 (Total 16)

Breakdown of the method of suicide reflects the following categories.

Gunshot (Service firearm) 9

Gunshot 4

Hanging 1

Carbon Monoxide Poison 1

Subway 1

Observations as to Possible Causes

The author, personally having experienced the loss of an Officer friend to suicide, conducted interviews with friends, co-workers, family and supervisors in an attempt to establish factors leading to individual tragedies.

The following factors were found to play a significant role in suicide cases:

- o Alcohol abuse/use played a significant role
- o Traumatic life incident
- o Victims grew up in dysfunctional families leading to an inability to communicate feelings and emotions
- o Experiencing relationship difficulties

Generally speaking a combination of factors lead to an individual contemplating and carrying out the act of suicide.

Recommendations (1987)

The author in a December 1987 report stated: "It is quite obvious that our 1986-87 suicide situation (6) is causing great concern. One only has to compare it to other law enforcement agencies and private sector companies. My recommendations are as follows:

- i. Evaluate present psychological testing and screening methods for recruits and supervisors.
- ii. Evaluate training at C.O. Bick College in the areas of assertiveness, coping with anger, stress management and maintaining relationships.

- iii. Evaluate the need for orienting the member's family to police work and it's stressors.
- iv. Evaluate the need for a comprehensive Wellness and Health Promotion Program.
- v. Evaluate our present Employee Assistance Program.
- vi. Evaluate the need for research and study as to the stressors and problems related to the physical and emotional well being of the MTPF.
- vii. Formation of a committee to address common issues that have established themselves as patterns in many disciplines. Committee members could be drawn from EAP, Trials Office, Complaint Bureau, Internal Affairs, C.O. Bick College, Peer Counsellor Program, Medical Bureau, Employment Office, Metropolitan Toronto Police Association and outside consultants utilized by EAP.

Present Factors in Suicide Prevention

The Toronto Police Service has not had an officer commit suicide since June 1992. In preparing this paper, the author examined what factors and work environment changes contributed to this pleasant reality and offers the following observations:

Change in Organizational Culture

- i. The historical culture within the Toronto Police Service, which depicted tough police officers that could not show emotion and where accessing counseling services, was frowned upon has changed significantly. The positive change occurred because of all or some of the following reasons: peer pressure; a new generation of officer who recognizes the emotional hazards of modern day policing; family intervention; a police association which actively promotes the proactive well being of their membership; and enlightened management practices.
- ii. The Chief of Police autographed the book "To Love a Cop" by Dr. Ellen Kirschman, Psychologist, and personally presented the book to all recruits and newly promoted Sergeants.
- iii. The Chief of Police reflected in his Goals and Objectives, his priority of development and implementing a sustainable Wellness/Family Program.
- iv. The Chief of Police addresses the graduation class of rookie Police Officers, emphasizing the primary priority of a balanced family life and a personal wellness program.
- v. The role of the Police Association cannot be understated. Through their efforts in 1984 a report titled "Serving Those Who Serve" was commissioned as a jointly funded project with management. This then formed the basis for the existing Employee and Family Assistance Program and initiated a recognition of stress management systems within the Service. Two of the Association Executive Members are active Referral Agents. This visible support ensures that members and their dependents are comfortable in accessing support services.

Employee and Family Assistance Program Committee

- vi. Command Officers, the Police Association and the Senior Officers' Organization having tripartite ownership of the Employee and Family Assistance Program

- through a committee structure. Each stakeholder has a vote and veto power, and is committed to the role of actively participating, endorsing and promoting the program.
- vii. Committee stakeholders ensure that the Employee and Family Assistance Program is adequately resourced in terms of staff and funding, while maintaining a high standard of confidentiality and credibility.
 - viii. The committee has an External Advisor, who as a Community Mental Health Professional, brings an external knowledge of EAP's and workplace health systems.

Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)

- ix. The Toronto Police Service, through the EFAP Committee, provides a systematic approach to stress management. Components of this approach are as follows:
 - o Services accessible to all members, pensioners, dependants, auxiliary, life guards, employees of the Police Association and school crossing guards totaling 30,000+ individuals.
 - o Policy statement signed by the stakeholders (Chief of Police, President Toronto Police Association, President Senior Officers' Organization)
 - o Policies and procedures that clearly show that "CONFIDENTIALITY" reflects the cornerstone of the program.
 - o Off-site confidential assessment/referral centre staffed by trained referral agents consisting of the Director (civilian), Co-ordinator Referral Agent Program (civilian), Co-ordinator Critical Incident Stress Management Program (Police Officer), Co-ordinator Addictions Program (Police Officer), Co-ordinator Family/Spousal/Bereavement Program (Police Officer), Referral Agent seconded for development and succession planning purposes and an administrative clerk. The services can be accessed on a 24 hour, 7 day a week basis.
 - o Screened Community Mental Health Professionals predominately Registered Psychologists who provide the therapeutic component of the process.
 - o 50 Referral Agents who provide support to members on a voluntary basis. They represent a cross section of the membership and job categories.
 - o Systematic approach to Critical Incident Stress Management utilizing policy, trained Debriefing Team, unlimited coverage for trauma therapy and ongoing educational initiatives.
 - o Proactive educational initiatives that promote program awareness, stress management within specialized units, supervisory education in managing the problem/troubled member, maintaining the balance in life and critical incident stress management.
 - o Program promotion activities encompass: articles and a monthly ad in the association magazine "Tour of Duty", comments in the Chief's news-page "Ten-Four", distribution of brochures, articles and information packages and extensive program awareness presented at the workplace.

- Program evaluation through an External Advisor (1994), client evaluation forms distributed by therapists of EFAP staff, lecture evaluation form distributed and correlated by presenters, feedback from all segments of the Police Service, EFAP Committee Members and Family Members.
- Information about the EFAP services and program utilization is distributed in an Annual Report to all stakeholders; Referral Agents; Unit Commanders; Chief Stewards; Community Mental Health Professionals; placed on the Intranet; and available as a public document.

EFAP Statistics

Number of clients (1994 - 1998)	4698
Number of Critical Incidents (1994 - 1998)	270
Members involved in Critical Incidents (1994 - 1998)	967
Cost of Trauma Therapy (1993 - 1998)	\$214,800
Number of CIS Packages distributed during (1993 - 1998)	3,236
Number of Educational sessions (1993 - 1998)	308
Number of Participants in sessions (1994 - 1998)	6,574

Medical Advisory Services (MAS)

The MAS provides "fitness for duty" assessments on members for Management who have concerns based on negative indicators. Members can voluntarily access or be ordered to attend MAS where three Nurses and a part time physician determine whether a member's status becomes, fit for duty, restricted duty or sick. There exists a mutual working relationship and professional respect between EFAP and MAS within confidentiality guidelines. Additional resources over the past several years have enhanced their ability to provide Medical Services.

Other Contributing Initiatives

- Extensive psychological testing, screening and background checks of recruits.

- Instructors at the Ontario Police College and Toronto C.O. Bick College are trained to observe course participants and intervene with members exhibiting signs of distress.
- Improved management systems in specialized units and plainclothes squads, especially guidelines as to length of assignment and educational on psychological hazards of drug squad and undercover police work.
- Name of EAP was changed to Employee and Family Assistance Program in November of 1997 to recognize the importance of families in the lives of Police Officers, which resulted in a 51% increase in uniform families accessing the program.
- A Wellness Program Co-ordinator was selected in January 1999 to develop proactive initiatives that emphasis the need to maintain a physical and emotional balance in the lives of police officers and their families.
- A committee was struck to hire a Police Chaplain to co-ordinate a Toronto Police Chaplaincy Program that provides spiritual support and to construct a chapel in headquarters. In the past there had only been an informal program in place.

Summary

The Toronto Police Service in 1999 has established a corporate environment where the occupational hazards of modern day policing are recognized and a systematic approach to stress management implemented. Officers and their families have to be assured that the Service cares about them and provides support services that they have the confidence to access. Through ongoing proactive educational sessions, officers develop life skill that they can use when the need arises. Effectiveness of these initiatives rely on the co-operation and commitment between the stakeholders, stringent confidentiality guidelines and adequate resources being dedicated to the programs.

Times have changed in the Toronto Police Service. It no longer is acceptable to ignore your own or someone else's pain. Maturity and professionalism is shown by a member knowing when it is time to seek out a support contact.

Sources:

Toronto Police Service 1998 Annual Report

Toronto Police Service Records and Information Services (formally R.I.B.)

Statistics Canada Mortality Rates - Suicide 1975-1989 Report

Reports submitted by Jaan Schaer EFAP to the EFAP Committee

EFAP Annual Reports submitted by Jaan Schaer to EFAP Committee