

Emergency Services Professions: The Mental Health Burden
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Abstract

The emergency services careers have the potential to result in negative effects on the physical and mental health of the professional. These negative effects can range from missed days at work, medical conditions, people leaving the career field or suicide. This is a serious challenge because of the current shortage of police officers and the projected need for significantly more officers in the years to come. Increasing physical fitness activity, reducing the reaction from stress, providing peer support groups, and offering appropriate mental and physical health programs can reduce attrition.

Keywords: police officers, mental health, stress, suicide, physical fitness, fitness assessments, law enforcement, emergency services

Chapter One: Introduction

A career in an emergency services profession can potentially result in negative effects on the mental health of the professional which could lead to increased: chronic medical conditions, sick leave usage, and early departure from the field. Tragically there has also been increased suicide risk without early mental health intervention and preventative services. Could the first responder who saved your life today, be the same one taking their own life tomorrow?

The emergency services professions have been viewed as ethical and trustworthy as noted in a two-year Gallup poll. Nurses ranked as the least dishonest, followed by other emergency services professions such as military officers, medical doctors, police officers (Nordlund, 2019). Because of the critical nature of their work in saving lives, enforcing laws, and restricting people's Constitutional rights, first responders are generally held at a different level of standard by the public and their own peers. There are codes of ethics that go along with almost all emergency services professions, to include the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics adopted in 1957 at the international level (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2021). Unfortunately, one bad news report can negatively impact the profession, even if it happened thousands of miles away. News outlets report some of the good actions that come from these professions, but these positive reports can be over-shadowed or short-lived by a more sensational negative incident.

When law enforcement officers are verbally attacked, assaulted, or even killed in New York City for the actions of a law enforcement officer in Texas, the whole profession could be placed on high alert. High alert can mean increased anxiety and stress for the officers. This could lead to loss of sleep, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, and increased arousal to danger. This malady of heightened arousal could become a negative cycle that if unmanaged could lead to

post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other physical deterioration (Pittaro, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Daily stress has become a part of modern life, sometimes rising to the level of trauma, but has generally been intermittent and not constant. For emergency services professionals, there has been documented greater daily stress and trauma related to job tasks (Regehr & LeBlanc, 2017). Over a 20 or 30-year career, the amount of stress and trauma experienced could be overwhelming if not processed properly and could result in devastating physical and mental effects. How does the daily activities of an emergency service professional, particularly law enforcement, impact the person's mental wellness over the course of their career and what services could be provided to mitigate the negative consequences?

Significance of the Study

The disturbing trend of preventable deaths and career field changes in the emergency services profession needs to be addressed. In any given crisis, emergency service professionals are considered essential employees to protect the populations' health and safety. Greater research is needed on how to prevent, treat, and eliminate the mental health burden on emergency service professionals.

Everyone is impacted by an emergency service professional in some way each day, maybe without knowing it. It could be as simple as feeling protected in their own home knowing the police are still awake watching over their neighborhood. It might be as complex as having a significant car crash that involved law enforcement, fire fighters, EMTs, and all the emergency department personnel at the hospital to begin the path to proper healing. If those emergency

services professionals were not there because they had committed suicide from the mental and emotional burden the job has created for them, who will protect the general public?

In 2018, there were 167 suicides among law enforcement officers. That equates to 17 out of 100,000, but the general population rate is 13 out of 100,000 (Hilliard, 2019). In June of 2020, the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Act was signed tasking the FBI with data collection of attempted and completed officer suicides. This was the first time the government gathered statistics on law enforcement suicides, but the numbers may be underreported, because it was still voluntary for agencies to participate. The program was slated to be up in June of 2021 with publication in 2022 (Perine, 2021). The 2018 reported numbers of suicides for firefighters and EMTs/paramedics was 82 and 21, respectively (Fahy & Molis, 2019). These numbers are projected to be under-reported because of the negative stigma suicide has among the general population, and even more so with emergency services professionals. They are to save lives, not take their own.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify and understand the mental health challenges emergency services personnel undergo over the course of their careers, that can lead to an increase in addictions, depression, anxiety, and/or suicide, that can shorten an otherwise productive career, and create financial and emotional burdens on families, employers, and the communities they serve.

Definition of Terms

Emergency Medical Technician: Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) and paramedics respond to emergencies, from someone who may be having a heart attack in their home to multi-

vehicle accidents on the highway. EMTs are most frequently found in ambulances but some may provide care for patients being transported by air as well (Riggs, 2021).

Emergency Services Professionals: Those people who are trained or designated to respond to an emergency or who participate in activities associated with response to an emergency (Career Trend, 2020).

Emergency Services Professions: Law enforcement, fire fighters, emergency medical technicians (EMTs), doctors, nurses, and any other profession that would deal with emergency response to others' needs (Pittaro, 2019).

Peer Support Person (PSP): Specifically trained colleague to provide day-to-day emotional support for department employees, along with participation in a department's response to critical incidents, not a counselor or therapist (IACP Police Psychological Services Section, 2016).

Peer Support Team: A group of Peer Support Persons who provides all public safety employees in an agency the opportunity to receive emotional and tangible support through times of personal or professional crisis and to help anticipate and address potential difficulties (IACP Police Psychological Services Section, 2016).

Physical Ability Test (PAT): Most PATs include traditional exercises such as situps, running, chin-ups, high jumps, and pushups. The PAT may also include muscular tension test, which involve lifting, pushing and pulling an object, or power and endurance tests that gauge the candidate's ability to work with tools against heavy resistance. Endurance testing may involve long runs or climbing stairs. PATs often include exercises such as climbing a ladder or flexibility tests that involve twisting and bending (Evans, 2018).

Psychological First Aid (PFA): PFA is an initial disaster response intervention with the goal to promote safety, stabilize survivors of disasters and connect individual to help and resources. PFA

is delivered to affected individuals by mental health professionals and other first responders. The purpose of PFA is to assess the immediate concerns and needs of an individual in the aftermath of a disaster, and not to provide on-site therapy (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Sworn Law Enforcement Officer: A law enforcement official with a gun and badge, who has arrest powers granted to them by a governing board to enforce laws at a local, state, or federal level (Banks et al., 2016).

Delimitations of Research

For this paper, the statistics provided come with some level of error. The level of error has been difficult to determine because suicides by emergency services professionals are under-reported for a variety of reasons including the negative stigma of suicide, undetermined causes of death, or unknown circumstances prior to death. Mental health in emergency services professions have recently become an increased area of study so the historical data has been unreliable or not available as it cannot be validated. Information was gathered from internet searches, professional journals published by government offices, a variety of emergency services websites and reports, and news articles. Most reviewed resources are less than five years old, with a few exceptions, and several come from the Community Oriented Policing Services office, a division of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Method of Approach

A historical search of emergency services professional suicide rates and mental health diagnosis was researched. A review of several journals from U.S. Department of Justice, Community Oriented Policing Services Office was completed. Research was conducted into different states peer support and mental health prevention and education programs, including on the job and recruit training.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

First responders are suffering more than the general population because of inherent stress in their positions. Ways that departments and individuals can come to the aid of their employees and co-workers need to be explored and implemented on a personal level and on a comprehensive scale. This can include: mental health programs, physical wellness programs, and organizational changes.

This chapter will take a more in-depth look at the problems and potential solutions that are faced in the emergency services professions. It will also cover statistics on employment levels for emergency services professions compared to the increase in the general population, along with programs currently in place at some departments and suggestions to improve the mental health of emergency services professionals

Employment

This section will break down the statistics for employment in the emergency services professions. A brief discussion will be presented on the difficulties with filling employment vacancies in the profession.

Law Enforcement

In 2012, there were 750,340 sworn personnel (Banks et al., 2016). As of May 2019, it was estimated there were 665,280 law enforcement personnel in the nation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). A 12-percent drop in the number of sworn law enforcement officers in a 7-year period presents a problem when compared to the increases in the general population. The general population of the United States was estimated over 313.8 million in 2012 (United States Census Bureau, 2020) and 328.2 million on July 1, 2019 (United States Census Bureau, 2019) and. That was over a four-percent increase in the population. The decrease in police officers and

the increase in general population showed a disparity of over 16% in the past 7 years. These statistics do not reflect the recent decreases in police enforcement due to defunding the police and other movements.

Other Emergency Services

Career firefighters are someone employed full-time who serves the public to fight and extinguish fires. The number of career fire fighters in the United States in 2012 was estimated at 345,950 (Everts & Stein, 2020), The number of career fire fighters in the United States in 2018 was 332,400 in 2018 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). This reflected a four-percent decrease in fire service personnel.

Emergency medical technicians (EMT) are medical professionals who are trained and received certification to begin the process of emergency care for people who have suffered an illness, or some sort of medical trauma. These individuals administer treatment to victims or patients as they are transported to hospitals for further observation and treatment (Riggs, 2021). There was an estimated 239,100 EMT's employed in 2012 (Career Trend, 2020) and 262,100 in 2018 (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). This was a nine percent increase, the only increase of the three different fields.

Generational Differences

Law enforcement has been a vital part of community safety since 1838 when the first police force was established in Boston (Potter, 2013). In recent years it has become more difficult to find willing, qualified candidates to fill the vacancies filled by retirements, officers leaving the career, or killed in the line of duty. The same phenomena have also been reported in most other emergency services professions. According to a poll of current workers, aged 18 to

34, they are looking for employment that includes work-life balances, flexibility, and maximizing their time off (McCarty Carino, 2019).

Emergency service professions have long been viewed as a career where professionals put in long, unpredictable hours that interfere with holidays, family, and social events, and does not follow the typical Monday-Friday work week (West Midland Family Center, 2020). This does not appeal to many new work force members, even with average to good pay, excellent benefits, and retirement available in the emergency services professional fields (McCarty Carino, 2019).

Employment Outlook

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, job growth for law enforcement is projected to be 7-percent between the years 2020-2030. It also has a median pay of \$67,290 a year or \$32.25 per hour (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). For fire personnel, job growth is estimated to be 8-percent with a median pay of \$52,500 a year or \$25.24 per hour, in the same time frame (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). There is above average growth projected for EMTs and paramedics during the same 10-year span at 11-percent. However, the median pay for year is only \$36,650 or \$17.62 per hour (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Wellness of Emergency Services Personnel

This section will discuss two important factors for overall health for any emergency services professional, physical and mental wellness. Physical wellness has been a continual focus in the careers, with mental health taking a back seat, but the link between the two has become clearer.

Physical Wellness

Police officers are required to demonstrate significant levels of fitness in order to graduate from a police academy or to become hired by a police program. One program required all recruits to meet satisfactory levels of fitness with 60 pushups, 60 sit-ups, a 75-yard pursuit run, vertical jump, medicine ball throw, and an aerobic multi-stage assessment (Lockie et al., 2019). While initially candidates must show high levels of fitness, police officers already on the force are infrequently assessed on their physical fitness levels. Irregular and long hours, high stress situations, and scheduled overtime challenges a police officer's opportunities to exercise. Martin et al., (2016) found a correlation between fitness assessment, fitness levels and disease risk markers in police officers. Those officers who had low levels of fitness were more likely to have disease risk markers for diabetes and heart problems.

Inactivity. The everyday activities of most emergency service personnel have been a mix of long periods of little activity, sitting in a squad car or at a hospital or station, coupled with periods that require maximum physical and mental output that can lead to the high emotional trauma of the death of another human being (Williams & Ramsey, 2017). It could be compared to a baseball game where it can be very slow, but when something happens, everyone springs into action. Increases in weight have been common in law enforcement careers because 80 to 90% of law enforcement work has been sedentary, leading to one of the highest obesity rates out of any occupation (Williams & Ramsey, 2017). A study by the University of Iowa showed the physical activity of police officers was on average the same as washing dishes while standing or sitting holding a baby (Cable, 2014).

Injury. In addition, the environment of law enforcement work, dangerous by nature, has led to one of the highest injury and illness rates of all professions (Price, 2017). Research has

shown significantly higher levels of mortality among law enforcement officers from cancer, heart disease, and suicide than the general public (Williams & Ramsey, 2017). The fatality rate for work injuries was 13.5 per 100,000 sworn law enforcement officers in 2014, with the general public coming in at 3.4 per 100,000 (Price, 2017), almost four-times the general public. Some of the contributing factors are believed to be job stress, irregular or poor sleep, lack of exercise, drugs, and alcohol. Low levels of physical fitness were also considered contributing factors to injury and illness. In a study of fitness levels and musculoskeletal injuries in police officers, researchers found a strong correlation between injuries and the level of fitness in police officers with those officers with the lowest fitness levels, the most likely to sustain injuries (Lentz et al., 2019).

Work-related Declining Fitness Levels. In most police academies and programs, minimum levels of physical fitness are required prior to graduation from the police academy. In addition, most police programs require an officer to pass a physical exam for any new position and some require an annual physical exam. However, even if required, most physicals require only minimum health requirements and do not reflect the stringent physical training required for initial entry into the police academy. In a retrospective research study, fitness levels were compared from a fitness test taken upon graduation from a police academy to 16 years later (Lagestad et al., 2014). The results indicated male police officers had significantly lower fitness levels in all four fitness tests, while female officers were significantly lower on two fitness tests: bench press and standing long jump (Lagestad et al., 2014). The greatest fitness loss was reported in upper body strength. The researchers recommended annual mandatory fitness tests as well as opportunities for officers to exercise during work hours. Decreased physical fitness of police officers over years in their profession has been researched and remain an international

concern. In a study of Korean officers, Sangwoon and Jooyoung (2019) found in general the fitness levels of police officers declined in just five years, from 2014 to 2019. The study of 372 officers (334 male and 38 female) examined fitness level pretests with annual results.

Assessments were conducted of body composition, 100m sprint, pushups, sit-ups, and handgrip strength. Male officers showed significantly lower fitness levels in the sprint, pushups, and sit-ups while female officers showed lower fitness levels only in the sprint (Sangwoon & Jooyoung, 2019).

Required Recertification. Most police departments have required mandatory hours of additional assessment, training and or education to stay current as a police officer. The State of Wisconsin requires 24 hours of training per fiscal year for all sworn law enforcement officers (Wisconsin Department of Justice, 2021). Included in the recertification has often been firearms qualification and pursuit training. Firearms certification required an officer to fire their weapon appropriately at a target, but not require demonstration of any physical fitness levels in chasing a suspect. Pursuit training has been designed for setting up roadblocks, using tools to slow a driver, and driving safely at fast speeds in a vehicle. These recertifications are generally sedentary activities that do not require, nor assess physical fitness. Annual fitness tests would provide the opportunity to assess the police officer and provide programs to reverse the decline in physical fitness levels. The annual recertification process could provide an opportunity for mandatory physical fitness and wellness assessments. These assessments could indicate the need for additional physical fitness programs within the workforce.

Accreditation. If a law enforcement agency has considered becoming accredited by a state or national law enforcement board, then additional training generally was required. However, physical health generally has only been a minimal part of the training and generally

more related to surveys of health and wellness factors rather than physical fitness training. For the most part, accreditation has included training in social areas of policing, such as, social justice, diversity, equity, and community culture (Wisconsin Law Enforcement Accreditation Group, 2016). As part of the accreditation process, physical fitness assessments and minimum requirements could be required.

Physical and Mental Health Connection. Research has shown a strong link between physical wellness and mental health: healthy body-healthy mind. In an Australian study, Bretland and Thorsteinsson (2015) found a correlation between workplace burnout, particularly in high stress careers, and cardiovascular and resistance exercises to reduce stress and increase mental health. In a similar study of police officers, Schilling et al. (2020) found there was a strong correlation between high levels of cardiorespiratory fitness and officers' physiological stress reactivity during acute real-life stress situations and officers' physiological recovery related to acute and chronic work stress. In the study, 201 police officers were equipped with devices to assess their physiological reaction to a stressful situation (increased respiratory rates, increased heart rate and increased blood pressure). In addition to wearing a fitness tracking device, officers were also contacted by smart phone eight times during their workdays to report their current level of affect, anger, and stress. Researchers found a positive correlation between cardiorespiratory fitness and stress reactivity in police officers in stress situations. They found officers responded with less stress initially to a highly charged situation and recovered more quickly if they had a higher level of cardiorespiratory fitness. Researchers did not however, find significant positive correlations with feelings of anger or affect (Schilling et al., 2020). The results of the study however, examined the impact of stress over a 48-hour period with police

officers and not over extended periods of time or over an entire career where sustained stress could create more negative consequences.

A connection between physical and mental health has been researched and the positive correlation between higher fitness levels and greater recovery from stress has been documented. The next section outlines the benefits of mental wellness programs for police officers.

Mental Wellness Programs

Traumatic incidents are unavoidable for all emergency services personnel. How a person adjusts after these traumatic situations can determine their overall health. Developing healthy coping skills and resilience has been shown as vital in a path of healthy functioning. Resilience was defined as adapting well when faced with adversity, trauma, threats, or substantial stressors (American Psychological Association, 2020). Failing to cope effectively can result in extremely negative consequences.

Suicide. The 2018 reported numbers of suicides for firefighters and EMTs/paramedics was 82 and 21, respectively, higher rates than the general public (Fahy & Molis, 2019). While these represent tragically high numbers for the individuals and their families, unfortunately police officers have twice the rate of suicides for the same period. During 2018, there were 167 suicides among law enforcement officers (Hilliard, 2019). Likely, there has been a significantly higher rate because of the known tendency to under-report, particularly in law enforcement. In addition, these statistics were reported prior to the pandemic, shutdowns, protests, and riots of the years 2019 and 2020. Because of the overall concern about police officers and under-reported suicides, the Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection Act tasked the FBI with data collection of attempted and completed officer suicides (Perine, 2021). However, the program was established as voluntary for agencies to participate, so it may continue to under-report law

enforcement suicides because of the negative stigma suicide has among the general population, and even more so with emergency services professionals. Law enforcement agencies have attempted to address the growing concern of police officer mental health with supervised physical exercise, peer support teams, and mental health training.

Physical Exercise Benefits to Mental Health. Global cost estimates of workplace stress (burnout) were estimated at \$300 billion annually (Bretland & Thorsteinsson, 2015). In Bretland and Thorsteinsson's (2015) research study, they found after four weeks of supervised exercise, the 49 participants reported increased well-being, decreased psychological distress, and less emotional exhaustion. While a small sample size of Australian emergency services workers were used, the results were still very significant on the stress indicator assessments. Effective organized physical fitness appears to offer benefits to reducing stress and workplace burnout.

Peer Support Teams. Peer support programs are popular among law enforcement officers because officers are encouraged to talk with someone who understands the technical and political aspects of the job. Fellow emergency service professionals know the training, kinds of trauma experienced, and common reactions to the stressful situations (Pittaro, 2019).

Mental Health Training. Psychological first aid has been a technique used by emergency service personnel to help those that are victims of trauma (Birkhead & Vermeulen, 2018). This approach can also be used by emergency services for themselves or coworkers. Psychological first aid has not been an evidence-based approach, because it was nearly impossible to study under a controlled environment, but instead was considered evidence-informed care (Birkhead & Vermeulen, 2018). Several emergency services agencies in the Dane County, Wisconsin area require their personnel to attend an annual wellness check. This included

meeting with a mental health professional to check in on mental wellness, both on and off the job, and tools they can use moving forward.

Summary

Currently, there are insufficient numbers of persons in critical emergency services and an increasing shortage each year. These shortages result in increased overtime, decreased opportunity for vacations and increased stress for law enforcement. Law enforcement recently showed a 12% drop in new recruits in a 7-year period, while firefighters showed a 4% decrease, and EMTs noted a 9% increase (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Projected needs for law enforcement are a 7% increase, 8% for firefighters, and 11% for EMTs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). These statistics translate to declining recruits and increased demands which will further exacerbate the shortage of officers, the increase in required overtime, and the resulting increase in workplace burnout.

Physical wellness of police officers has become a concern because of higher rates of suicide than the general population (Hilliard, 2019; Perine, 2021), the inactivity levels of the job (Williams & Ramsey, 2017), and higher rates of injury (Lentz et al., 2019; Price 2017, Williams & Ramsey, 2017). The longer a police officer remained on the force, the lower their fitness levels and the greater incidence of work-related injuries and illness (Lagestad et al., 2014). State recertification training requirements and accreditation are options to interject physical fitness and wellness requirements, assessments, and interventions. Links between physical and mental health were examined by Bretland and Thorsteinsson (2015) and Schilling et al. (2020).

Police officers and other emergency service professional work in high stress fields. Even though under-reported, suicide rates among officers were much higher than the general public.

Options for addressing mental health challenges including peer mentoring (Pittaro, 2019) and mental health training (Birkhead & Vermeulen, 2018).

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

There are insufficient numbers of persons in critical emergency services in the United States, particularly in law enforcement, and increasing shortages are projected for each year in the future. These shortages could result in increased overtime, decreased opportunity for vacations, and increased stress for law enforcement. Law enforcement recently showed a 12% drop in new recruits in a 7-year period, while firefighters showed a 4% decrease, and EMTs noted a 9% increase (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Projected needs for law enforcement are 7% increase, 8% for firefighters, and 11% for EMTs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). These statistics translate to declining recruits and increased demands which will further exacerbate the shortage of officers and the increase of stress for the officers who address escalating issues (covid, civil protests) with decreasing resources.

Physical wellness of police officers has become a concern for many reasons. First and foremost are the physical demands of the job that require physical stamina and ability to recover quickly from high stress situations. While a law enforcement officers' job requires strength and stamina, it has also become a sedentary job with short bursts of extreme activity (Williams & Ramsey, 2017). The longer an officer is on the force, the lower their rates of physical fitness and the higher their rates of injury (Lagerstad, 2014; Lentz, et al., 2019; Price 2012,).

State-mandated recertification training and accreditation are options to interject physical fitness and wellness requirements, assessments, and interventions. Links between physical and mental health were examined by Bretland and Thorsteinsson (2015) and Schilling et al. (2020). Greater physical fitness was correlated to higher levels of positive mental health. Both positive physical and mental health are essential to the emergency services professionals because of their

high stress occupations. Not addressing workplace stress could and has resulted in higher rates of suicide than the general population (Hilliard, 2019; Perine, 2021). Options for addressing mental health challenges included peer mentoring (Pittaro, 2019) and mental health training (Birkhead & Vermeulen, 2018).

Recommendations

Addressing the physical and mental health of law enforcement professional is essential to retaining existing officers and to make the profession more attractive to future recruits. Starting these efforts at the academy level is a step in the right direction that agencies then need to continue with new hires and existing employees.

Sustained Physical Fitness Assessment and Programming

In a longitudinal study, (Lagestad et al., 2014) found decreases in fitness levels from 10% to 32% over a 16-year period, so clearly more sustained physical fitness assessment and programming is necessary. The researchers recommended annual mandatory fitness assessments and opportunities to exercise during work time. If the annual required fitness tests used similar fitness assessments as those required for entry into the police academy, then longitudinal research could be conducted to show the effect of long-term stress on officers and what programs were most effective in reducing those negative consequences. One way to include physical fitness tests and programming is to integrate it into police officer annual mandatory recertification training and/or voluntary law enforcement agency accreditation. Police officers could be updated on the newest equipment, trends, and practices, as well as learn how to exercise more effectively on the job while waiting in their car or in the police station. For example, resistance exercises could be done while in a police car or another location could be studied to determine feasibility. In addition, while in the police station, standing or treadmill desks could be

used to encourage more activity. Equipping all police officers with fitness monitoring equipment would also help them self-assess their own fitness and encourage them to increase their activity levels, potentially through friendly competition.

Police Officer Individual or Group Stress-Reduction Programming

When working in a high stress work environment, coping mechanisms will emerge. Officers need to learn how to address stressful situation and how to recover quickly without creating physical or mental problems for themselves. Stress reduction training, breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, and many other programs are recommended to help reduce stress and provide positive coping mechanisms. If the police officer does not develop and sustain positive coping mechanisms, negative coping strategies may develop. One maladaptive coping mechanism could be overeating and need to be addressed by a group healthy eating, low stress exercise, and positive support group. Smoking and alcohol overuse cessation programming could be another strategy to increase physical and mental health and reduce negative consequences. These programs could be in-person or virtual to better address the varied schedule of the emergency services professionals and to increase confidentiality if it was a national group rather than a local one.

Mental Health Information and Counseling

Addressing mental health concerns is challenging because of the stigma placed on emergency services, particularly law enforcement, and the concern that the officer will be relegated to a desk position if they admit to a mental health concern. While police academies are now beginning to address mental health issues and stress, high suicide rates among police officers persist. Even with the high rate, researchers argue the suicide data is underreported and the rates are much higher than the general public, indicating an even greater concern than is currently reported.

Suicide and Mental Health Reporting

It would be difficult to address an issue if unsure of the extent of the problem. Clearly, there are reported high rates of suicide among police officers, however, researchers contend the data is severely under-reported. The new FBI task force on suicide reporting for police officers would provide national data on law enforcement suicide. While this is a start, more local, state and regional assessments are needed since the FBI data will be compiled and reported on incidents that occurred in the past. In addition, mental health assessments are needed on a regular basis and as part of annual certification just like physical fitness assessments.

Organizational Change and Expanded Programs

Peer mentoring and mental health training should be expanded as well as programming available for stress reduction and alcohol use reduction. Free, confidential counseling could be recommended or required for officers who are involved in a high stress situation instead of just in an officer-related shooting death. Dealing with riots and civil unrest in large cities like Portland and Seattle and coping with the defund police and other negative police rhetoric, also causes stress for the police officers. Police departments need to provide informational sessions to help officers cope with the added stress of negative publicity. In addition, police administrators need to provide support for the officers and provide positive strategies the officers can use to be even more effective in hostile situations. Proactive strategies and training for officers to deescalate situations would also be beneficial.

Scheduling

While there are current shortages in police officers and projected future shortages, finding a way to protect officers by having teams of officers approach a potentially difficult situation would be recommended. While sending a pair or team of officers to a reported shots

fired, domestic assault, or serious traffic accident is standard, even a barking dog complaint can escalate quickly and become highly stressful to the officer. Having another officer there could help reduce stress, provide much needed back-up, and help de-escalate a potentially dangerous situation.

Identifying any potential areas where clerical and other duties could be handled by some other personnel to increase the number of officers available to serve directly in law enforcement would also be recommended. This will require some organizational change as well as integration of new technology and practices.

Future research

Further research studies on the correlation between physical fitness and reduced injuries and physical fitness and positive mental health are needed. Retrospective longitudinal research tracking police officers' fitness levels from graduation from the police academy through their police career is also recommended to illustrate the decline of physical fitness and the effectiveness of physical fitness exams or training, and programs in reducing the decline. Studies similar to Lagestad et al., (2014) could be conducted with results from police academy physical fitness results and the most recent physical fitness tests conducted on police currently on the force. Future research could provide new strategies to recruit, retain, assess and assist officers and other emergency service personnel in their highly stressful jobs.

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