**Rate of suicides among Chicago Police a badge of high-stress job**

Buried among the facts and figures in the Justice Department’s recent book-length report on the failings of the Chicago Police Department was a telling statistic: The rate of suicide among CPD officers is 60 percent higher than other departments across the U.S.

Among the ranks of the nearly 10,000 patrol officers of the CPD, an average of three officers will take their own lives each year, according to life insurance claims information from the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 7, the union representing the bulk of the department’s sworn officers.

In the past decade, 13 officers have been killed in the line of duty. Nearly twice as many officers died by their own hand during the same span.

Ron Rufo was a peer support counselor for most of his 21 years as a patrolman in the 9th District, volunteering to talk to his fellow officers at any scene where an officer was killed or injured. Rufo, who retired a little more than a year ago, estimates the number of his former peers who kill themselves each year could be double the FOP figure.

“There is a problem, and nobody’s doing anything about it,” Rufo said. “Supervisors don’t talk about it. The rank-and-file don’t talk about it. And it’s like the administration does not want to admit it’s a problem.”

Police officers in Chicago have a uniquely difficult job, even among their big-city peers, said Alexa James, a psychologist who served on Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s Police Accountability Task Force. The expert panel last spring also released a scathing report on the CPD, but James said the authors were aware that individual officers need more support.

“When you have 760 homicides in the city in a year, that’s a war zone — and that’s where [police] are working every day,” said James, who noted the total number of murders in Chicago last year was larger than the tally in Los Angeles and New York, combined.

“It is a hard, hard job, and police officers get very little support,” she said.

The CPD’s Employee Assistance Program, which provides mental health services to 13,500 police officers and staff, has only three full-time counselors. The Los Angeles PD, the next-largest department in the U.S., has a staff of 11 clinicians for less than 10,000 sworn officers.

The small number of counselors leads to a “triage” approach to counseling services, the DOJ report states, with those three staffers offering about 7,500 consultations in 2015 alone. The combination of a potential backlog for appointments and the typical cop’s reluctance to seek help for mental issues hasn’t made EAP popular.

“You can go there whenever you want and make appointments,” said a veteran officer in a West Side district. “I believe there’s only two therapists there, so what’s their availability?”

“Do people do it? I don’t know. If they do, they don’t talk about it. I’ve never, in 14 years on the job, ever heard more than one or two guys talk about going to EAP.”

Police officers in Illinois might be more reluctant to seek mental health treatment than their peers in other states because of a pervasive fear that seeking help could cost them their badge, said Marla Friedman, a suburban psychologist who specializes in treating law enforcement officers.

Illinois is one of a handful of states that permanently prohibits anyone who has been involuntarily committed to in-patient mental health treatment from getting a Firearm Owner’s Identification Card. A permit to carry a gun is a job requirement for police officers, and many officers believe — wrongly — that they could lose their FOID card just for seeing a therapist, going on psychiatric medication or getting outpatient treatment, Friedman said.

“This is a real problem,” Friedman said. “Police officers are the only class of citizen in the U.S. who is going to lose their job for seeking mental health care.”

Friedman has lobbied for legislation to carve out an exemption to the FOID laws that would allow police to have their license to carry a weapon reinstated, even if they’d spent time in in-patient treatment.

She realizes there is significant resistance to changing laws to make it easier for anyone to own a gun after receiving serious psychiatric treatment, especially for police officers during a period when new video of police misconduct seems to surface every few months.

“But that’s the Catch-22,” Friedman said. Police “are afraid if they go to counseling, they’ll lose their job forever. But if they hold it in, they can stay on the job. And then they snap. Which [scenario] is safer?”

And for those not sympathetic to the emotional needs of police officers, officer suicides could be a bellwether for the kind of stress that leads to conduct by police that strains relations with the public, from a lack of empathy to large and small instances of brutality, James said.

James said creating a “culture of care” within the CPD, where supervisors are on watch for signs of depression or trauma — sudden drops in productivity, an increase in citizen complaints — would go a long way toward reducing police misconduct.

“We want police to be out there with the clearest head, we want people with a strong constitution,” she said. “Then, they can be thinking clearly in a job where they make quick decisions.”

A culture of care doesn’t exist in CPD, FOP President Dean Angelo said. Union leaders urged CPD brass to create a program to allow officers to take time off or an administrative assignment when they were feeling stressed or after a traumatic experience, Angelo said. The suggestion apparently morphed into the department’s new policy of putting officers involved in shootings on desk duty for a mandatory 30 days, a move Angelo said seems punitive to officers.

“We wanted an ‘administrative timeout,’ where you could go to your supervisor and say, ‘Hey, I need some time,’ and there would be a guarantee you could stay in your assignment and wouldn’t be ostracized,” Angelo said. “Guys need that guarantee, or they’re not going to talk.”

Officers need support to deal with trauma, not just when they’ve been involved in a shooting.

“We don’t put a notch on our gun when we shoot someone. It’s traumatic for the officer, but not everyone needs 30 days to deal with it,” Angelo said. “What about the guy that went to a domestic and saw a baby covered in roaches? Or who just buried his own kid.

“It’s a crazy-ass job,” he said. “You’re dealing with the crazy. You can’t be crazy.”

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