

# A quiet killer

**Little information is available on police officer suicides in the UK. Yet a simple internet search finds a plethora of sites in the US and other European countries.**

**What can cause police officers to take their own life?**

While there is evidence to show that stress plays a major part in police suicides, the many traumas and disasters in the world undoubtedly add weight to the chance of officers killing themselves. After all, it is usually the police officer who arrives on the scene first, who observes the carnage human beings suffer through such things as earthquakes, hurricanes or bombings. It is they, too, who have to pass on the bad news to relatives of the deceased.

Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans provides a case in point. Following the disaster, two of that city's officers committed suicide, and several NYPD officers killed themselves after the trauma of 9/11 five years ago, bringing the subject of police suicides into the public light.

Richard Weinblatt, a professor and programme manager for Florida's Criminal Justice Institute, who has also worked as a police officer in New Jersey, New Mexico and North Carolina, said: "It is estimated that some 300 officers [in the USA] 'eat their gun', or use some other means, to end their own lives each year. The figure is one that should get people's attention, but for the most part it hasn't. Police leaders and instructors dedicated to officer survival issues need to address this issue as critical to an officer's survival."

**"Several factors contribute to officers being in the top rankings of suicide rate charts. Officers tend to see people at their worst. The developing cynicism lends itself to desperate acts. Officers also have rotating shifts that tend to separate them from their family, friends and other areas of socialisation. Alcohol and substance abuse become self-medicating methods used in lieu of dreaded mental health assistance."**

Professor Weinblatt believes that American police officers having the "ever present availability" of firearms on their belts adds to the problem. He says: "People can ride out the momentary impulse to kill themselves due to not having a gun with them most of the time. Not so for law enforcers who, especially when combined with their unique job stresses, have that ever present instrument of deadly force."

British police officers, perhaps because they do not have the ever present temptation of a gun, also tend to be more indifferent than most police forces around the globe, and reports of officers committing suicide are few and far between. The most recently reported in the British press was that of PC Paula Tomlinson, a 35-year-old member of the Merseyside Police firearms squad who hanged herself at the family home in 2004. The reason suggested as to why she committed suicide was that she had been dismissed from the firearms unit for failing proficiency tests. Coroner Christopher Sumner was told that as one of only two women members of the 90-strong unit, and one of the first female snipers in Britain, she felt "victimised and uncomfortable" within the macho environment of the squad. Mr Sumner summed up that: "Paula Tomlinson killed herself at a time that she was suffering from stress, a contributory factor of which was work related."

**"Despite the growing concern about stress being a major factor in police officers taking time off work suffering from depression, and other ailments, there is no official record of police suicides in Britain, and while most countries studied seem willing to air the subject publicly in the hope that police forces can help each other in suicide prevention, the UK appears unwilling to face the problem."**



Illustration: Lisa Ryszkowska

In the United States and South Africa police suicides are widespread. In the case of South Africa, the suicide rate among officers is high, and stress is certainly a major factor, which is hardly surprising when between 1983 and 1999 a record 2,559 police officers were murdered, which equates to two South African officers being killed for every one in the United States.

Terence Corrigan, a spokesman for the South African Institute of Race Relations, said: "South Africa is probably one of the riskiest places in the world to be a policeman, and even if we are seeing a decline in the murder of police officers, South African police officers are being killed in far greater numbers than the United States, and the USA has vastly more police officers than South Africa."

Facing such atrocious conditions day after day it is little wonder that stress is the major factor given in South Africa for the suicide of officers, with 122 South African officers taking their lives in 1999, an average of 100 a year since, the most recent official figure available.

According to a study, *Suicide in Police*, published in 2001, by Norwegian doctors, Erlend Hem, Anne Marie Berg and Oivind Ekeberg, suicide among police officers has been described as "an epidemic" with police officers taking their own lives two or three times more than the general population. They also supplied a fascinating statistic, claiming that suicides in London stand at 5.8 per 100,000 officers to an astonishing 203.7 per 100,000 in Wyoming, a US state with a mainly rural population.

Their caseload included 13 studies in the United States, six in Europe and one in Australia, and they concluded: "The results showed that some studies found elevated suicide rates among police officers; others showed an average or low rate of suicide. However the rates varied widely and were inconsistent and inconclusive."

But according to the Police Suicide Prevention Center (PSPC), based in the United States 'every law enforcement officer, trainer, supervisor and executive needs to know about suicide. Every law enforcement agency needs to tell its employees, and every law enforcement union needs to tell its members, about suicide, and what resources are available to help officers with their problem.'

The organisation says that suicide is the 'quiet killer' in law enforcement and more police officers have killed themselves than have been killed by criminals. Many officers and agencies consider suicide to be 'weak' or 'the coward's way out'. Often, because of the shame and stigma attached to suicide, the friends and family of officers who have killed themselves are ashamed or embarrassed to talk about it.

The PSPC is a voluntary group primarily comprised of current or former police officers who volunteer their time to prevent cops from taking their own lives and it provides valuable back up to those in need, whether individual officers, their families or whole police departments, and its work is being recognised as a valuable asset in the United States where police suicides have reached record levels in some states.