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SAFLEO Issue Brief Series #2

Spotlight on
Suicide Exposure
in Law Enforcement Officers

Julie Cerel, PhD, for SAFLEO





What is suicide exposure?

Suicide exposure is personally knowing someone who died by suicide or being in the presence of a suicide death. Studies in the United States report that about half of people personally know someone who has died by suicide.¹

Why does suicide exposure matter for law enforcement officers?

Law enforcement officers encounter a great number of traumatic events in the course of their work. Responding to the scene of a suicide is often difficult because of the violence of the scene, the intense emotions of the surviving family and friends at the scene, and the way that the scene may remind officers of other events in their lives.

How common is it?

Here is a look at the realities of the law enforcement profession. In a published study of more than 800 officers, **more than 95 percent² of officers report that they have responded to at least one suicide scene in their career.** On average, officers reported that they had responded to about 2 scenes in the past 12 months and will respond to **more than 30 over the course of their career.**



“They’re as brutal as anything you’ll ever see. You don’t forget.”

What kinds of impact do these scenes have?

In the same study, **just over one in five officers (22 percent) who have responded to the scene of a suicide report that they cannot shake** or that they have nightmares about the event, and 42.5 percent report that they responded to at least one scene that has stayed with them.



“I think about the incident often and play what happened over and over again.”

“I can picture them all.”

¹ Feigelman, W., Cerel, J., McIntosh, J., Brent, D & Gutin, N. (2018) Suicide Exposures and Bereavement Among American Adults: Evidence from the 2016 General Social Survey Journal of Affective Disorders. 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.09.056>

² Data throughout this issue brief was gathered in a study by Julie Cerel, PhD. Some study results have been published in J. Cerel, B. Jones, M. M. Brown, D. Weistenhorn, and K. J. Patel, “Suicide Exposure in Law Enforcement Officers,” *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior*, Vol. 49, No. 5, October 2019, pp. 1281–1289, <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12516>.

³ All quotes in this document are from unpublished data collected by the authors..

● ● ● Suicide Exposure in Law Enforcement Officers

What about personal exposure to suicide?

More than 73 percent of officers in the published study reported that they know someone personally who died by suicide.



"I think about it often because it was a sergeant that worked for me, and he did it in the office. I think it stays with me because I did not see the signs that he would take his own life."

Do these suicide exposures lead to problems for officers?

High levels of occupational exposure to suicide are associated with behavioral health consequences, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), persistent thoughts of a suicide scene, and the inability to shake a scene. Being unable to shake a scene and having that memory stick with them are associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and their own thoughts of suicide.

"Vivid flashbacks, feeling of hopelessness for others, wanting to help but not being able to. Deep, dark feelings that are inexplicable. A darkness that makes you feel like the world is bad/sad/awful."

Why does this matter?

"I carry it like it's part of me now."

Officers who are exposed to multiple or traumatic suicide scenes or who have lost a fellow officer to suicide may need support to function at their best after their experience. Training can mitigate the effects of this trauma on officers' mental health.

"Whenever I hear something about suicide, I can see about two to three past ones in my head."

This includes not only suicide awareness and prevention training like SAFLEO, but also departments' willingness to foster a culture of help-seeking for when officers encounter difficult scenes. Here are some warning signs that officers might need some additional support:

- They have nightmares
- They refuse to accept that it occurred
- A scene sticks with them
- They refuse to talk about it
- They cannot stop thinking about it
- They wonder if they could have done more to prevent it



My Local Resources

Resources

- Primary care physician
- Culturally competent clinician (in person or online)
- Professionally led support group
- Peer support group
- Employee Assistance Program
- Agency chaplain
- Clergy
- Supervisor
- SAFLEO Postvention Guide
- Human resources
- Trusted colleagues
- Friends or family members
- Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call 988
- Crisis Text Line: Text "BLUE" to 741741

SUICIDE IS PREVENTABLE, AND IT STARTS WITH YOU!

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