

Suicide biggest threat to police

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When psychologist Stephen F. Curran asks police recruits how many officers they think are killed in the line of duty nationwide, some guess as many as 2,000 a year.

In fact, fewer than 200 have been killed in each of the last 20 years, excluding 2001, when 72 died during the Sept. 11 attacks alone.

Meanwhile, more than 400 police officers killed themselves last year, according to the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation in Pasadena.

"That's pretty staggering," said O'Brien Atkinson, president of the county police union, Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 70.

Across the United States, police officers consistently kill themselves far more often than they are killed in the line of duty. The suicides, however, have received little attention, police advocates say.

Anne Arundel County has been touched by the problem, most recently on Halloween night, when Officer David Keith Frendlich, 35, shot and killed his estranged wife's lover and then killed himself.

"I've been president of this lodge for two years, and three of my members have taken their own lives," Officer Atkinson said. "Before I came onto this department, suicide was something that was very foreign to me."

One officer killed herself in May after a domestic dispute, and another killed himself shortly before that, Officer Atkinson said.

On the other hand, the county never has had an officer slain in the line of duty, said Lt. Joseph Jordan, police spokesman. Two officers have died on duty - Paul Mitchell in a 1977 car accident and Paul Werner from a heart attack in 1979.

Although departments offer counseling for officers involved in shootings or other traumatic incidents, some say more needs to be done to help officers deal with the everyday stresses of their profession.

At times officers hesitate to seek help, believing they should be able to deal with anything. That reluctance can be fatal.

Root of the problem

Police officers kill themselves for the same reasons other people do, said the Rev. Robert E. Douglas Jr., executive director of the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation.

But for officers, problems at home often are created or worsened by the stresses of police work - the night shifts, the constant possibility of danger, the grisly scenes they encounter on the job.

"Domestic problems almost come with the job," Officer Atkinson said. "A majority of officers are working shift work. They're working six days in a row. Even in the best of relationships, they're just not seeing each other."

Mr. Curran, who does psychological evaluations for police departments, including the county's, said police officers experience "chronic stress" that can have long-term effects.

"It's really different than any other occupation," Officer Atkinson said. "You take your job so personally. They say 'Don't take it home with you,' but that's almost impossible."

And officers, who are trained to control their emotions even under great stress, might be unable to vent their frustrations even at home, the Rev. Douglas said.

Getting help

The Rev. Douglas, 58, a former Baltimore city police officer and a pastor at Jenkins Memorial Church in Riviera Beach, said he has studied the police suicide problem for almost 20 years.

The Pasadena resident founded the nonprofit National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation in 1996. The acronym stands for Paramedics, Officers, Law enforcement, IRS, Corrections, Emergency responders.

He said he has had some success bringing attention to the problem, notably when the FBI National Police Academy agreed to include training on police suicide in its classes for officers.

County police have department chaplains and psychologists available to help officers deal with stress, especially after traumatic incidents. Officers also may use the employee assistance program offered to all county workers. And the FOP has its own informal chaplain.

Breaking silence

But many officers are reluctant to use that help.

"There's kind of a stigma, unfortunately, that goes with the job," Officer Atkinson said. "You're supposed to be strong. You're supposed to handle everything that comes down the pike."

Police said Officer Frendlich, a 10-year veteran of the force, and his wife were estranged.

His wife, Lisa Frendlich, was dating Ronald Larry Boliek, 35, of Odenton but had recently moved back in with Officer Frendlich, bringing their two young sons.

Officer Frendlich shot Mr. Boliek when he came over to the Frendlichs' Millersville house, then turned the gun on himself, police said.

Lt. Jordan said no one requested what the department calls "traumatic incident counseling" immediately after Officer Frendlich's death. That doesn't mean, however, some officers weren't getting help from other sources.

"It's just something we don't talk about a whole lot," Officer Atkinson said.

The Rev. Douglas said officers could be afraid they'll be taken off the street if they admit to having problems.

"Law enforcement officers don't trust (employee assistance program) reps. They don't trust anything that management lays down for them," the Rev. Douglas said. "They tell the psychologist what the psychologist wants to hear."

The annual suicide rate for U.S. residents is about 12 per 100,000 people, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Although no statistics are kept nationwide, some police agencies report a much higher rate of suicide among their officers, the Rev. Douglas said.

Mr. Curran, though, said there is no evidence that suicide rates are higher for law enforcement officers in general.

Everyone, however, agrees too many officers are dying by their own hands.

"The problem with police officers is (we) are so used to helping other people with their problems that we seldom reach out for help when we have problems," Officer Atkinson said.
