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Trapped Behind The Badge

What Causes Cops To Self-Destruct?

BY JOEL LANG

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The grief inflicted before Thanksgiving by the murder-suicide of state trooper Victor Diaz and his former girlfriend, Newington Police Officer Ciara McDermott, must still be deep.

No amount of grief, however, can obviate a cold-hearted judgment. Diaz's extreme act might not have been prevented, but some form of violent breakdown by the troubled trooper should have been foreseen.

Social scientists who study police behavior have long recognized and warned about patterns of self-destruction among law enforcement officers. One is that they are several times more likely to commit suicide than to be killed in the line of duty. Another is that their suicides are usually preceded by the alcohol abuse and domestic discord to which police in general are prone.

Diaz fit this pattern all too well. In March, he cursed at Cromwell police who arrested him for drunk driving. While serving a 60-day suspension from duty, Diaz began making harassing phone calls to McDermott at her home in West Hartford. She had arranged his bail, but now he was angry she was seeing another officer. The day he shot her and then himself, Diaz was supposed to turn himself in on charges stemming from the harassment that likely would have resulted in another suspension and the loss of his job.

Even the method of killing did not surprise experts. "There's a good possibility he shot her in the head," said Robert Douglas, a former Baltimore police officer who is now a minister and director of the National P.O.L.I.C.E. Suicide Foundation (www.psf.org). In fact, Diaz was reported to have shot McDermott three times in the head and chest, then to have shot himself in the head. Douglas based his guess on the shoot-to-kill training police get. "One in the chest. One in the throat. One in the head. It's called vertical shooting," Douglas said.

His foundation is one of several advocacy groups that seek to raise awareness of police suicide and the job stress associated with it. Another is SOLES, Survivors of Law Enforcement Suicide (www.tearsofacop.com). Douglas said a minimum of 300 police suicides probably occur each year and that many go unreported. He believes the actual rate of police suicide is several times higher than the national average, that has been estimated at roughly 11 suicides per 100,000 people. He also said his foundation has counted at least 22 domestic homicides in the past two years in which a law enforcement officer killed a family member. In most of the cases, the officer then took his own life.

Rates of police suicide and domestic violence are hard to pin down statistically. John Violanti, a leading authority on police pathology based at the University of Buffalo, said Douglas' estimates probably are exaggerated. But Violanti, himself a former state trooper, agrees the rates are abnormally elevated.

One of Violanti's own older studies found police officers in Buffalo three times more likely to commit suicide than other municipal workers. In "The Mystery Within: Understanding Police Suicide," an

article published in the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Violanti wrote that police suicides commonly were labeled as accidental or natural deaths. (The misclassification protects families, pensions and reputations.) More recently in a letter to the American Journal of Psychiatry, Violanti faulted a New York City study that concluded the suicide rate for the city's finest over a 20-year period was slightly lower than that for New Yorkers of similar age, sex and race.

The flaw, Violanti wrote, is that the study's baseline population included the mentally ill, the unemployed and others who have higher than normal suicide rates. In contrast, the police, he wrote, are "a healthy and psychologically-tested working group ... who should have relatively low suicides rates."

Psychological Screening For The Police Personality

The presumption that police are a select group points to a real, but unexplained paradox. After several years on the job, officers previously judged healthy, to use Violanti's word, "decline." Those who study police behavior debate the cause. "Is it that they have a personality that draws people to police work, or is it the socialization from the job?" Violanti asked.

Douglas put it this way: "Police officers when they come on board don't come with a lot of baggage. Most are given psychological evaluations. The issue is the culture that develops once they come on board."

The very purpose of the psychological screening, however, is to identify people emotionally suited for police work. The screening commonly requires prospective recruits to be interviewed by a psychologist and to take a battery of personality tests.

Most often given is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. The present version, the MMPI-2, consists of 567 statements that demand snap, true-or-false self-judgment. Sample statements are: "I have a good appetite," "I cry easily," "At times I think I am no good at all," "I am often said to be hot-headed."

Originally developed to aid in the diagnosis of illnesses such as depression and paranoia, the MMPI now is used worldwide, often for occupational fitness. It is the basic test administered to police candidates evaluated at Behavioral Health Consultants in Hamden. The firm works with 23 municipalities in Connecticut, including New Haven, New London, West Hartford and East Hartford.

Though limited by confidentiality rules, Arnold Holzman, the managing partner who does many of his group's evaluations, agreed to discuss the process. He cautioned against imagining any direct correspondence between the actual replies on the MMPI, or other tests he may use, and police performance.

The MMPI compensates for people who try to guess the right answer and is scored on a statistical basis. Even the scores on each of the test's 10 standard scales must be interpreted in relation to one another.

Those scales retain their clinical names. The scale for "psychopathic deviance," for instance, now becomes a measure of an individual's appetite for excitement, the ability to function in risky or atypical environments and to relate to a variety of people. The scale for "mania" translates into energy level and organization skills, where a higher than normal score is desirable, but an exceedingly high score may suggest impulsiveness and lack of focus.

In general, Holzman said he looks for scores that indicate extroversion, ease with others, quick decision-making, conventional attitudes, a positive view of life, good impulse control and no submerged hostility. The scores are not pass-fail, like school grades. Holzman judges them in the context of the candidate's personal history and performance during an hour-long interview. He said the face-to-face interview is vital. It can be a test itself of how a candidate handles stress and the unknown.

Holzman's description of the ideal police personality suggests one that is supremely well-adjusted. But he saw the same paradoxical tendency toward dysfunction as Douglas and Violanti. "If you walk into any police roll-call room and ask who's been divorced, you'll see many more than half the hands go up, especially in big city departments," said Holzman, adding he generally agrees with the studies that police have higher rates of alcohol abuse and suicide.

"It's interesting ... these are the folks most closely screened. They are very well functioning at the time of their entry [into a department]. It says something about the nature of the profession and the people who do it that there is a substantial percentage that break down. We need to understand that and be better prepared to identify [problems] and intervene."

TV Police Dramas Perpetuate A Myth, Ignore A Core Issue

The stress of the job is the obvious reason for the decline from extra healthy to extra troubled. The sources of the stress, however, might surprise fans of television police dramas. Some does indeed come from exposure to uncertain danger, even though, as Holzman said, "It's not knowing what comes next that draws people to the job. They like excitement. You don't know who's coming around the corner or who's behind the door."

But the routines of police work may contribute even more than intermittent danger.

"It's also the regulated nature of the job, the paramilitary structure and the needing to follow through in a very particular way. You're always being re-evaluated and second-guessed," Holzman said. "The most significant stressors are the insidious day-to-day events of dealing with difficult people in difficult situations and then not having a place to leave it, to be able to process it. Then at the same time you're affected by what your home life is all about and any other stress that may have nothing to do with your job."

As someone who works with Connecticut departments, Holzman had to be tactful. Experts outside Connecticut had blunter appraisals.

Katherine Ellison, a psychology professor at Montclair State University in New Jersey and the author of "Stress and the Police Officer," said the popular belief that police work is extraordinarily dangerous and stressful is a myth. "The greatest stressor in policing is bad management, bad supervision," she said, especially given its paramilitary structure.

"Policing requires a great deal of discretion and [officers] are not trained for this. [Management] can screw you no matter what you do ... They don't allow for the discretion you have to have to do the job."

Ellison said police themselves tend to magnify the "crook catching" aspects of the job. Quoting the police novelist Joseph Wambaugh, she said policing involves dealing routinely with "the worst of people and ordinary people at their worst."

As an occupational psychologist, she said she is skeptical of the usefulness of personality tests. They yield similar scores for a good school teacher as they do for a good police officer. Describing the social skills police need, Ellison said, "Good cops have an elevated level of psychopathic deviance. They can run a good con."

Ellison believes some stress comes only indirectly from the job. Shift work complicates personal relationships under any circumstance. But Ellison said the job "offers great opportunity for infidelity." Drinking with fellow officers also remains part of the police culture, though she thinks it's becoming less prevalent. She said she once visited a department where beer was dispensed from a vending machine. (Some years ago the Hartford department was embarrassed by off-duty officers drinking in the headquarters parking lot.)

Violanti agrees that the greatest stress on the job can be attributed to management decisions, ranging from the failure to give officers the street support they think they need to dress codes that require an officer keep his jacket buttoned and his hat on. But he distinguishes between the ability

to cope with doing the job and living with the job.

He thinks psychological tests probably do help give an accurate assessment of a candidate's personality. They are constructed to detect proclivities toward, say, alcohol abuse or post traumatic stress syndrome. The problem is, he said, that "It's hard to predict these things from a test that you take in 2000 and here it is 2005 and you kill yourself. What happened in between? Where is the chain of evidence?"

Initial Idealism, A Need To Control, Ultimate Isolation

It is ironic and potentially tragic that early links in the chain may be forged from a recruit's good character and his training on the force.

"People who come into police work are very idealistic. They want to solve every crime in the world. They want to be on CSI," Violanti said. Then seeing what the job is like, the idealistic recruit may be transformed into a cynic.

Then, too, the innate idealism may be reinforced by what Violanti calls the "socialization" of the job. In one of his papers, "Suicide and the police role: a psychosocial model," Violanti wrote that police training attempts "to instill a sense of superhuman emotional strength ... Recruit officers are told that they are someone unique, far different from the average citizen and certainly beyond harm." The weapons they carry and the bullet-proof vests they wear may be physical reminders of the psychic strength they think they are supposed to have.

At the same time officers, who may already have a tendency to do so, learn to think in a "constrictive" style that sees only right or wrong. "Such thinking may be the result of a quest for objectivity," Violanti wrote, "but eventually may become an absolute in the solution of personal and life problems."

Meanwhile, after being on the job for a while, officers may become isolated from friends and any identity other than that of being a cop. A tendency toward being emotionally "guarded," a skill the job requires, may increase. Off duty, "they cannot turn their emotions back on," Violanti wrote. "As a result, the personal relations of police officers are not personal at all; they are more like transactions on the street."

"Control is part of an officer's life," Violanti said. "Officers think they need to maintain control for their own safety and to do the job. But there is a schism between being on the street and going home ... Some officers can't shift between job control and their need for personal control."

Together these factors may explain the increased potential for police suicide, not the cause. Confronted by domestic problems where training and discipline is no help, the officer nevertheless may default into the constricted thinking he uses on the street. Ultimately the shamed officer may see suicide not as an escape, but as a way of making things right. It can become, Violanti writes, "the police officer's attempt to restore [his] self-concept as moral and decent."

Those are qualities the officer was trained to see in himself and recruited for. The experts are sympathetic to the suicide syndrome, not to the act.

"They need to develop, I think, more tests for people who might be, just might be, suicide problems," Violanti said.

"What we're seeing is younger and younger officers are killing themselves. It's getting down into the 39 to 30 range," he said. "The generation coming into policing is probably not as equipped to deal with [the job]. I don't know why that is."

Victor Diaz was 37 and had been a state trooper for seven years. .

Violanti said there's anecdotal evidence that even murder-suicides are becoming more common around the nation, and that in the last 18 months there have been three suicides within the Buffalo

department.

"It's awful," he said. "It's frightening a lot of people."

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