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Cops under pressure: Driven to drink

Off-duty cops have long used alcohol to relieve the stress. Now, after recent incidents, police are responding to fight alcohol abuse.

Jim Adams and James Walsh, Star Tribune

Some cops call it choir practice, those back-room hours after work when they try to escape the stress of life on the beat.

It's a time to gripe about bosses and bureaucracy, to commiserate about criminals -- and to knock down a few drinks.

"During my career, there were many, many choir practices after work," said St. Paul Police Sgt. C.R. Nelson, who joined the department in 1979 after getting alcoholism treatment and who just retired this month. "A lot of people unwind very appropriately. Unfortunately, some people don't."

Alcohol has long been a part of police culture; some studies suggest that nearly 25 percent of officers are dependent on it. But a rash of recent incidents around the region involving officers caught drinking too much is prompting police officials and counselors to take a hard new look at the culture, and either crack down on alcohol abuse or reach out to those needing help.

Drinking-related offenses are "a much bigger problem than any of us would like to see," said Interim Minneapolis Police Chief Tim Dolan.

St. Paul Police Chief John Harrington said drinking on his 560-member force tends to increase after a traumatic event, such as the death of an officer on duty. His department experienced that last year after Sgt. Gerald Vick was shot and killed while working undercover.

In the past year, seven Minneapolis officers have been arrested for drinking-related offenses. Two officers, engaged to each other, were arrested this spring after an alcohol-related traffic accident in Columbia Heights. The woman threw a leg-kicking fit while detained in a squad car.

Her hefty fiancé had to be shot twice with a stun gun before cops could subdue and handcuff him.

In St. Paul, 25 officers were recently reprimanded after admitting to drinking together after work at a headquarters building last year.

Meanwhile, a state trooper who was a driver for Gov. Arne Carlson in the 1990s had a second drunken-driving incident last month and has resigned.

New demands, more duress

Even as they tighten their policies on drinking, police leaders in the Twin Cities and several suburbs say they do not see a crisis in their ranks.

In St. Paul, Harrington said that excessive drinking was "out of control" when he joined the force in the 1970s and that the number of officers needing treatment for alcoholism has declined since then.

Dolan agreed. He suggested that one reason more officers may be getting arrested for alcohol offenses is increased DWI enforcement and because flashing their badges when they are pulled over by another officer usually no longer means a free pass.

"Cops don't get byes on traffic stops or DWIs, where they might have in the past," Dolan said.

Since the death of Vick, who was killed while working undercover as he left a bar and had a 0.20 percent blood-alcohol level, St. Paul police officials have limited how much undercover officers can drink and require a non-drinking partner to drive.

In Minneapolis, where two officers were arrested last year in domestic-abuse cases involving alcohol and six others were disciplined for drunken driving in 2004, Dolan said he is seeking tougher penalties for officers caught driving under the influence.

One possibility: placing officers whose licenses have been revoked -- which can occur after a drunken-driving arrest -- on unpaid leave, instead of desk duty, until their license is restored.

"Alcohol is a real challenge [for police] going into the 21st century," said Robert Douglas, who speaks at police-training seminars on the issue and was an officer and police chaplain in Baltimore for about 20 years.

Douglas said he fears that alcohol or drug abuse could get worse because heightened concerns over terrorism and security are putting more demands on police officers. He also noted that alcohol is often a factor in officer suicides -- which appear to be increasing nationally -- and domestic assaults.

Police suicides outnumber officers who get killed on duty, Douglas said. He leads the National Police Suicide Foundation, which documented about 450 officer suicides across the country last year. Other officials who have examined the issue say the number is closer to 300. Harlan Johnson, executive director of the Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association, said he has heard of two such suicides in the state in the past two years.

The burdens of stress

In Minneapolis, some officers drink too much because of family stress or heredity as well as job pressures, said Sgt. Steve Wickelgren, a psychologist and former patrol officer who coordinates the department's employee-assistance

program. Sometimes, he said, it's not so much the stress from street duty or violence that officers talk most about; it's office politics or policies they feel interfere with their work.

"Officers fear change," he said. "They had no input into the decision-making, yet the front-line officers are the ones most affected."

John Delmonico, president of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, the police union, said work stress on the Minneapolis force may have increased in recent years because the number of sworn officers has declined. Police officials said the city has about 130 fewer officers than its high of 923 in 1998.

But John Violanti, a research professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, said the daily rigors that officers face on the streets are a big reason some of them turn to alcohol.

"They use [drinking] as a coping mechanism to deal with work trauma, not just shootings, but the everyday drudgery of dealing with abused kids and human misery," said Violanti, a former New York state trooper. "It has cultural acceptance: You have to be able to drink to be a good cop. It's a macho thing, a stress reliever."

Wickelgren said Minneapolis officers are trained about stress and family life before they get sworn onto the force. Last month, he spoke to recruits at a gathering that included officers' spouses and touched on the effects of stress on their personal lives.

After a day of high-speed chases or dealing with unruly suspects, officers may say, " 'I need to relax, leave me alone,' and distance themselves from everyone, which is negative for family life," Wickelgren said.

Helping cops cope

C.R. Nelson, who joined the St. Paul force after coming to Minnesota for chemical-dependency treatment and who has been sober for nearly 30 years, said that for most officers, after-hours drinking meant a few beers before heading home.

"But there were always those couple of guys who drank until dawn," he said.

Nelson said that since he had refused to participate in drinking sessions over the years -- for fear of losing his sobriety -- some fellow officers distrusted him.

"There's that old adage that you can't trust a man who doesn't drink," he said.

But over time, he said, troubled officers began seeking his help. He has mentored cops battling alcohol dependency.

Minneapolis and St. Paul have special programs for police employees. Other jurisdictions, including Dakota and Anoka counties, refer officers with drinking

problems to counselors available to all employees.

"Counseling can be required as part of disciplinary action," said Anoka County Sheriff Bruce Andersohn. "There is no excuse for [drinking offenses], but if it is an issue, you try to help them so they can straighten themselves out or it will probably end in termination."

Boston's police department, with 2,300 officers, has a stress-support unit that addresses drinking problems, said Sgt. Herbert White Jr., its director.

He said he was a heavy drinker until a fellow officer arrested him for drunken driving after he hit a truck 17 years ago. He got treatment, recovered, remarried his wife and now supervises others who counsel officers.

White said that, before his arrest, he drank to numb his feelings and relax.

"A few drinks with the boys after work, some laughs and jokes and you are ready to go home," he said. "But how well do you sleep? Or do you just pass out?"

He said officers get in tense situations and sometimes develop "pre-anxiety," preparing themselves for what their shift may bring.

"You expect it, and you get it screaming down the road to a domestic violence call and then the dispatcher says a gun is involved," White said. "You get an adrenaline high. You get there, and you know the battle could be on. Sometimes it's nothing, but your body shakes when the adrenaline subsides."

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