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## Progress Being Made, But Cops And Alcohol Still A Deadly Combination

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was right behind the police station," Strillacci said. "It was almost one of those rites of passage, where after work, you'd go down the hill and you'd have a couple brews with your fellow officers.

"And sometimes you'd end up being there until closing."

Now, decades later, that tradition has waned, Strillacci said, as both the public and the profession are less inclined to wink at excessive drinking by officers.

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But while the stereotype of the hard-drinking cop may be fading, the mix of police work and alcohol remains a dangerous combination. And after an exceptional string of tragedies and embarrassments in Connecticut, some wonder if agencies are doing all they can to deal with officers who get lost in the bottle.

"To put it bluntly: Yeah, it's a problem," said John Violanti, a former New York state trooper who now studies alcohol use by police as an assistant professor at the State University of New York in Buffalo.

"It's long been recognized that alcohol problems in police work are prevalent," Violanti said. "Generally, it's social: it's done only with other police officers and there's no repercussions. But then you get the guy who can't control it



### YOUR REPORTER



### Don Stacom

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Don Stacom has been a reporter and editor for various Connecticut newspapers for nearly 30 years. He covers transportation, state revenue sharing, and the cities of New Britain and Bristol.

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anymore, and that's when the trouble starts."

In Connecticut, there has been plenty of trouble the past year:

- Bristol police Officer Robert Mosback acknowledged drinking at a neighborhood party before going on duty June 26. He later crashed his cruiser into a utility pole while driving at twice the speed limit; court records indicate his blood-alcohol level was over the legal limit at 0.13 percent. He was charged with driving under the influence.

- Windsor Locks police Officer Michael Koistinen allegedly spent hours drinking the night of Oct. 29 when his car struck and killed a teenager riding a bicycle. He faces manslaughter charges. The head of a regional accident-reconstruction team who was called to the scene reportedly arrived drunk and was sent home, sources have said.

- State Police Lt. Timothy Kradas crashed into a box truck on I-84 while on duty Feb. 2. Investigators reportedly found empty beer cans and a mix of alcohol and tomato juice in his cruiser and charged him with driving under the influence.

- And early last Saturday morning, New Britain police Capt. Matthew Tuttle, reportedly after attending a party with other officers, lost control of his car and struck a disabled vehicle and its driver before fleeing the scene and driving home. He was charged with drunken driving and evading responsibility, and less than 12 hours later, fatally shot himself in the head in his Middletown apartment.

While high-profile cases make headlines, it is hard to quantify just how common alcohol abuse is inside the nation's police departments.

Some studies suggest problem drinking affects officers at levels roughly equal to other professions — about 81/2 percent of those on the job. Other research suggests that the rate is more than twice as high. The National Police Suicide Foundation estimates that alcohol is a factor in 85 to 90 percent of police suicides nationally.

But regardless of the exact scope of the problem, experts say a police officer with both a drinking problem and a deadly weapon is a serious concern.

"At the end of the day, police officers have to model decent behavior," said Cary A. Friedman, an orthodox rabbi who helped revive the Connecticut State Police chaplaincy program several years ago following concerns about trooper misconduct, including alcohol abuse. "The stakes are much higher because they are carrying guns. They have enormous amounts of authority and power in our society."

Friedman and Violanti both said police officers do not enter the profession predisposed to alcohol abuse.

"If you look at the psychological testing of officers, it shows that they're generally people who are willing to get into a helping profession. They're people who have high ideals," Violanti said. "In terms of the potential for alcohol abuse on these tests, it's low."

But Violanti said that inclination is weakened from an officer's earliest interactions with the fraternal sensibility that binds cops. More than even the stress of the job, Violanti said, it is peer pressure that pushes officers towards alcohol.

"My take on this is that the police culture contributes greatly to the use of alcohol. It starts at the academy level and just continues onward," Violanti said. "If you don't drink, you don't fit in. You're not one of the guys."

Friedman agreed that many officers are idealistic at the beginning of their careers, but he believes it's the emotional toll of their experiences on the street that leads them to find solace in intoxication.

"A lot of them went into police work as an expression of some really noble instinct to serve humanity. But there's no mechanism for them to detox from what it is that they see every day," said Friedman, a training consultant in matters of spirituality with the FBI's behavioral science unit and the author of "Spiritual Survival for Law Enforcement"

"The rage that's there, there's no way to vent it. And so what cops try to do is they try to numb the pain, and that I think is the cause for the substance and the alcohol abuse," he said. "Obviously that is self-destructive because you can't do that. You can try. You can pretend. And at this moment you can get yourself good and drunk. But what it does is it creates this cycle of self-destructive and ultimately destructive behavior."

Over the last generation, many — but not all — police agencies have recognized those destructive forces and established programs to promote healthier lifestyles and help officers in trouble, Friedman said.

In Bristol, where excessive drinking was linked to several years of police scandals, the police union and Acting Chief Eric Osanitsch are working to set up a peer support team. It was a new philosophy for a department where after-work drinking on the roof of the headquarters garage was so common five years ago that commanders sent out a written order forbidding it.

"This would be a partnership between management, the union and the officers," Osanitsch said. "We want to get officers to pick up a phone before something happens."

Most departments have employee assistance programs (EAPs) and some have worked to chip away at the stigma that can still make it difficult for officers to seek help. Friedman provides training across the country aimed at helping officers replenish their spiritual reserves, and he says officers and departments have become increasingly open to an approach he acknowledges sounds awfully touchy-feely.

"Once upon a time, there was a lot of eye-rolling. People said to us: What are you trying to do? Create a bunch of soft social workers who happen to have guns? You're going to create people who are wishy-washy. You're going to weaken their resolve and we don't want that, because you're going to doom these people," Friedman said.

"The fact is that more police officers — many, many more police officers — every year kill themselves than are killed at the hands of somebody else," Friedman said. "So to say: Oh, you're going to doom them to danger on the street — the street is not the most dangerous place for a police officer. It's their home, it's their office, it's their car, it's the inside of them."

Violanti said some of the best evidence that attitudes have changed toward alcohol abuse is the fact that officers faced criminal charges in the high-profile cases in Windsor Locks, Bristol and elsewhere. "Back in 1950," he said, "that would have never happened."

But he said the quality of efforts to address alcohol abuse is dependent on the commitment of those in command. Programs must, for example, be confidential, rather than a system in which "the department psychologist is next to the chief's office."

As in private business, EAPs for police are usually run by clinics or agencies that offer a 24-7 hotline and referrals for counseling or therapy.

"There wasn't anything like this 30 years ago. It's a vast change from the culture then," Enfield Chief Carl Sferrazza said.

At the end of each year, Sferrazza gets a report from his town's EAP summarizing how many police called and the general category of problem involved — financial, marital, substance abuse, etc.

"That's all they tell us, that's all we want to know. No names, no ranks. The primary tenet is complete confidentiality. We've never had a breach, and I wouldn't stand for it," Sferrazza said. "We want officers to call. If they think what they say will be relayed back to the department, they won't call."

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Some commanders are still inclined to sweep problems under the rug, Violante said. But he also sees progress.

"I think a lot of higher executive officers understand that it takes a lot of courage to ask for help. It's the coward that keeps drinking and hides away," he said. "The guy who steps forward and says, 'Hey, I need help' — sometimes there's respect for that."

Help is important for supervisors and senior commanders as well as young officers, police say. Several of the recent cases in Connecticut involved high-ranking officers with 25 years or more on the job. Sferrazza said the rash of veteran commanders in alcohol-related trouble in Connecticut shows the complexity of the problem.

"I don't have the answer to why it's happening except to say life presents different challenges for all of us, regardless of age. Alcoholism isn't age-discriminate — if you accept the premises that it's an affliction, then it's going to affect older people, young people, people who are inexperienced, with 30 years [in police work]."

Nationally, some cities have instituted extraordinary procedures to break the cycle of secretive on-duty drinking and the pressure for coverups that comes after a crash or other major incident. In Indianapolis, where Officer David Bisard faces drunken driving and homicide charges for running down several motorcyclists last summer with his patrol car, Breathalyzer tests are now required for any officer involved in an on-duty car accident.

Ultimately, police themselves are responsible, Sferrazza tells new officers.

"The first morning they come to work, we talk about how they can have a good career. I tell them other people can't create something that isn't there. You have your future in your own hands, and the only person who will mess up your career is you," Sferrazza said. "If you choose to drink and drive, you should be blaming yourself, not the media or special interest groups."

In West Hartford, Strillacci, the police chief, makes a habit of sitting down with new recruits to explain the dangers of the job — both physical and emotional — and he drives home the point that cops are expected to be the good guys.

"We can't go around doing the things that we would arrest somebody for," he tells them.

Strillacci said he received no such guidance on the emotional hazards of police work when he first suited up.

"That was something we had to find out the hard way," he said.

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state employee AND taxpayer at 4:53 PM May 09, 2011

After 18 years I have learned one thing, from a detective to a road/patrol cop is nothing more than a glorified janitor that cleans up messes not many people would have the stomach for. At the beginning the ideology of becoming a cop is a noble one. Protecting society, preventing crimes against all people and just in general being someone who helps in dire times of need. As the years go by you realize that the general public hates you and that you really don't prevent anything, that by the time you are called the mess has already been created. Whether it be a fatal car accident, a domestic gone horribly wrong, a violent crime against a child, or an ugly, senseless murder, a cop's main job is to find who did it and clean it up. When you do find that person responsible for the mess, the laws and courts protect that person more than their victims. In time you realize it is what it is, a job. No more, no less. Drinking oneself into a stupor with regularity is not an excuse and does nothing to change this.

r2d2000 at 1:15 PM May 09, 2011

So are the Drugs that they confiscate and then either use or sell!  
Sad world when you can't trust Politicians, Police, Teachers, etc  
Thomas Jefferson said it would come to this, he was so right!!  
And sorry being a Police Officer is not the most dangerous job in the world!

runningonjoy at 12:14 PM May 09, 2011

I am beginning to understand why CT is the 50th worst state in terms of the percentage of alcohol related deaths. (See the MADD website). I am still waiting for the drunk driver who hit my car last year to spend at least one day in jail...he has been arrested three times in less than a year for DUIs! And he is still roaming around CT free as a bird to drive and eventually kill someone. And we can see why...the police are too busy getting drunk to care about it.

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