

**Newsweek**

Police: Alarming Suicide Rate on the Force

Newsweek

March 19, 2007 issue - California Highway Patrol officials are anxious to stop an alarming wave of suicides among their ranks. Since 2003, 15 cops at the nation's biggest state-police force have killed themselves; the latest came last month, and eight died in 2006, five times the national rate for law enforcement and "one of the highest we've seen," says Robert Douglas, executive director of the National Police Suicide Foundation. CHP Commissioner Mike Brown ordered an investigation last spring, but perplexed CHP leaders haven't found an explanation yet. Some officers had personal or financial crises; five faced disciplinary actions. But several lacked any apparent problems. "Frankly, the principal commonality is the fact that the outcome is the same," Brown told NEWSWEEK.

Outside experts wonder whether the high rate encourages others. The spike "may be the result of a contagion effect," says John Violanti, a SUNY Buffalo researcher who studies cop suicide (but not the CHP cases). The deaths of admired officers may help legitimize the choice for fellow cops.

Police officers, taught to bottle their emotions on the job, are notoriously slow to seek help, so the CHP has launched a training program to help managers recognize and confront at-risk officers with a "question, persuade, refer" technique. Brown released a suicide-awareness video stressing where and how to get help, and posters are set to spring up in CHP offices and squad rooms, pushing hot lines and psychological services. "I don't care what started it, as long as we can make it stop," says CHP union president Rick Mattos.

—Andrew Murr

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