



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

What Drives Suicidal Thoughts Among Police and Civilian Staff? Findings on Mental Health and PTSD

Key Takeaways

- Poor psychological health and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were the strongest predictors of suicidal ideation among law enforcement staff, rather than characteristics associated with demographics or job positions.
- PTSD increases suicidal ideation both directly and indirectly, with poorer mental health explaining roughly 37 percent of PTSD's overall effect on suicidal ideation.
- About one in four surveyed staff members reported having contemplated, planned, or attempted suicide at some point, and sworn and civilian staff were equally likely to report these suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Why This Matters

Policework involves constant unpredictability and frequent exposure to traumatic events—conditions that are known to take a toll on psychological health. However, suicide-related data specific to law enforcement has historically not been tracked systematically, leaving agencies with limited information about the prevalence of suicidal thoughts among their staff and the factors that are driving them.

Prior research has found that police officers experience suicidal ideation at roughly twice the rate of the general population and that PTSD is a significant predictor of these thoughts. Other studies have linked personal stressors, such as alcohol use and relationship struggles, and organizational stressors, such as shift work and poor supervision, to higher rates of suicidal ideation. However, much of this research has focused only on sworn officers, leaving civilian staff largely unexamined.

This study fills that gap by examining suicidal ideation among both sworn and civilian law enforcement staff, testing how demographic, position, physical health, and psychological health factors relate to suicidal ideation and exploring the specific relationship between PTSD, mental health, and suicidal ideation.

How the Study Worked

Researchers surveyed 883 sworn and civilian staff across eight police agencies of varying sizes and locations across the country. The survey measured aspects of demographic characteristics, position and agency characteristics, physical health, psychological health, and suicidal ideation through three escalating questions: whether someone had ever contemplated suicide, made a suicide plan, or attempted suicide.

Researchers built a series of statistical models that added one group of factors at a time, starting with demographics, then job and agency characteristics, then physical health, and finally psychological health. This step-by-step approach allowed researchers to assess how much each group of factors contributed to predicting suicidal ideation and whether relationships that appeared significant early on held up once other factors were taken into account. Researchers then conducted a follow-

up analysis to test whether poor mental health explains why PTSD is linked to higher suicidal ideation, rather than simply confirming that both are related to it separately.

What Was Learned

- **A substantial share of staff reported some level of suicidal ideation.** About 74.6 percent of respondents reported never having suicidal thoughts, 18.9 percent had contemplated suicide, and 6.5 percent had planned or attempted suicide. The 3.1 percent of respondents who reported a past suicide attempt is well above the national average of 0.6 percent among adults.
- **Psychological health was the leading factor associated with suicidal ideation.** Once mental health characteristics were added to the analysis, the model's ability to explain suicidal ideation nearly doubled compared to models that included only demographic, job, and physical health factors.
- **PTSD increased suicidal ideation, and poorer mental health explained this relationship.** Among staff with PTSD, individuals who reported better mental health tended to report lower levels of suicidal ideation than those with poorer mental health, suggesting that mental health may partially account for the association between PTSD and suicidal ideation.
- **Job position and sworn status did not predict suicidal ideation.** Whether staff were sworn or civilian, their specific job and their tenure had no significant relationship with suicidal ideation, suggesting that risk is not limited to any single role within an agency.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest takeaway for agencies is that supporting staff mental health directly reduces the risk of suicidal ideation, including among those experiencing PTSD. Because mental health significantly weakens the link between PTSD and suicidal thoughts, agencies that invest in mental health support are addressing one of the most direct pathways to reducing this risk.

The researchers note that because job position and sworn status did not predict suicidal ideation, civilian and sworn staff face comparable risk and should be included equally in any wellness or prevention efforts. The researchers also point out that staff in this sample reported PTSD at more than twice the rate of the general population, underscoring why agencies should prioritize regular mental health screenings, reduce stigma around seeking help, and ensure mental health resources are easy to access.

Source article

Lawrence, D. S., Padilla, K. E. L., & Dockstader, J. (2025). Bearing the badge, battling inner struggles: Understanding suicidal ideation in law enforcement. *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology*, 40(3), 497–509. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11896-025-09741-2>

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