



What New National Data Show About Police Officer Suicide Rates

Key Takeaways

- Using a new, standardized national dataset, researchers found that sworn law enforcement officers died by suicide at an average rate of 21.4 per 100,000 officers per year between 2016 and 2022.
- Male officers had a suicide rate of 22.7 per 100,000 officers, almost double the rate of 12.7 per 100,000 among female officers.
- Suicide rates varied widely by region, with the Midwest (27.5) and Northeast (24.0) showing notably higher rates than the South (19.4) and West (19.7).

Why This Matters

Accurately counting how many police officers die by suicide has long been difficult. Stigma around mental health can make families and colleagues reluctant to report a death as a suicide, and national data systems run by federal health agencies have not reliably or consistently tracked suicides specifically among police officers. Without solid numbers, it is difficult for police departments and policymakers to gauge the true scope of the problem or determine where to focus prevention efforts.

Earlier research tried to work around these data gaps in different ways. One study compared law enforcement deaths to deaths in the broader population and found that officers were 69 percent more likely to die by suicide. A follow-up study using a larger, updated dataset found that officers were 54 percent more likely to die by suicide than the general public. A separate analysis calculated officer suicide rates directly but could not fully account for the fact that police officers tend to be working-age adults, whereas general population rates include people of all ages, including children, whose very low suicide rates pull the comparison numbers down.

This study fills that gap by using a newer, more rigorously collected dataset to calculate officer suicide rates broken down by year, sex, and geographic region for the first time. It provides departments and policymakers a clearer, more current picture than earlier studies could provide.

How the Study Worked

The researchers used data collected by First H.E.L.P., a nonprofit organization that has tracked suicides among public safety personnel since 2016. The organization gathers information through its website, social media monitoring, and direct contact with families and colleagues, then verifies each case through multiple follow-up conversations. From this larger dataset, the researchers narrowed the focus to sworn law enforcement officers, using the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) official definition, which excludes correctional staff, court personnel, and certain federal agencies. This left 977 officer suicides recorded between 2016 and 2022. To turn these counts into rates, the researchers paired them with FBI staffing data showing how many sworn officers worked in each state, broken down by sex and year.

Rather than simply counting suicides, the researchers calculated rates per 100,000 officers, which accounts for the fact that some groups, regions, and time periods have more officers than others. This matters because a region with more total suicides is not necessarily more dangerous; it may simply employ more officers. Calculating rates this way allows for fair, apples-to-apples comparisons across years, between men and women, and across different parts of the country.

What Was Learned

- **Suicide rates peaked in 2019, then declined.** The rate climbed to 27.5 per 100,000 officers in 2019, the highest of the seven years studied, then dropped during the COVID-19 pandemic years before settling at 21.6 in 2022.
- **Male officers had nearly double the suicide rate of female officers.** Male officers averaged 22.7 suicides per 100,000 officers compared to 12.7 per 100,000 among female officers, despite the number of women working as police officers increasing by 30 percent compared to the 11 percent increase in the number of male officers.
- **The Midwest and Northeast had the highest regional rates.** The Midwest averaged 27.5 suicides per 100,000 officers and the Northeast averaged 24.0, compared to 19.4 in the South and 19.7 in the West. The New England division had the highest rate of any single division, at 34.6 per 100,000 officers.
- **Rates varied sharply even within the same region.** In the West, the Mountain division's rate (29.3) was nearly double that of the Pacific division (15.2), showing that regional averages can mask large differences between individual states or divisions.

What This Means in Practice

Standardized, ongoing data collection on officer suicide is essential for departments and policymakers to understand the true scope of the problem and target prevention resources effectively. The wide gap between male and female officer suicide rates, along with the substantial regional and divisional differences identified in this study, suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to prevention may not address where the risk is concentrated. Departments in higher-rate regions, such as the Midwest and Northeast, may want to pay particular attention to local wellness and prevention programming given these elevated patterns.

The authors caution that their findings are descriptive rather than definitive because some officer suicides likely go unreported or are misclassified, and the data are not validated against official death certificates. They also note that every officer suicide reflects a complex mix of personal, professional, and psychological factors that resist simple explanation, and they emphasize that continued, standardized national data collection is a critical first step toward better understanding and supporting the law enforcement community.

Source article

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