Policing during COVID-19: Another day, another crisis

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“Another Brick in the Wall” of Police Work

The COVID-19 virus is an unprecedented public health emergency. Although many police departments have adopted some novel activities for their officers to perform during the pandemic, such as reading books to homebound schoolchildren over the Internet (Johnson, 2020), for police officers, the current crisis is pretty much just another day at work. Police officers, like most first responders, are accustomed to performing their duties under the most critical circumstances. These are the heroes who run into schools as active shooters are murdering children, who help evacuate buildings during chemical leaks and bomb threats, and who apprehend violent criminals who would do them harm. Police officers routinely put their lives on the line to serve and protect the members of their community.

Without hesitation, police officers continue to work during the present pandemic. While most people are following physical distancing guidelines and many are able to work from home, public safety professionals are not afforded this luxury. On one hand, the crisis is unlike all others and poses some unique challenges for police officers, which are discussed below. On the other hand, however, current circumstances are reminiscent of obstacles faced by officers during previous crises and during the routine performance of their duties.

All first responders are cognizant of the risk of exposure to infectious diseases (e.g., Jahnke, Poston, Jitnarin, & Haddock, 2012; Shakespeare-Finch, 2011). It was found that “needlestick injuries occur with considerable frequency in this group of law enforcement professionals, suggesting an increased risk of becoming infected with bloodborne pathogens...” (Lorentz, Hill, & Samimi, 2000, p. 146). Specifically, research has shown that police officers reported elevated anxiety after contact with “blood and bodily fluids” and that pre-incident training about such exposures had no impact on post-incident anxiety levels (Dunleavy, Taylor, Gow, Cullen, & Roy, 2012, p. 384). Similar findings were observed from a sample of correctional officers whose job stress increased and job satisfaction decreased as their concern about “contracting an infectious disease on the job increased” (Hartley, Davila, Marquart, & Mullings, 2013, p. 334).

An important consideration to mitigate first responders’ fears is the extent to which those exposed are provided adequate and immediate medical attention to assess whether the exposure resulted in any actual contagion. Unfortunately, HIV/AIDS, perhaps the most anxiety-provoking health crisis ever faced by police officers, which was discussed over twenty years ago (Flavin, 1998), is not ameliorated by quick medical assessment following possible exposure. Specifically, the threat of contracting HIV/AIDS lingers for months after possible exposure, since infection is not immediately detectable. This poses tremendous challenges for police officers and their loved ones, especially spouses/romantic partners, since that virus is also transmitted sexually.

Although more immediate than HIV/AIDS, the COVID-19 crisis also creates significant challenges for first responders’ families. The COVID-19 pandemic adds yet another layer of stress to this already dangerous and stressful job. Officers continue to contract COVID-19, and the number of officer deaths is rising. As reported on CNN, in the city of New York alone, 29 members of the New York Police Department (NYPD) have died due to COVID-19 (Waldrop, 2020). The graphic reality is that the number of officers’ deaths will probably keep increasing over the coming months.

Officers are not only concerned about their health, but also the health of their family members. This creates another challenge for officers who attempt to avoid “bringing” work home with them, since many people exposed to COVID-19 remain asymptomatic. Some of these family members may have pre-existing health issues, are elderly, or are in other high-risk groups vulnerable for contracting the COVID-19 infection. Consequently, officers who are concerned about their possible exposure to the virus during a shift may further isolate themselves (physically and emotionally) from family members to avoid infecting a loved one. This isolation adds to officers’ already increased level of distress during this crisis.

The Essential Role of Police Leadership during COVID-19

Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is essential now, more than ever, that officers have the support of their departments. Chiefs and Sheriffs must let their employees know that they appreciate the work they are doing, that their
courage and dedication are acknowledged, and that they will
do everything they can to keep officers as safe as possible in
terms of both their physical and mental health. At the same
time, law enforcement executives have to recognize the
added stress on officers who have been tasked with policing
violations of physical distancing regulations and the strain
placed on officers arising from the ambiguity of fluctuating
policies (e.g., Sisak, 2020).

Agencies have put into place numerous protocols in an
effort to prevent officers from contracting COVID-19. These
protocols are essential not only for officers’ protection from
COVID-19, but also for providing them with emotional sup-
port. For example, many agencies are adopting policies to
limit officers’ face-to-face interactions with citizens. If a police
matter does not involve a violent crime or other emergencies,
departments are now taking reports and handling minor
issues over the phone or online. These criteria vary from
agency to agency, but examples of minor problems include
minor traffic accidents, thefts where there is no suspect, and
lost or missing property. When officers do have to respond in
person, they are being provided with masks, complying with
physical distancing rules, and washing their hands regularly.

That being said, officers still need to balance their safety
with their obligation to protect the public they serve. Officers
must always respond to domestic disputes, in-progress fights,
and other disturbances. As part of their regular duties, officers
still have to make arrests, search arrestees, separate those
who are fighting, control aggressive and resisting subjects,
and so on. Regardless of the dangerousness of the call and
the risk of contracting COVID-19, the police will respond to
protect those who cannot protect themselves, to help those
who cannot help themselves, and to maintain civil peace. What
does that mean?”

Police officers’ identities expand beyond that of their
profession. They are husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, broth-
ers, and sisters. They are citizens, just like those they serve.
They have hobbies, are involved in community activities,
and like to enjoy the same things as everyone else. They also
have emotions and are susceptible to anxiety, depression, and
other mental health conditions.

Although there are numerous obvious stressors for
police officers, such as handling dangerous calls and wit-
nessing violence and death, it has been shown consistently
that organizational stressors are ranked the highest among
working officers (Shane, 2010; Violanti & Aron, 1995; Violanti
et al., 2017). Some of these stressors include the operation of
a department, the bureaucracy, relations with coworkers,
unfavourable policies, and a lack of recognition for good work.
These are especially difficult against the backdrop of being
disciplined for negative work performance, other officers not
doing their fair share, a lack of supervision, and being treated
differently than fellow officers (Shane, 2010; Violanti & Aron,
1995; Violanti et al., 2017).

However difficult, an essential part of officer wellness
is to separate off-duty (family, friends, and leisure activities)
from on-duty life (Gilmartin, 2002; Papazoglou & Blumberg,
2019). Because policing is such a vital part of an officer’s
identity, many carry this identity with them even when off-
duty. The job itself interrupts family time, such as working
odd shifts and holidays (Kirschman, Kamena, & Fay, 2014;
Papazoglou, 2016).

### Recommended Action Plan

Agencies must prioritize protecting officers’ emotional
health as much as their physical health. Given that off-
cers frequently complain about the stress coming from
within the organization, this is the ideal time for agency
leadership to step up and create a positive organizational
environment for their officers. The following are some sug-
gestions for police leaders and organizations in general to
protect officers’ mental and physical health and maintain
their well-being:

- First and foremost, communicate with officers:
  - Let them know how much you appreciate their cour-
    age during this pandemic
  - Ensure consistent communication (physical distanc-
    ing or virtual meetings)
  - Check in with them to see how they are
  - Perform wellness checks
  - Keep them updated on departamental proce-
    dures and changes

- Ask your officers what they need from you

- Provide information on how officers can seek help if
  needed, including departmental and outside counsel-
  ling, as well as peer support groups (virtual meetings)

- Guide them on how to monitor themselves without
  fear of judgment regarding stress-related reactions. For
  instance, if they notice changes in their functioning not
  noticed before the COVID-19 crisis outbreak (e.g., mi-
  graine headaches, sore muscles, disrupted sleep), they
  should be able to seek help from health professionals

- If possible, given strained staffing needs, provide
  officers with additional time off (e.g., days off, vacation
days) if they experience fatigue or exhaustion and es-
  pecially for those who appear to be highly concerned
  and overwhelmed by having to care for a vulnerable
  person at home or are required to assist in homeschool-
ing their children

- Offer additional resources, for example:
  - What Law Enforcement Personnel Need to Know about
    Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), by Centers
    for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) https://
    guidance-law-enforcement.html
  - Law Enforcement Information on COVID-19, by the
    International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)
    https://www.theiacp.org/resources/document/
    law-enforcement-information-on-covid-19?utm_          
    source=Informz&utm_medium=email&utm_          
    campaign=Informz+Email
  - Confidential support – Bulletproof https://www.
    bulletproof.org/
  - Confidential support – Copline https://copline.org/
  - Confidential support – National Suicide Prevention
    Lifeline https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/

In conclusion, these are novel times due to a novel virus.
Viruses change quickly as they acquire genetic variations.
Law enforcement, as well, has to change quickly to adapt
to these unusual times. It is therefore paramount that we
continue to protect officers psychologically, in addition to
protecting them physically.
CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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