

Police Primary and Secondary Danger: the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

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The *Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative* was developed from the conceptions of police primary and secondary danger.

Police primary danger: physical and psychological

The primary danger of policing has two components: (1) physical primary danger and (2) psychological primary danger. The physical primary danger of policing is comprised of the inherent risks of the job, such as working in motor vehicle traffic, working in bad weather, confronting armed and violent persons, being a target of disgruntled persons, and so on. You need only to read a newspaper or watch a news broadcast to understand the primary physical danger of policing. In short, the primary physical danger of policing is represented by the circumstances within which an officer can be physically harmed. Unfortunately, due to the differences among people and the divergence of various philosophical and belief systems, the risks that comprise the physical primary danger of policing will likely never be zero.

Police officers counterbalance the physical risks inherent in policing by applying the three T's of policing—Training, Tactics, and Technology. The three T's represent factors designed to reduce the probability that officers will be injured or killed in the line of duty. They are most effective when they achieve a standard of quality, and when police officers properly use and engage them. Because the type, quality, and subject matter of such training can vary widely among agencies, some officers are better prepared than others to deal with the physical primary danger of policing.

Police psychological primary danger

The psychological primary danger of policing is related to, but distinguishable from the physical primary danger of policing. The psychological primary danger of policing is represented in the increased probability that due to the nature of policing, officers will be exposed to critical incidents, work-related cumulative stress, and human tragedy. This higher probability of exposure results in an increased likelihood that officers will suffer psychological traumatization and stressor-related disorders. It is the increased likelihood of psychological traumatization and the increased likelihood of experiencing stressor-related disorders that comprises the psychological primary danger of policing. Another way of saying this is that the physical primary danger of policing constitutes a work environment that generates the psychological primary danger of policing.

The existence of an increased probability that police officers will suffer work-related psychological traumatization and stressor-related disorders has been known for some time. Many modern law enforcement agencies have recognized this feature of policing and have attempted to address it. They have addressed it by initiating stress management training, contracting for employee assistance counseling programs, creating peer support teams, developing officer-involved critical incident protocols, and providing access to qualified police psychologists. Some departments have gone so far as to engage comprehensive officer mental-wellness programs. These programs start at employment and extend beyond retirement. Regardless of the specific type or combination of police stress management

programs, all have as their goal the prevention or reduction of the possible undesirable effects of the psychological primary danger of policing.

Police secondary danger

Properly developed support programs designed to help officers cope with the psychological primary danger of policing are effective only to the degree that they are personally implemented or utilized. Many officers benefit from these programs on a regular basis. Some do not. Some officers choose not to engage the support programs available to them, even when confronting very difficult circumstances. Why? The answer to this question is associated with an insidious *secondary danger* of policing that has its foundation in the primary dangers of policing.

As a former police officer and a police psychologist I have become painfully aware of a danger to police officers beyond those inherent in policing. What is this danger? It is the officers themselves. The significance of this danger is readily observed in the number of known and recorded annual police officer suicides – which is likely to be less than the actual number of police officer suicides.

I have treated police officers that had become suicidal. I have also witnessed the aftermath of completed officer suicides. Some of these officers spiraled inexorably downward while attempting to put up a good front. They tried to look good and expended much effort to hide the fact that all was not well. They needed help but would not ask for it. If their spouse, coworker, or friend offered help, they rejected it. If anyone tried to compel them to seek help, they reacted forcefully against them. They concealed enough of their state of mind that involuntary treatment was not an option. The end result for too many of these officers was suicide.

Why was it so difficult for these officers to ask for help? Why was it so difficult for these officers to accept help when offered, even if they felt incapable of asking for it? Why did some of these officers act upon suicidal thoughts instead of reaching out for support? These are important and probing questions. A large part of the answer to these questions is traumatization, anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders, and everything that these conditions entail. But there is another contributing and influencing factor, and it is already known to every police officer. It is the mindset that comprises the secondary danger of policing.

What is this secondary danger of policing? The secondary danger of policing is a powerful conceptual undercurrent that pervades the policing profession. It is often unspecified and seldom discussed. It is an artifact of the police culture and is frequently reinforced by police officers themselves. The secondary danger of policing is the idea that equates “*asking for psychological help*” with “*personal and professional weakness*.” Secondary danger is reinforced by the fear of department or peer ridicule or reprisal for seeking psychological help.

Interestingly, fears of department or peer ridicule or reprisal are seldom observed in officers confronting what they view as physical illness or physical injury. This is because physical illness and physical injury retain a personal and social acceptability not yet observed in perceived psychological conditions. Unfortunately, there still exists a bias in the personal and social acceptability of what is viewed as “psychological” versus “physical” when it comes to police officer illness and injury.

How serious is police secondary danger? So serious that some officers will suicide or attempt to suicide before asking for help. How do we know this? We know this from the statements of officers that have survived their suicide attempt. We also know this from the information included in the suicide notes of officers that completed suicide.

Police profession not alone

The policing profession is not alone. There is a similar secondary danger in numerous other occupations, and it is a characteristic of some dysfunctional family, friend, and other social systems. Also, as odd as it may seem, a person may not seek psychological support due to a significant *self-ridicule* and fear of *self-reprisal*. This state of affairs is possible because humans are psychologically complex and maintain an on-going relationship with themselves.

Comprehensive action

To act comprehensively, law enforcement agencies must not only concern themselves with training officers how to do the job - thereby addressing the physical primary danger of policing. They must also initiate and maintain programs aimed at officer mental wellness - thereby addressing psychological primary danger and the secondary danger of policing. Such wellness programs should include efforts to:

- (1) educate officers in stress management, stress inoculation, posttraumatic stress, posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatization, alcohol and substance abuse, the warning signs of anxiety and depression, and officer suicide prevention
- (2) engage more pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic officer support interventions
- (3) initiate incident-specific protocols to support officers and their families when officers are involved in critical incidents
- (4) create properly trained and clinically supervised peer support teams
- (5) provide easy and confidential access to psychological support services
- (6) enhance the agency organizational climate so that officers are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.

The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative represents a concerted effort to reduce the secondary danger of policing. It was developed in 2013 and consists of 12 elements. It is designed to promote police officer mental wellness and reduce the frequency of police officer suicide. The core of the initiative is simple - *make it safe for officers to seek or ask for psychological support*.

The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative seeks to:

- (1) make it personally and professionally acceptable for officers to engage peer and professional psychological support services without fear of agency or peer ridicule or reprisal.
- (2) reduce officer fears about asking for psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming job or other life difficulties.
- (3) change organizational climates that discourage officers from seeking psychological help by reducing explicit and implicit organizational messages that imply asking for help is indicative of personal and professional weakness.

(4) alter the profession-wide law enforcement culture that generally views asking for psychological help as a personal or professional weakness.

(5) improve the career-long psychological wellness of officers by encouraging police agencies to adopt long-term and comprehensive officer-support strategies such as the Comprehensive Model for Police Advanced Strategic Support (COMPASS).

The twelve elements of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

The Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative encourages:

(1) officers to "self-monitor" and to take personal responsibility for their mental wellness.

(2) every officer to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (officers do not have to "go it alone").

(3) every officer to diminish the sometime deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other officers known to be facing difficult circumstances.

(4) veteran and ranking officers to use their status to help reduce secondary danger (veteran and ranking officers can reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances).

(5) law enforcement administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.

(6) law enforcement administrators to issue a departmental memo encouraging officers to engage psychological support services when confronting potentially overwhelming stress (the memo should include information about confidentiality and available support resources).

(7) basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, police family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of depression and suicide.

(8) the development of programs that engage pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic department-wide officer support interventions (for example, proactive annual check in, "early warning" policies designed to support officers displaying signs of stress, and regularly scheduled stress inoculation and critical incident stressor management training).

(9) agencies to initiate incident-specific protocols to support officers and their families when officers are involved in critical incidents.

(10) agencies to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.

(11) agencies to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized police psychological support services.

(12) officers at all levels of the organization to enhance the agency climate so that others are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.

Asking for help does not mean "unfit for duty"

Implementing the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

Implementing the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative is not difficult. The elements of the Initiative are easily implemented by initiating processes, strategies, and programs already well known to law enforcement agencies.

The Initiative is not an "all or nothing" proposition. Various elements of the Initiative can be implemented independently of one another. Although it is best to move forward with the entire Initiative, a partial implementation is better than no implementation.

There is no "one right way" to implement the Initiative. It is ok to be creative. Make the *Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative* work for you.

Considerations and recommendations for implementing the elements of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative

(1) The Initiative encourages: every officer to "self-monitor" and to take personal responsibility for his or her mental wellness.

Implementation: Many officers are pretty good at picking up signs of distress in others. But as an officer, have you ever thought of applying this skill to yourself? Accomplishing this simply requires you to make an honest and ongoing self-assessment. Although denial can be or become an issue, many officers know when they are experiencing stress or trauma-related difficulty. However, knowing you are having difficulty is not enough. You must also know what to do about it and be willing to take action. One of the things that you can do about it is to talk to someone. Allow yourself to seek appropriate support and assistance.

(2) The Initiative encourages: every officer to seek psychological support when confronting potentially overwhelming difficulties (officers do not have to "go it alone").

Implementation: Why limit yourself to personal stress management ideas and strategies? You can supplement your solo stress management efforts by engaging outside support. Outside support comes in many varieties, ranging from talking with a trusted friend to professional counseling. Many times just talking it out will help you to see things differently and help you to feel better. The next time you feel stressed, take a chance. Talk to someone you trust. You may be pleasantly surprised at the outcome.

(3) The Initiative encourages: every officer to diminish the sometimes deadly effects of secondary danger by reaching out to other officers known to be facing difficult circumstances.

Implementation: Even if an officer is not exhibiting outward signs of distress, if you know that he or she is dealing with circumstances that would be difficult for nearly everyone, try reaching out. Too often, officers will shy away from other officers in distress for a variety of reasons, including

not knowing what to say or do. But think about this – during years of policing and psychological practice I have had officers time after time talk about how an unanticipated kind word from another officer made a positive difference. It does not take much, and it's not like you need to form a life-long relationship. Sometimes just a few supportive words can make a remarkable difference.

(4) The Initiative encourages: veteran and ranking officers to use their status to help reduce secondary danger (veteran and ranking officers can reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances).

Implementation: Veteran and ranking officers are in a unique position to influence the police culture generally and organizational climate specifically. They can do this for better or for worse. If you are a veteran or ranking officer, make a positive difference. As mentioned, you can help to reduce secondary danger by openly discussing it, appropriately sharing selected personal experiences, avoiding the use of pejorative terms to describe officers seeking or engaging psychological support, and talking about the acceptability of seeking psychological support when confronting stressful circumstances.

(5) The Initiative encourages: law enforcement administrators to better educate themselves about the nature of secondary danger and to take the lead in secondary danger reduction.

Implementation: The conceptual distinction between police primary and secondary danger is relatively new. Police administrators should think through the notions of police primary and secondary danger, take the lead, and consider ways to reduce secondary danger within their agencies.

(6) The Initiative encourages: law enforcement administrators to issue a departmental memo encouraging officers to engage psychological support services when confronting potentially overwhelming stress - the memo should include information about confidentiality and available support resources.

Implementation: This is easily accomplished by administrators. All it takes is an understanding of what support services are available, learning about the limits of confidentiality, and a commitment to write and distribute such information in a departmental memo. If you are a police administrator, whether or not you support the entire Initiative, implementing this element would clarify your position, help to define your philosophy, contribute to a supportive organizational climate, and help to reduce secondary danger. A memo from the chief that identifies support services and encourages their use expresses a caring attitude and lets officers know that it is ok to seek support. This element alone has significant potential to help officers in distress. (see Police Administrators and the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative).

(7) The Initiative encourages: basic training in stress management, stress inoculation, critical incidents, posttraumatic stress, police family dynamics, substance use and addiction, and the warning signs of depression and suicide.

Implementation: In nearly every jurisdiction there are qualified persons that are willing to train officers in the specified areas. Resources for this training include local or regional mental health facilities, community psychologists and counselors, area community colleges, local universities, academy cadre, and specially trained officers already within the department. Training in these areas should begin in recruit academy and continue throughout an officer's career.

(8) The Initiative encourages: the development of programs that engage pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic department-wide officer support interventions (for example, proactive annual check in, "early warning" policies designed to support officers displaying signs of stress, and regularly scheduled stress inoculation and critical incident stressor management training).

Implementation: Initiating pre-emptive, early-warning, and periodic support programs is nothing new for law enforcement agencies. Many departments offer stress management refresher training periodically and have early warning officer-assist policies and programs already in place. These programs are designed to help officers cope with everyday stress and the potentially overwhelming stress of policing before it becomes an issue.

(9) The Initiative encourages: agencies to initiate incident-specific protocols to support officers and their families when officers are involved in critical incidents.

Implementation: It takes some work but it is possible for an agency to develop a standardized protocol for dealing with critical incidents. The protocol can define "critical incident" and "officer-involved" to best fit departmental standards. It can also specify when the protocol should be engaged. Critical incident protocols not only help to standardize incident investigation, but can also be designed to reduce second injury, secondary trauma, and secondary danger. Incident protocols can be developed by and applicable to individual law enforcement agencies or they can be developed by and applicable to multiple jurisdictions. To implement this element of the Initiative, it takes someone to introduce the concept, secure administrative support, develop the protocol and have it approved, then put it into effect. Agencies with an officer-involved incident protocol have used a committee of officers and other professionals to develop it. Such committees have included officers, investigators, supervisors, administrators, district attorneys, peer support team members, and police psychologists.

(10) The Initiative encourages: agencies to create appropriately structured, properly trained, and clinically supervised peer support teams.

Implementation: The efficacy of police peer support teams is well understood by police psychologists and many police administrators. To be most effective, police peer support teams must be formally established in policy and function under departmental written guidelines. Peer support team members should be trained by qualified personnel and receive ongoing training and clinical supervision. Clinical supervision provides a "ladder of escalation" and "support for the supporters." Several states have enacted legislation which provides members of police (and other) peer support teams with a degree of statutory confidentiality.

(11) The Initiative encourages: agencies to provide easy and confidential access to counseling and specialized police psychological support services.

Implementation: Most departments provide insurance coverage for private psychologists and counselors, and many have developed Employee Assistance Programs. Some agencies also provide in-house psychological services. Regardless of the services provided, they must be

easily accessible and remain confidential within the limits prescribed by law if officers are to view them as viable resources.

(12) The Initiative encourages: officers at all levels of the organization to enhance the agency climate so that others are encouraged to ask for help when experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties instead of keeping and acting out a deadly secret.

Implementation: Police officers must remain aware that even seemingly innocuous verbal exchanges and unintentional nonverbal gestures can contribute to police secondary danger. To avoid this, officers of all ranks must act conscientiously, proactively, and consistently to reduce police secondary danger. This requires increased personal awareness and may require a significant shift in thinking for some officers. In this way, officers can positively affect their agency's organizational climate and thereby, the police culture.

The effects of the Make it Safe Police Officer Initiative are cumulative: the more elements implemented, the greater the effect.

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