

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

About this Series

Time after time, we comb through the wreckage of the latest insider threat event to glean every lesson so that whatever happened never happens again. These after-action reports and damage assessments are important and should continue, but what can we learn from organizations that don't make the headlines? What can we learn from organizations that have not had to recover from an insider threat event?

The organizations highlighted in this series offer their approach and demonstrated successes to assist others with insider threat prevention. From this perspective, they are **On the Right Track**.



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Worker-on-Worker Violence Prevention

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Introduction

Law enforcement is one among several professions most at risk of workplace violence. The nature of the work—working late at night, patrolling high-crime areas, and interacting with unpredictable people—makes officers vulnerable to injuries perpetrated by the customers they serve.¹

By definition, workplace violence is not limited to incidents committed by members of the public; it also includes violence between workers. Although open source data are difficult to find, anecdotal evidence suggests that law enforcement officers rarely turn their weapons on each other, in spite of the fact that personnel work in an intense, fast-paced, and armed environment.

For this first report in the series, *On the Right Track*, researchers partnered with subject matter experts (SME) in law enforcement and asked them to share their opinions as to why worker-on-worker violence seems so rare in police departments, especially given the previously-noted risk factors. The purpose of this report is to identify best practices based on these discussions, and recommend potential prevention strategies that the Department of Defense (DoD) might want to consider for its own workforce and prioritize for additional research.

Method

Researchers interviewed a convenience sample of 21 law enforcement SMEs between October 2018 and March 2019. SMEs were recruited at the 2018 IACP Annual Conference and Exposition and from the researchers' professional networks. SMEs included: current and former federal, military, state, and local officers; academics; administrators; and consultants. In order to maximize candor, SMEs were promised confidentiality.

¹ United States Department of Labor. (2019). *Workplace violence*. Retrieved from <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence/>



Telephone interviews lasted no more than 1 hour and were based on a semi-structured interview protocol tailored to each SME's expertise. Field notes were provided to each SME after the interview for review and revision in order to ensure accuracy. The field notes were aggregated and analyzed by the research team for common themes. The most common themes are presented in the following sections,² and the quotations are excerpted directly from the field notes; names and organizational affiliation are withheld to protect the identities of those who participated.

Results

SMEs agreed that worker-on-worker violence is rare in police departments. When asked to explain why, very few SMEs could cite a specific written prevention policy or a mandatory training course. Instead, nearly all of the SMEs talked about their culture, their leadership, and high standards for what they expect of one another. For example, one SME stated, "Fifteen years ago, [bullying and outbursts of anger] would not have been reported or labeled as workplace violence [in police departments], but we have gotten smarter in what we accept and how we label and deal with behavior." What follows are the most common themes that emerged from the SME interviews, presented as best practices for DoD to consider as part of its strategy to prevent worker-on-worker violence.

Best Practice #1: De-Escalation Training

Although SMEs rarely mentioned a policy or training course specific to worker-on-worker violence prevention, they did cite the relevant secondary benefits of the skills they learned in other courses. Notably, SMEs cited the value of de-escalation training, which is in place to help guide officers through interactions with the general public and keep them safe, but it also improves the way they interact with one another.

In its 2017 *National Consensus Policy and Discussion*

Paper on Use of Force, IACP defined de-escalation as "taking action or communicating verbally or non-verbally during a potential force encounter in an attempt to stabilize the situation and reduce the immediacy of the threat."³ Whether it is with a customer, a subordinate, or a colleague, de-escalation techniques are designed to slow down a volatile situation to give everyone more time to assess their options and maximize the likelihood of a satisfactory outcome.⁴

"Workplace violence does not happen more often because officers are trained in de-escalation. This is a part of their DNA. Although the purpose of this training is to teach officers how to deal with people on the street, it comes into play when officers have disagreements between themselves."

Commanding Officer

² Researchers excluded a fifth theme—psychological screening for applicants—from this report because it is the subject of Baweja, J. A., McGrath, S. M., Burchett, D., & Jaros, S. L. (Forthcoming). An evaluation of the utility of expanding psychological screening to prevent insider attacks. Seaside, CA: Defense Personnel and Security Research Center/Office of People Analytics.

³ National Consensus Policy and Discussion Paper on the Use of Force (October 2017). Retrieved from https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/National_Consensus_Policy_On_Use_Of_Force.pdf

⁴ Police Executive Research Forum. Retrieved from https://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Critical_Issues_Series/an%20integrated%20approach%20to%20de-escalation%20and%20minimizing%20use%20of%20force%202012.pdf



Todak and James (2018)⁵ observed 131 police-citizen interactions and assessed how often officers applied de-escalation tactics, and how these tactics influenced the outcome of the situation. Researchers found statistically significant relationships between two of the tactics and satisfactory outcomes, measured as whether or not the citizen was visibly calm at the end of the interaction. First, satisfactory outcomes resulted from the “calming” tactic, in which officers made an intentional effort to manage their emotions and stay calm, and second, from the “human” tactic, in which officers worked to minimize the power imbalance inherent in the interaction. For example, officers introduced themselves using their first names and they shook citizens’ hands. While the authors called for additional research, SMEs interviewed for this project supported the idea that de-escalation techniques produce satisfactory outcomes for both police-citizen interactions and among workers.

Best Practice #2: Peer-to-Peer Support Networks

“Other people do not understand what police officers see, the stuff that stains your brain. Other people don’t know what police officers go through.”

Chief of Police

In support of this project, two of the authors attended Dr. Kevin Gilmartin’s seminar, “Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement.”⁶ Dr. Gilmartin explained that “the job” turns police officers into people “who aren’t normal” because of what they see on the street every day. As one SME said, police officers respond to “particularly horrific crime scenes”, which stay with them long after their shifts end.

Peer-to-peer support networks enable police officers to pick up the phone and talk with other current and former police officers who understand the pressures of the job. As one SME noted, “Volunteers aren’t identified by their rank. It’s all about cops helping cops.” Networks are staffed by trained volunteers who complement departments’ formal Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), which are staffed by salaried personnel. Volunteers listen, debrief, and try to defuse stress, and they also provide referrals to a wide range of services, including counseling (e.g., financial, relationship, and bereavement) and alcohol abuse treatment.

Depending on resources, peer-to-peer support networks may provide services above and beyond a hotline. For instance, peer support groups may deploy trauma response teams to critical incident scenes, such as police-involved shootings or officer suicides. These volunteers do not conduct inquiries or investigations but instead, talk with the officers about how they are feeling and coping. Also, thanks to support from the city’s police commissioner, one SME explained that her peer-to-peer support network sends volunteers to the gun ranges and randomly pulls officers into on-the-spot group discussions. Volunteers encourage group members to share recent positive and negative experiences that happened either on- or off-duty, including those calls that were the most difficult.

⁵ Todak, N. & James, L. (2018). A systematic social observation study of police de-escalation techniques. *Police Quarterly*, 21(4), 509-543.

⁶ See also Gilmartin, K. M. (2002). *Emotional survival for law enforcement: A guide for officers and their families*.



Best Practice #3: Help-Seeking Behavior

Although many SMEs said their departments over the years have come to recognize the value of psychological services—and officers have started to demand a higher quality of mental health care—they agreed that stigma persists as a barrier to help-seeking behavior.⁷

To mitigate stigma and other barriers to care, SMEs recommended outreach programs delivered in person as often as possible to as many people as possible. More specifically, they said respected leaders should be actively involved in these campaigns. For example, one SME talked about a police captain who volunteers for his department’s peer-to-peer support network and talks about his personal experience with the service. He explained, “[The captain] shares that he called [the hotline] for help when he was younger and no one ever found out. He got the help he needed and his career was not derailed.” Similarly, one SME who commands an EAP encourages her peer counselors to share their EAP experiences with clients “to let people know that the system works and services are kept confidential.”

“[Like soldiers], police officers are reluctant to ask for help. ...They worry that if they ask for help, they will be put on the rubber gun squad or even lose their careers.”

Management Consultant

Best Practice #4: Behavioral Threat Assessment Teams

“The cost of threat mitigation is a factor, but the long-term cost can be damaging if threats are not taken seriously. The return on investment is often high when established programs recognize and interrupt threat themes before they damage the organization.”

Chief Executive Officer

One SME explained, “After the Columbine shooting [in 1999], there was a national switch in how people thought about these incidents: they could happen at schools, they could involve multiple perpetrators, and the perpetrators could be children. For these and other reasons, the police response needed to change to include threat assessment.” Since then, behavioral threat assessment has become the standard of care to prevent targeted violence not only in schools but also in the workplace.⁸ Behavioral threat assessment is defined as

a systematic, fact-based method of investigation and examination that blends the collection and analysis of multiple sources of information with published research and practitioner experience, focusing on an individual’s patterns of thinking and behavior to determine whether, and to what extent, a person of concern is moving toward an attack. (Amman *et al.*, 2017: p.4)⁹

⁷ See also Ho, T. E., Hesse, C. M., Osborn, M. M., Schneider, K. G., Smischney, T. M., Carlisle, B. L., Beneda, J. G., Schwerin, M. J., & Shechter, O. G. (2018). Mental Health and Help-Seeking in the U.S. Military: Survey and Focus Group Findings (OPA-2018-48, PERSEREC-TR-18-10). Seaside, CA: Defense Personnel and Security Research Center/Office of People Analytics. DTIC: AD1059321

⁸ The American Psychological Association, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), ASIS International, and OSHA all endorse behavioral threat assessment.

⁹ Amman, M., Bowlin, M., Buckles, L., Burton, K. C., Brunell, K. F., Gibson, K. A., ... & Robins, C. J. (2017). Making prevention a reality: identifying, assessing, and managing the threat of targeted attacks. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice Retrieved from: https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making_prevention_a_reality_identifying_assessing_managing_threats_of_ta.pdf



Unlike demographic profiling, behavioral threat assessment is founded on the principle that targeted violence results from an interaction between a subject’s individual and environmental circumstances. Moreover, violence is preceded by a set of known or knowable pre-attack thinking and behavioral processes that move along a continuum from idea to action.¹⁰

In order to be successful, behavioral threat assessment programs require multiple sources of information to both respond to and detect potential concerns. That is, people must be willing and able to report what they see in order to protect themselves, their organizations, and their communities. One SME who works on a military installation shared that his workplace violence prevention program offers training about how and what to report to both on-base and community personnel. As a result, “Reports come in from everywhere, including employees at local gun stores and hunting/fishing supply stores.” Although this causes more work for his team, the SME prefers this scenario to the possibility that he might miss an opportunity to intervene.

Conclusion

Worker-on-worker violence is a complicated problem. There is no single solution and no organization has a monopoly on the practices most likely to prevent these incidents. *On the Right Track* looks for best practices in places where DoD might not yet have looked. This report presents four best practices with the potential to help prevent worker-on-worker violence, based on interviews with law enforcement SMEs who, like many in DoD, work in a high-stress, high-operational tempo environment.

Taken together, the four best practices emphasize the need for officers to be prepared for uncertainty and to take care of each other, whether it is through peer support or early intervention from behavioral threat assessment teams. While few SMEs could cite a worker-on-worker violence prevention policy, many talked about the role of organizational culture and leadership. They explained that the most successful initiatives are integrated into the organizational fabric and valued by leaders who model the behavior they ask to see from their employees. In the words of one SME and in conclusion, “There is so much more than can be done if only organizations would listen and agree that people matter.”

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¹⁰ Borum, R., Fein, R., Vossekuil, B., & Berglund, J. (1999). Threat assessment: Defining an approach for evaluating risk of targeted violence. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 17, 323-337. Retrieved from <https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/>