



Psychological Effects of Working as a First Responder

Ronald Mynarsky

Research Scholars Program, Harvard Student Agencies, In collaboration with Learn with Leaders

ABSTRACT

Working as a first responder, such as a firefighter, police officer, or paramedic, is a highly demanding and stressful occupation. This research paper aims to examine the psychological effects experienced by first responders and explore the various factors contributing to their mental well-being. By synthesizing existing literature, this paper identifies key stressors, psychological disorders, coping mechanisms, and potential interventions to support the mental health of these dedicated professionals. The findings emphasize the importance of addressing the psychological needs of first responders to ensure their overall well-being and the effective provision of emergency services.

Keywords: First responders, stress, psychological disorders, coping mechanisms, mental health

Subject: Psychology

INTRODUCTION

First responders play a crucial role in maintaining public safety and well-being by rapidly responding to emergencies, providing critical medical care, and ensuring public order. These professionals, including firefighters, police officers, and paramedics, face numerous challenges and hazards in their line of duty. While their bravery and selflessness are widely acknowledged, it is essential to recognize and understand the psychological effects that are associated with such demanding work. The nature of the first responder's occupation exposes individuals to highly stressful and traumatic events on a regular basis (Lawn, 2020). These events, often involving life-threatening situations, witnessing violence, and experiencing human suffering, can have profound and long-lasting impacts on their psychological well-being. The psychological effects of working as a first responder have garnered significant attention in recent years, as the mental health and overall well-being of these professionals are critical not only for their own sake but also for the efficient and effective provision of emergency services.

This research paper aims to analyze the psychological effects experienced by first responders and explore the various factors contributing to their mental well-being. By synthesizing existing literature, we will identify the key stressors faced by first responders and examine the psychological disorders commonly observed in this population. Additionally, we will investigate the coping mechanisms first responders utilize to mitigate the impact of stress and trauma, as well as the interventions and support systems available to address their psychological needs. Understanding the psychological effects of working as a first responder is of paramount importance for several reasons. Firstly, it helps to shed light on the unique challenges and stressors faced by these professionals, thereby fostering empathy and support within society. Secondly, it enables the development of targeted interventions and programs to enhance the mental health and resilience of first responders. Thirdly, it highlights the significance of organizational culture and leadership in promoting psychological well-being within the first responder community.

By analyzing the existing body of literature, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the psychological effects of working as a first responder. This analysis will inform policymakers, organizations, and mental health professionals in their efforts to create supportive environments and implement evidence-based interventions that address the unique needs of first responders. In the subsequent sections of this research paper, we will delve into the specific stressors encountered by first responders, explore the psychological disorders commonly observed in this population, investigate coping mechanisms employed by these professionals, and evaluate the effectiveness of various

interventions and support systems. Through this comprehensive examination, we aim to enhance our understanding of the psychological effects of working as a first responder and provide valuable insights to inform future research and practice in supporting the mental health of these dedicated individuals.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative secondary research approach to examine the psychological effects of working as a first responder. The methodology centers around the analysis of existing data rather than collecting new data, making it a secondary research endeavor. The data will be sourced from previous studies, independent research findings, and public resources, along with a significant engagement with clinical research surveys conducted by the Journal of Emergency Medical Services (JEMS). Through the analysis of these surveys, conducted across various groups of first responders in the United States, the research aims to determine the mental health challenges inherent in first responder professions and evaluate the adequacy of the support systems in place. By aligning with JEMS, the research seeks to leverage their comprehensive data to gain insights into whether the nature of first responder work is mentally detrimental and if the support structures suffice in providing the necessary psychological support. Through this method, a deeper understanding of the psychological landscape within the first responder community will be achieved.

RESULTS

Through the collection of the data, we can determine that there is a great increase in the thoughts of suicide for first responders, specifically EMS (Emergency Medical Services). The thoughts of suicide for first responders are about 10 times the average of the population in the United States, while actual suicide attempts are over 13 times more frequent for first responders (Erich, 2015).

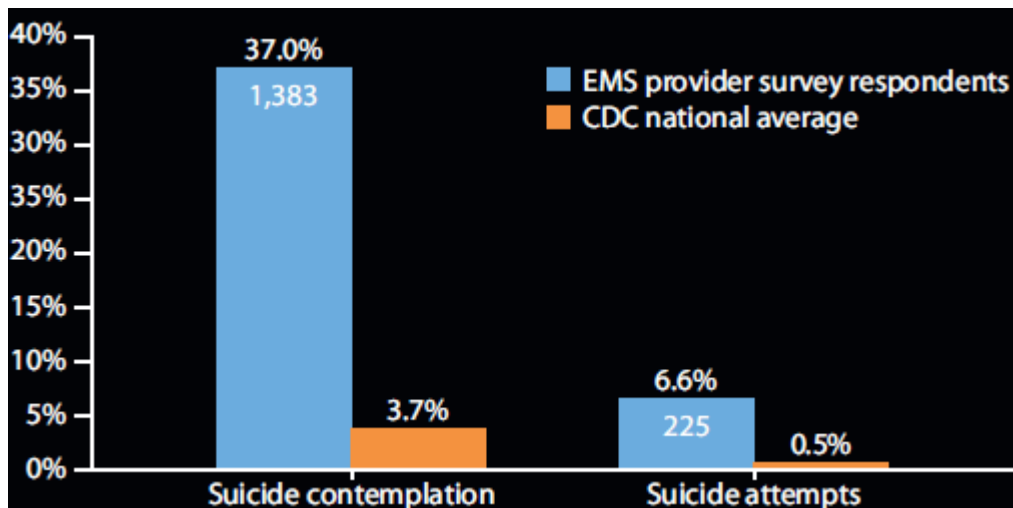


Figure 1: Comparison of suicide contemplation and attempt rates: survey respondents vs. national average (n = 4,022)
 Source: Erich (2015)

In addition to causing increased rates of suicidal thoughts and actions, being a first responder can increase rates of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and burnout. Exposure to critical incidents, high levels of occupational stress, and organizational factors contribute to these mental health challenges. However, the studies also shed light on potential protective factors, such as social support networks, effective coping strategies, and resilience-building programs. The findings underscore the urgent need for proactive measures to address the psychological well-being of first responders. Implementing targeted interventions, providing mental health support services, and fostering supportive organizational cultures is crucial for mitigating the psychological impact and promoting the overall well-being of these dedicated professionals. Data suggests that by providing resources to first responders, their rates of suicidal thoughts go down tremendously. These resources can be found through support groups, therapists, and even a strong family and social structure.

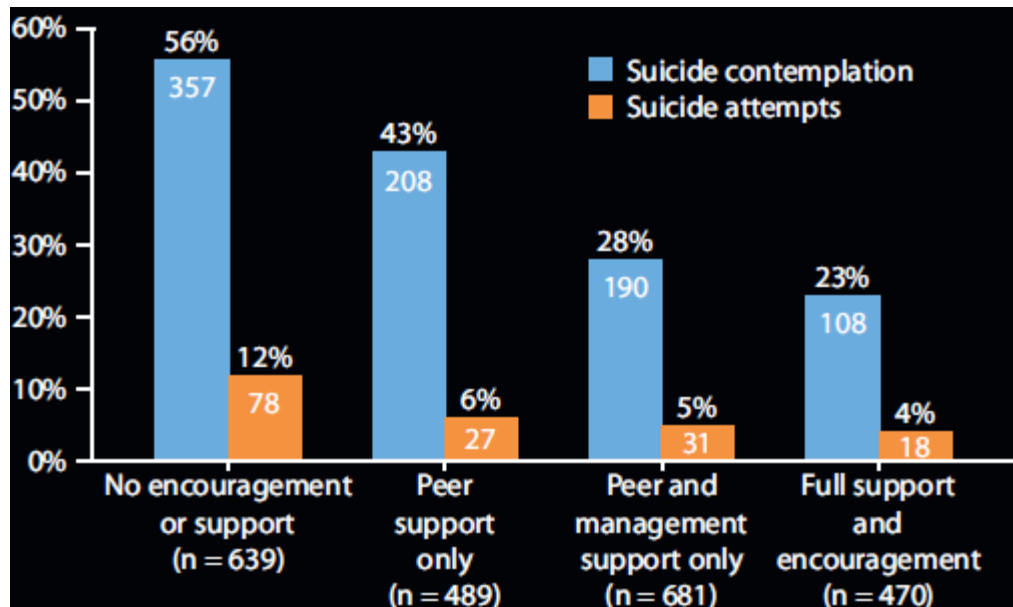


Figure 2: Suicide contemplation and attempts in EMS cultures
 Source: Erich (2015)

DISCUSSION

The role of first responders is crucial in any community, as they provide frontline support during emergencies. However, the data presented in this research highlights a concerning reality: the mental well-being of these vital professionals is at serious risk. Particularly, those working in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) are facing alarming rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts, significantly higher than the general population. This is not only concerning for the individuals affected but also poses a risk to the community they serve. The data from the graph above shows that people who work or volunteer for EMS are more likely to have suicidal thoughts. In fact, the data shows that more than 1/3 of emergency medical personnel have thought about suicide, and over 6 percent have attempted to commit suicide. This is more than 10 times the national average (Erich, 2015).

Several factors contribute to the mental health issues faced by first responders. Continuous exposure to traumatic events, high-stress work conditions, and sometimes a lack of organizational support can lead to serious psychological disorders such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, and burnout (Benincasa, 2022). Addressing these issues requires a well-rounded approach. Firstly, creating a supportive work environment is essential. This includes making it acceptable to discuss mental health issues, encouraging regular mental health check-ups, and ensuring that first responders can seek help openly without fear of negative consequences. Moreover, strong mental health support systems within first responder organizations are needed. This could include regular mental health training and awareness programs, easy access to counseling services, and peer support groups. Additionally, resilience-building programs could provide first responders with coping strategies to manage stress and trauma effectively. It is also important to provide ways for first responders to seek help anonymously, especially for those who might hesitate due to stigma or fear of repercussions. Implementing anonymous helplines or online counseling services could be helpful.

Engaging families and the broader community in supporting the mental well-being of first responders is also vital. Educating families about the psychological challenges faced by first responders and providing them with resources to offer support can be very beneficial. Lastly, advocating for policies that support the mental well-being of first responders is crucial. This includes engaging policymakers to allocate adequate resources for mental health support and advocating for mental health-friendly policies within first responder organizations.

CONCLUSION

This research paper has highlighted the significant psychological effects experienced by first responders, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support systems and interventions. By addressing the mental health needs of first responders, we not only prioritize their well-being but also ensure the provision of effective emergency services. It is crucial for policymakers, organizations, and mental health professionals to collaborate in developing and implementing



evidence-based strategies that promote the psychological resilience and overall mental well-being of these dedicated professionals. By prioritizing the mental health of first responders, we honor their invaluable service to society and contribute to building a more resilient and supportive community for those who selflessly put their lives on the line to protect others. Still, more research must be done to determine what the most efficient support system is and how to better help first responders.

The research provides important insights into the psychological issues faced by first responders. However, it has some limitations. The reliance on existing data instead of collecting new data might not capture the full scope of experiences and challenges faced by first responders. Also, the findings may not be generalizable due to potential differences in demographic and regional data. These limitations highlight the need for more detailed and diverse research in this area.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1]. *First Responders: Behavioral Health Concerns, Emergency ...* - Samhsa, www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/dtac/supplementalresearchbulletin-first-responders-may2018.pdf. Accessed: 18 June, 2023.
- [2]. Lawn, Sharon, et al., "The Effects of Emergency Medical Service Work on the Psychological, Physical, and Social Well-Being of Ambulance Personnel: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Research - BMC Psychiatry." *BioMed Central*, July 3, 2020, bmcp psychiatry.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12888-020-02752-4.
- [3]. Benincasa, Veronica, et al. "Burnout and Psychological Vulnerability in First Responders: Monitoring Depersonalization and Phobic Anxiety during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 27 Feb. 2022, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8910596/.
- [4]. Barber, Erich, et al. "Survey Reveals Alarming Rates of EMS Provider Stress and Thoughts of Suicide - JEMS: EMS, Emergency Medical Services - Training, Paramedic, EMT News." *JEMS*, www.jems.com/special-topics/survey-reveals-alarming-rates-of-ems-provider-stress-and-thoughts-of-suicide/. Accessed 20 Sep. 2023.