



Not in Our House?

Substance Abuse among Police and Firefighters

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It is not something we like to think about, but the evidence reveals that many law enforcement officers and firefighters struggle with abuse of alcohol, illegal drugs, or prescription drugs. Public safety professionals experience unusually high levels of stress related to potential dangers to their physical safety and the effects of experiencing a multitude of gruesome events. Some, as a result, turn to alcohol and/or drugs as a coping mechanism. The prevalence of drug and alcohol use among police officers and firefighters may be higher than you think.

Prevalence in Law Enforcement

One national study of law enforcement officers found that 20% abused alcohol on a regular basis, and, when compared to the general population, law enforcement officers were 200% more likely to abuse alcohol than the average citizen.¹ Furthermore, while men drink more than women in the general population, studies of law enforcement officers have revealed male and female officers abuse alcohol at equal rates.² **Across three decades, a total of 2,119 New York City police officers were terminated for criminal charges they acquired while off duty. The majority of these officers had been drinking at the time of their arrest, and 13% were arrested specifically for an alcohol-related violation of the law, such as drunken driving.**³ A survey of 1,410 officers from Austin, Dallas, and El Paso, revealed that approximately 70% consumed between zero and 10 alcoholic beverages weekly, but 30% reported regularly drinking more than 10 alcoholic beverages every week.⁴

In a survey of 980 police officers in Baltimore, 38% reported that in the last year their alcohol consumption resulted in such problems as family arguments and drinking to unconsciousness.⁵ Another study involved a nationwide study of news stories over a five-year period. It revealed 221 arrests of law enforcement officers on drug charges, and 782 arrests of officers for drunken driving. **Of the drug arrests, 64% of the officers were using illegal drugs on duty. Of the drunken driving arrests, 14% of the officers were driving drunk while on duty.**⁶ The problem of substance abuse in law enforcement has also been detected by law enforcement executives. In a survey of police chiefs, these chiefs estimated as many as 25% of their officers abuse alcohol.⁷

Prevalence in Firefighting

The fire service faces similar struggles. A survey of 1,481 firefighters in New York City revealed that the majority consumed alcohol regularly, and 30% abused alcohol often.⁸ Another survey of 112 firefighters with one urban fire department in the Northeast revealed 58% admitted to binge drinking at least once in the last 12 months, and 14% admitted to having driven drunk during that time.⁹ A Pacific Northwest study of 188 firefighters, and another study of 408 firefighters from three cities across the nation, showed similar levels of alcohol consumption, and also revealed that binge-drinking behavior tended to remain stable across a firefighter's career unless they received intervention or treatment.¹⁰

Furthermore, opioid addiction is becoming a growing social problem across the nation with a large proportion of illegal heroin users being those who were initially proscribed opioids for pain from physical injuries. A very large national study of several thousand patients suffering from back pain revealed that 24% became addicted to the painkillers and routinely used the drugs more often than was proscribed.¹¹ **Since lower back pain is one of the most common physical maladies of law enforcement officers, paramedics, and firefighters, the fact that 1 in 4 persons prescribed opioids for lower back pain become addicted to the drugs is extremely troubling for the public safety profession.**¹²

Consequences of Substance Abuse

Substance abuse by public safety personnel poses many significant negative consequences. **While most public safety personnel who abuse alcohol or drugs do so as a stress management strategy, the use of alcohol and drugs actually exacerbates the symptoms of stress and posttraumatic disorder. It increases depression and risk of suicide or other violent behaviors. It contributes to divorce and other family strife, and could cost the individual his or her career due to work-related misconduct.**¹³

Beyond the effects substance abuse has on the individual, that individual's substance abuse has negative repercussions on the organization. **The addicted individual's poor job performance hurts the entire team's performance, and may put peers in danger. Having a team member who cannot concentrate, or displays volatile emotions, can cause someone to get hurt or at the very last create unnecessary conflict in the ranks.** Any accidents or acts of poor judgement by the addicted individual can impact negatively on the reputation of the entire organization, not to mention the public scandal if the media learns of the employee's addiction—especially through that individual's arrest.

The public is also at great risk if a law enforcement officer is patrolling the streets under the influence of drugs or alcohol. These substances will likely impact the officer's judgement in choice of words with a citizen or use of force. The public is at great risk when firefighters are responding to calls in a 20-ton fire apparatus while under the influence. Paramedics place the public at great risk when trying to render medical treatment while being cognitively impaired by drugs or alcohol. Therefore, it is crucial that public safety leaders and municipal human resources officials address this issue.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that substance abuse by public safety professionals is a serious issue that appears to involve a quarter to a third of law enforcement officers and firefighters. This substance abuse is damaging the lives of employees, their families, their peers, and the communities they are supposed to protect. Luckily, substance abuse treatment can be very effective in improving the lives of individuals who wish to change. Therefore, **if public safety and municipal leaders can identify their substance-abusing employees, help them get access to treatment, and hold them accountable, then they can improve the lives of the public safety officials, protect their agencies, and keep their communities safe.**

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