

Alcohol and Anger: A Recipe for Disaster

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the current alcohol and anger culture in law enforcement. Numerous published articles were reviewed and although the articles varied slightly in their statistics, they ultimately all pointed to an issue that must be addressed. In 2007, the Betty Ford Foundation conducted a study of 960 officers and found that 37.6% of the respondents had one or more problematic drinking behaviors. Other articles studied addressed the volatile issue of anger affecting the law enforcement officer. According to a 2016 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 50% of officers surveyed frequently feel angry and frustrated. Anger can bring some problems on its own, but it is a recipe for disaster when it is combined with alcohol. Many internal and external behaviors may contribute to this maladaptive behavior. This paper will provide a brief history of alcohol in law enforcement, examine current statistics and trends, discuss the underlying issues, and the fine line between irritability and anger. Suggestions for decreasing these statistics and assisting officers in obtaining long successful careers will be included.

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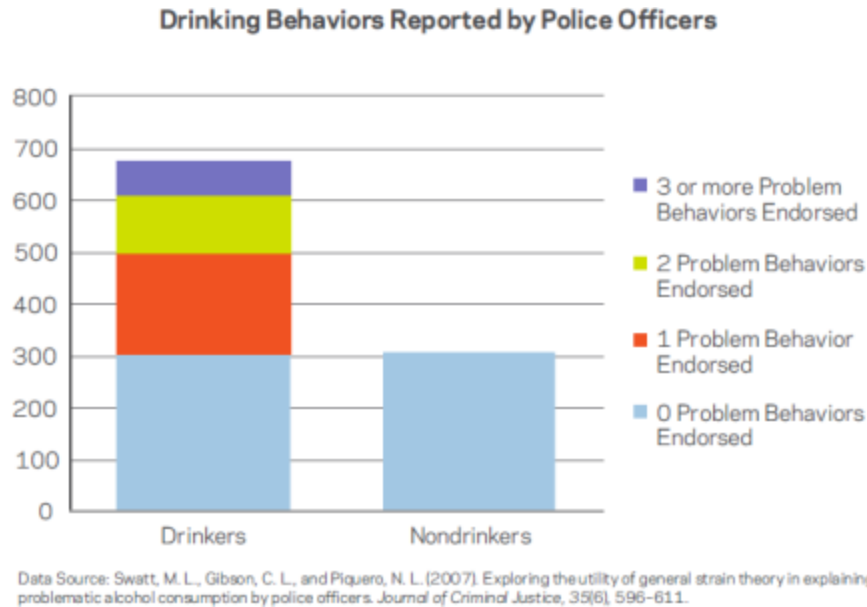
The law enforcement profession is unique because of the constant stress and demands placed on them by the public and police administrators. In our opinion, officers are expected to maintain impeccable personal and professional decorum in all circumstances, even when dodging bullets or thrown knives. Who can do that all the time? On a scale of one to ten, what level of superhuman strength and self-discipline is required of those who wear the badge? Probably about an eleven! So how does one survive the profession? The officer has two choices: develop healthy coping skills or resort to maladaptive behavior. Unfortunately, too many are falling towards maladaptive behavior with the use of alcohol. Unbridled or excessive anger may also be a result of a lack of healthy coping skills and brings with it many challenges and consequences. Law enforcement has many unique characteristics and without the knowledge

and proper training related to healthy coping strategies the officer may not survive the profession.

History of Alcohol Usage in Law Enforcement

The history of alcohol use by law enforcement has been well documented. During the potato blight of the 1850's droves of Irish-born immigrants came to the United States and began joining the metropolitan police departments of New York, Chicago and Boston bringing with them an alcohol cultural thrust. From the 1850s to the early 20th century a solitary beat was the norm and 12-hour shifts with a 12-hour holdover at the stationhouse was common. Many officers carried personal flasks during their shifts and alcohol in the stationhouse to consume during the holdover period or to celebrate a holiday was not uncommon.

From the Irish Americans giving alcohol a cultural thrust to young officers gathering together to celebrate a good arrest, the concern over alcohol use and abuse among law enforcement officers is of great relevance. In a 2010 study of police officers working in the urban areas within the United States, 11% of male officers and 16% of female officers reported levels of alcohol use deemed "at-risk" by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (Ballenger, Best, Metzler, Wasserman, Mohr, & Liberman.,2010). A 2007 survey of 980 American police officers found that 37.6% of the respondents endorsed one or more problem drinking behaviors (Swatt, Gibson, & Piquero, 2007).

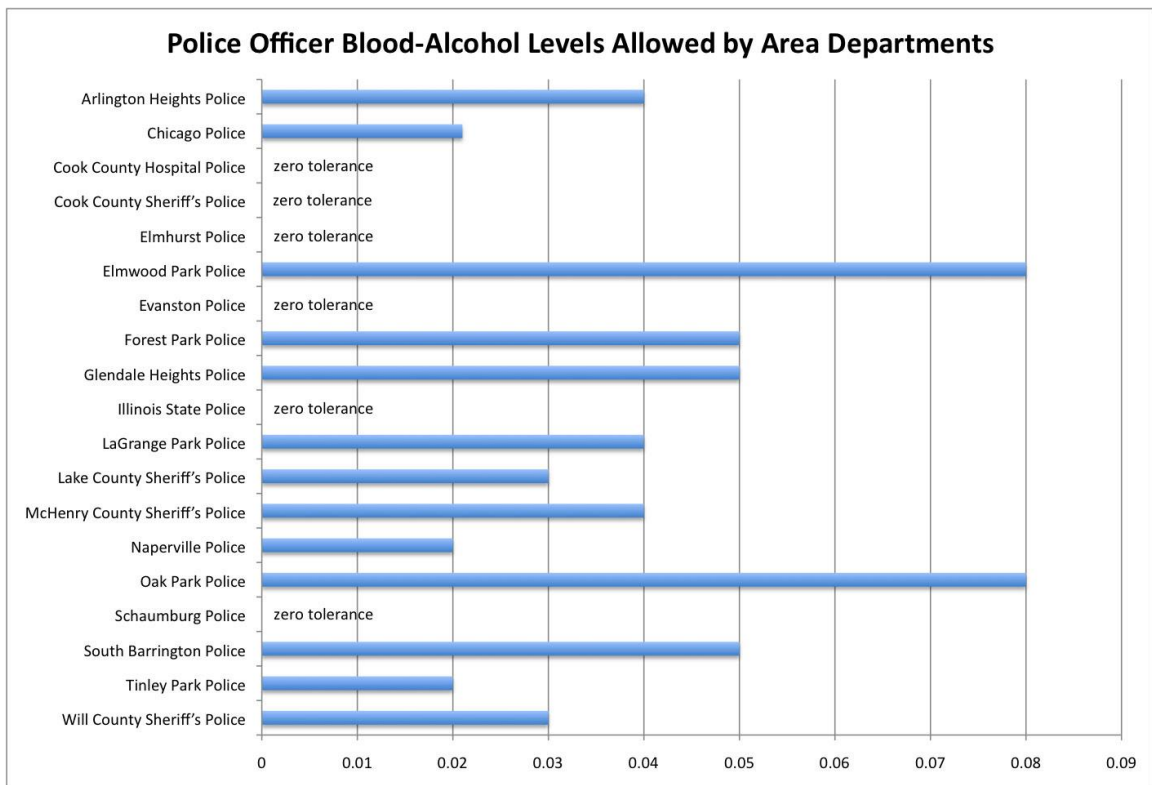


According to Facts about Alcohol (2015) article one in twelve Americans (17 million) abuses alcohol or is an alcoholic. Alcohol abuse among police officers is double this amount (“The facts about alcoholism”, 2017). The same article also states that a study of 2,200 officers in 29 departments indicated approximately 23% of the officers sampled had serious issues with alcohol use.

According to Walden (2018) “Police officers represent a professional band of brothers and sisters committed to upholding the law and providing safe havens for all people. This culture is rooted in good training, people skills, and a sincere desire to ensure the well-being of all people, but there is a social culture as well” (personal communication). A 2001 survey among police officers reported that 31% believed that non-drinkers were viewed as suspicious and unsociable by other officers (Davey & Sheehan, 2001). Davey & Sheehan (2001) also found that most police officers reported spending at least 25% of their social time (outside of work) with their co-workers, and 10% of officers reported that they spent 75% or more of their free time

with coworkers. Many experts feel that the combination of drinking to fit-in and spending large amounts of time with colleagues could lead to a culture of problematic drinking behaviors.

This disturbing information should raise some red flags throughout the law enforcement community even though drinking is still considered a tradition and is tolerated amongst many law enforcement agencies. According to a news story done by the Chicago 5 News, as recent as February 2013 many small municipal police departments in the greater Chicago area have made allowances for their officers to come to work with a blood-alcohol content level ranging from .02 to as high as a .08.



This practice is not just isolated to the Chicago area as many other states have similar policies and/or union concessions written into their contracts.

From observed experience we have found that in other agencies, the drinking culture is more unofficial. There are still hundreds of bars throughout our nation, that at regular intervals each day (shift change) a steady stream of police personnel wander in, some of them still wearing their uniform and weapons. Some bars even accommodate the officer by having hooks available to hang their belt and uniform shirt on and by offering drinks at a substantially reduced price. You may even find a bar where the District Commander has an open tab for all his officers to use when making a “good arrest.” Some agencies even have the unofficial “drunk” ride for officers who have consumed too much and are too impaired to drive.

External and Internal Stressors

While social factors are certainly a major concern, perhaps a more significant area of concern should be the relationship between the stress faced by officers and the increases in alcohol consumption. External and internal stress are the two types of stress that most often affect a law enforcement officer. External stress factors are related to the fear and danger associated with officers performing their daily duties (Genovese, 2012). This stress can come in forms such as fear of death or fear of great bodily harm. The emotional stress of handling crime scenes and dealing with victims can be difficult for some officers as well. The reluctance of an officer to share his/her feelings for fear of ridicule by co-workers and fear of scrutiny by the public or media can send them on an emotional roller coaster.

Internal stress factors are stressors that come from within the organization or agency they work for. These are factors such as the feeling of absence of upward mobility opportunities, limited extrinsic reward system, dysfunctional policies or guidelines, excessive paperwork, poor supervision, and overtime.

The constant pressure to “fit-in”, the continuous exposure to traumatic occurrences, social and stress-related issues, combined with inadequate coping skills can point anyone in the direction of the bottle. One study concluded that by the end of the first year, there was no increase in alcohol problems. There was a 27% jump in alcohol use by the end of the second year. That percentage increased to 36% by the end of the fourth year of the study (Genovese, 2012).

So why alcohol? It is legal, cheap, available, a chemical depressant and a great thinking/mood modifier. Dr. David Walden (2018) said it best, “Make no mistake, alcohol is a superb transporter of feeling and thoughts. It will move a person from where they are to a place they would prefer to be. However, the visit to that other place will eventually end and the return trip to reality is inevitable” (personal communication). Unfortunately, at times that return trip brings more with it than a bad tattoo.

Many of the mentioned stressors can also lead to anger issues with law enforcement officers if intervention does not take place. Dr. Charles Spielberger defined anger as “an emotional state that varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury and rage.” Anger is an emotion that every human being will experience and is a natural response to some threats. Anger is only a problem when it becomes excessive or unbridled. Excessive anger is anger that occurs when a person’s reaction to an event or action is disproportionate to the event or action that was done. For example, if you are stopped in heavy traffic and the car behind you accidentally bumps the bumper of your car and you get out and punch them in the face. That would be considered excessive or unbridled anger.

Forms of Anger

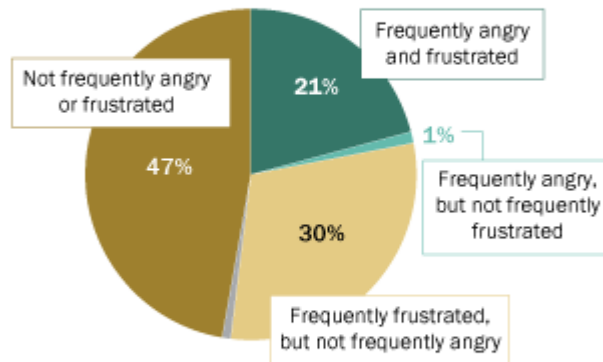
Anger comes in two forms; suppressed or expressed. Suppressed anger is anger that you hold in. Suppressed anger can be converted or redirected, but that takes intention and practice. Suppressed anger can create other problems if not coped with properly. The danger with suppressed anger is that if it isn't allowed outward expression your anger can turn in-ward and cause various problems. Anger turned inward can cause hypertension, high blood pressure, or depression. Unexpressed anger can also lead to pathological expressions of anger such as becoming passive-aggressive, cynical or hostile ("The nature of anger", 2006).

Expressed anger is just as it sounds, anger that is shown outward. This is often done in an uncontrolled, lashing out manner. Expressed anger is often powerful, aggressive feelings and behaviors ("The nature of anger", 2006).

In 2016 the Pew Research Center surveyed 7,917 sworn police officers and sheriff's deputies from 54 departments with at least 100 officers. In this survey 1 in 5 officers said their job frequently or always makes them feel angry and frustrated (Morin, 2017).

About one-in-five police officers say their job frequently makes them feel both angry and frustrated

% of police officers saying their work makes them feel ...



Note: No answer category shown but not labeled. The "frequently" categories include those who say they feel this way nearly always or often.

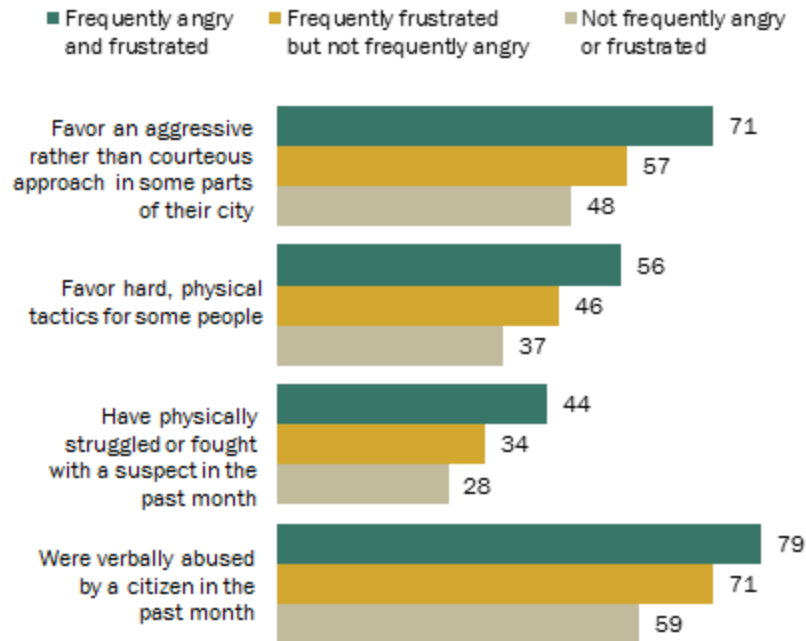
Source: Survey of law enforcement officers conducted May 19-Aug. 14, 2016.

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Morin (2017) also found that of these angry and frustrated officers 56% say they are distrustful of most citizens and 77% say they have become more callous towards people since becoming a police officer. According to this same study, officers who say their job frequently or always makes them feel angry or frustrated are significantly more likely to favor the use of aggressive tactics and are more likely to have been involved in a physical or verbal confrontation in the past month.

Angry and frustrated police officers more likely to favor aggressive tactics and to have been involved in physical or verbal confrontations

% of officers in each group who ...



Note: "Frequently angry and frustrated" category includes those who say they are "nearly always" or "often" angry and frustrated. "Frequently frustrated but not frequently angry" includes those who say they are nearly always or often frustrated but not nearly always or often angry.

Source: Survey of law enforcement officers conducted May 19-Aug. 14, 2016.

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Excessive anger without intervention can lead to many problems for both the individual officer and their organization. Alcohol can lead to problems for the individual officer and their organization as well. When officers combine excessive anger and alcohol this can establish issues such as divorce, domestic violence, career sabotage, and suicide. As leaders we must ensure that intervention strategies are in place to assist with these critical issues. As leaders we must stop trying to divide personal problems and job-related problems and must begin

addressing the issues regardless of the root cause. As leaders we cannot simply become stagnant and refuse to assist our employees based on personal problems (Constant, 1984).

Operationalizing Stress: Stress Reduction Strategies

Developing healthy coping skills is crucial to managing or mitigating these issues within law enforcement. Law enforcement stress factors have been mentioned numerous times, but stress has not been defined. Stress can be known as the physically detrimental and emotional bodily responses that happen when the demands of the job outweigh the capabilities, resources and needs of the employee. Medical experts cite stress effects as the body going into a defensive mode, to which the nervous system is aroused and releases hormones that elevate senses, elevate pulse rates and respiration, and causes tensing of the muscles. The choice of alcohol has become culturally known as the “go-to” for stress relief for many law enforcement officers. Many alternative stress reduction strategies can and need to be emphasized within the law enforcement community.

In stressful situations, or when stress is becoming obvious, the practice of diaphragmatic breathing is an exercise that brings the heart rate down, and in turn also releases endorphins, which studies have labeled as the body’s natural “pain killer” (Bahadorfar 2014). This can be done in the office, while driving home at home, or anywhere and everywhere.

When taking a shower after their shift, changing the water temperature from hot to cold every few minutes will cause stress to leave the body. This is called contrast shower hydrotherapy (Bahadorfar, 2014). The contrast shower hydrotherapy has the same effects of relaxation, and the body’s natural deep breathing while going from hot to cold water adds to the benefits.

A commonly known stress reductions strategy is to participate in physical activity (Mayo, 2017). By walking, jogging, swimming, or any other various exercises, an off duty officer could replace the daily drink with a daily release of endorphins. The long-term health benefits far outweigh the long-term health risks of using alcohol to deal with stress.

According to Dr. Deepak Bhatt (2014), developing daily rituals can assist in the short term for replacing alcohol in a stress relief routine and carry on into the long term. These rituals are:

- “1.) Stay Positive. Laughter has been found to lower levels of stress hormones, reduce inflammation in the arteries, and increase “good” HDL cholesterol.
- 2.) Meditate. This practice of inward focused thought and deep breathing has been shown to reduce heart disease risk factors such as high blood pressure. Meditation’s close relatives, yoga and prayer can also relax the mind and body.
- 3.) Exercise. Every time you are physically active, whether you take a walk or play tennis, your body releases mood boosting chemicals called endorphins. Exercising not only melts away stress, it also protects against heart disease by lowering your blood pressure, strengthens your heart muscle, and helping you maintain a healthy weight.
- 4.) Unplug. It’s impossible to escape stress when it follows you everywhere.
- 5.) Cut the cord. Avoid emails and TV News. Take time each day, even if it’s for just 10 or 15 minutes, to escape the world. Find ways to take the edge off your stress. Simple things, like a warm bath, listening to music, or spending time on a favorite hobby, can give you a much needed break from the stressors in your life”.

The Nature of Anger (2006) article suggests a few techniques for specifically handling anger are cognitive restructuring, problem solving, better communication, using humor and changing your environment.

- Cognitive restructuring means changing the way you think. Constantly remind yourself that getting angry will not make you feel better and it might actually make you feel worse. Quit believing that the world is out to get you and that whatever the issue, it is not the end of the world.
- Problem solving makes things easier to handle. Sometimes, our anger and frustration are caused by very real and inescapable problems in our lives. Not all anger is misplaced, and often it's a healthy, natural response to these difficulties. There is also a cultural belief that every problem has a solution, and it adds to our frustration to find out that this isn't always the case. The best attitude to bring to such a situation, then, is not to focus on finding the solution, but rather how you handle and face the problem.
- Better communication can help erase assumptions and inaccurate conclusions. Angry people tend to jump to-and act on-conclusions, and some of those conclusions can be very inaccurate. Be slow to speak, quick to listen, and do not get defensive.
- Humor can help defuse anger. It allows an individual to maintain a balanced perspective. It is the refusal to take oneself too seriously.
- Changing your environment is sometimes necessary. You may have heard the term you must change your playmates and change your playgrounds. This phrase applies very much to someone struggling with anger issues. If other techniques

have not been successful in helping to control anger than it is time for a change. Get away from that which makes you angry. Do not keep doing the same thing and expecting different results, change something.

As an organization, investing in an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and encouraging yearly visits will provide great benefit to the officer and the organization as a whole. “Dr. John Violanti of the University of Buffalo estimates that 15% to 18% of police officers suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This equates to thousands of law enforcement personnel at all ranks” (O’Hara, 2017). Some of those suffering are excessively angry, alcoholics, or suicide victims waiting to happen. Having an EAP in place can allow organizational leader to encourage officers to seek help before they need it as opposed to waiting until they really need it.

These alternatives to alcohol and anger are all teachable to officers, do not cost money, and can be incorporated into health/ wellness programs that many departments already have in place.

Conclusion

As law enforcement leaders, we spend so much time worrying about external environmental pressures that we often neglect our greatest resource, our employees. In training we spend large amounts of time teaching the laws, defensive tactics, and fire arms and driving skills, and very little time raising awareness of the mental and emotional toll this career can take on an individual. Not preparing young officers is setting them up for failure. Research shows that alcohol abuse problems within law enforcement tend to increase over their career. Officers surveyed in their first year showed no alcohol problems, but by the second year the problems

went up to 27% and increased to 36% by their fourth year (“The facts about alcoholism”, 2017).

Taking the steps necessary to correct the critical alcohol and anger problems is going to take courage, candor, competence, commitment and many other magnanimous leadership traits.

Raising awareness and accountability is key to making this change within each organization.

Long gone are the days of hiding our head in the sand. It is time for law enforcement leaders to address the issue head on with passion. Deep change, which is what this may be in some organizations, takes a lot of work and comes with a few obstacles. It is not going to be easy and it probably will not always be fun, but will be worth it in the long run. There is no reason for an officer not to enjoy a long and satisfying career as long as we, as leaders, provide them the tools necessary to do just that.

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