

# Media Portrayal of Police Suicides

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**Abstract:** Suicide is a leading cause of death worldwide but accurate statistics on police suicides in Canada are limited [1], [2]. Statistics from the Ontario Provincial Police show that police suicides may be on the rise with an increase from 1 per year between 1989 to 2012 to 1.7 per year between 2013 to 2019 [3], [4]. How the media portrays police suicide can affect public opinion surrounding the officer and their service and can even affect the suicide rates, known as the Werther effect [5], [6]. This study seeks to examine how police services and specific officers are portrayed in articles concerning police suicides in news media during 2019 in Canada.

Data was collected from news media outlets in Canada including The Globe and Mail, CBC News and The Toronto Star among others. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted on 43 news articles regarding police suicide. Each article was looked at using a three-point system to determine whether the tone was positive, neutral or negative towards the police officer and their service. It is hypothesized that media articles will portray the officers who died in a positive tone but their police service in a negative tone. The findings can be useful as a foundation for future research with the ultimate goal of helping to reduce and prevent police suicides. Implications and direction for future research are also discussed.

**Keywords:** Media, Police, Police Officer, Police Service, Suicide.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Suicide is a leading cause of death worldwide and a public health issue [1], [2]. In Canada the rates of suicide range between 15 and 75 in 100,000 depending on which demographic you look at, accounting for 16% of adult deaths [7]. Accurate statistics regarding the number of police suicides in Canada is limited but statistics from the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) show that it has been increasing [3], [4]. Between 1989 and 2012 the OPP experienced one police suicide per year [3], [4]. This increased from 2013 to 2019 where there were 1.7 police suicides per year, showing that the rate has nearly doubled [3], [4]. While suicide rates appear to be increasing among police officers, research into the media's portrayal of police suicide has been lacking. This is troubling since not only can media portrayals affect public opinion of the police it can also affect suicide rates, known as the Werther Effect [5], [6]. This led to the focus of this paper, how are police services and specific officers portrayed in articles concerning police suicides in news media during 2019 in Canada? Does the media portray police services and specific officers in a positive, negative or neutral tone in articles regarding police suicide?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The public gains most of the information about mental illness and suicide from television, news articles and books, especially when the person lacks first-hand experience [8], [9], [10]. In this regard the media tend to portray the mentally ill in a negative light [11], [12], [13], [14], [15]. This is a great concern as media portrayals can affect and create stigma around the topic and may facilitate toxic social environments that can lead to discrimination and marginalization [16], [17], [18]. Positive portrayals and hopeful stories are hard to come by [19]. However, research has shown that the media has improved in this regard with positive portrayals becoming more common in recent years [18], [20]. These positive

portrayals have the opposite effect of negative ones, reducing stigma and discrimination [18]. Suicide which is a leading cause of death in the developed world has also received significant attention [21], [22].

The majority of research surrounding the media and suicide has been around the topic of suicide contagion which are groups of linked imitative suicidal behavior [23]. Learning of the suicidal behaviour of others can increase people's risks of imitating that behaviour especially when they are already vulnerable to such thoughts [24], [25]. Research into this goes back over 200 years to a book where the protagonist Werther committed suicide which caused an increase in suicides, dubbed the Werther effect [5]. The effects of suicide contagion are increased proportionally to the amount of coverage a suicide receives which, with the advent of the internet, has increased substantially [5]. Studies have also shown that coverage of real suicides has a higher rate of being imitated than fictional ones [26], [27], [28]. The imitative effect is also increased by media sensationalism, glorifying the deceased, and rationalizing the suicide all of which may cause the suicide to seem appealing to those considering it already [29]. It may lead to others thinking that the action is acceptable as a solution to their problems [30]. Finally, differential association theory adds that the more similar the person who committed suicide is to the reader the higher the chances of imitative behaviour [31], [32].

Given the above information, suicide contagion may account for the increase in police suicides in recent years. Therefore, knowing how the media portrays police officers in articles regarding police suicide may be the first step in helping to reduce such events. As much as the media can have a negative effect, they can also promote a positive one. The media can raise awareness, promote help seeking and increase the visibility of support services [33]. Indeed, when such solutions are presented in an article and the suicide is not glorified the rates of imitation decrease by 99% [29]. Looking at how the media portrays the police provides insight into how they are likely to portray the police in articles regarding police suicide.

The news media values law and order stories, especially police stories [34]. When analyzing newspaper articles about the police, Porter (1995), found that positive, negative and neutral tones were used in almost equal amounts [34]. Though negatively toned articles were more likely to be found on the earlier pages, in particular the front page [34]. Even in more recent years the media has provided both favourable and unfavourable portrayals of the police [35]. On the one hand the media can be overly critical of the police emphasizing their failures, which can place them under considerable scrutiny [36], [37], [38]. On the other hand, the police can be portrayed as heroes who can do no wrong which can cause unrealistic expectations on the part of the public who may come to hold them to an impossibly high standard [38], [39].

These two opposite views show a conflicting image of policing with them being portrayed simultaneously as heroes and professionals, as well as being incompetent and ineffective [40], [41]. This effectively means that a more neutral fact-based tone, which is not overly critical and does not hand out undue praise, may be the most beneficial to police services. The police themselves have a limited amount of control over what is reported, simply by virtue of deciding what to tell the media and when [34]. This is demonstrated by Porter (1995) who in analyzing newspaper articles found that if the police were a source of the information the tone was significantly less likely to be negative [34]. This means that police and media relations are important.

Police media relations can be best characterized by mutual interdependence [42]. The media need the police for a steady source of new and accurate information and the police need the media to help control their public image [42]. However, the media need to be careful in how they portray the police since they can not risk alienating their primary source of reliable information [43]. The media tend to walk a fine line as negative news is more popular, getting more attention and being more likely to be retained by the public [44]). Despite the negative press the police will however continue to maintain relations with the media as the media can have a substantial impact on the public [45]. Among services with a wide area of jurisdiction the media may also act as their primary means of communication with the public [43]. In fact, while the police are generally accessible, many prefer to maintain a distance from them by using mass media for their information [43].

The popular media's portrayal of topics and how they frame an issue is a significant factor in how people come to understand the world [46]. The media can influence, support or subvert group beliefs [10], [14], [15], [47]. This effect is even more prominent today than it was in the past as the influence of mass media has increased [45]. This influence is explained by both cultivation theory and social learning theory [45]. Cultivation theory states that the more time people spend in the virtual world, television and the internet, the more they are likely to believe the portrayals depicted therein such as those of media outlets [48]. Social learning theory states that people learn from both direct experience and through observation which includes what is stated in mass media [49].

This learning through observation is even more prominent when a person lacks first-hand experience and can colour the view of future experience with the police [45]. Due to the increasing pervasiveness of mass media it has the ability to alter perceptions and sway public opinion by shaping ideas and understanding of various topics [45], [50], [51]. In response to these opinions police services may alter their existing policies and practices creating a feedback loop [35], [52]. Mass media makes information more salient and as salience increases so too does the impact of public opinion on issues of policy and the responsiveness of policy makers [53], [54]. Through the influence of mass media policies regarding police suicide intervention and support can be either hindered or aided. In turn, this could mean that more lives could be saved.

As evidenced the media can have quite the impact on the public. The way the media portray mental illness, suicide and the police all affect if the impact is positive or negative. This can have a very real impact on whether officers in crisis that may be contemplating suicide get the support they need or fall through the cracks. There is also the possibility that media reports of officer suicide could lead to a suicide contagion effect that may increase the risk of further officer suicides. All of this warrants further research into how the media portray police suicides to decrease the negative effects and increase the positive benefits around these articles. The hypothesis is in articles regarding police suicide the media will portray police services in a negative tone but will portray the officers who committed suicide in a positive tone. With regard to the previous research this result may cause a twofold negative effect. It would hurt the public opinion of the police service and may cause others contemplating suicide to think of it as acceptable.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This research paper is an exploratory study to develop a preliminary understanding of how the media portrays both the specific officer and police services in general in articles concerning police suicide. For this research news media articles from January 1 2019 to December 31 2019 were analyzed. To be included an article must have had the following keywords in its title; police, officer, cop or the name of a specific police service and suicide or took his or her own life. The article must also have been from one of the following news media outlets; The Globe and Mail, Global News, CBC News, CTV News, City News, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Sun, The Toronto Sun, The Toronto Star, The Sudbury Star or The National Post. This resulted in forty three (43) articles being selected after duplicate articles from different media outlets were removed. Each news media article will be analyzed to determine if it has a positive, negative or neutral tone towards both the specific officer who committed suicide, if the article talks about one, and police services in general.

The definition of a positive tone is any unit of information that demonstrates support for either the police service or a specific officer or that covers a police service or specific officer favourably fulfilling or surpassing their duties. The definition of a negative tone is any unit of information that makes explicit the existence of a problem with either the police service or a specific officer. The definition of a neutral tone is any unit of information that imparts non-judgmental details.

In determining the tone of the articles, the authors will act as raters. The tone of the articles will be broken down into two components. The first component will be the tone of the article regarding the specific officer that committed suicide, if any, and the second component will be the tone of the article regarding the police service the officer belonged too or the police in general. If the units of information covering each component express multiple tones, the component will be placed into only one category based on which tone is more prevalent. Each rater will rate all forty three (43) articles of the sample independently and the sum of the results will be averaged to establish inter-rater reliability. The inter rater reliability for component one was 88.40% while the inter rater reliability for component two was much lower, being only 62.79%.

### **IV. RESULTS**

Of the articles analyzed approximately one fifth (20.90%) of them were considered long articles, that is they had one thousand or more words in them. A further one third (30.20%) of them were considered short articles, containing five hundred or less words. The remaining articles fell somewhere in between these extremes containing five hundred one to nine hundred ninety nine words and were considered medium length articles. These articles constituted approximately one half of the articles analyzed (48.80%).

Out of all of the articles examined, over half of them (67.44%) did not talk about a specific officer that took their own life. Of those articles that did focus on a specific officer that took their own life the tone was mainly positive (71.42%), accounting for ten of the fourteen articles discussing a specific officer or 23.3% of all articles. A neutral tone was used approximately one quarter (28.57%) of the time, accounting for four of the fourteen articles or 9.3% of all articles.

Finally, no negative tone (0%) was used in any article examined when talking about a specific officer that took their own life. When the article was regarding police services when discussing police suicide a negative tone was used the majority of the time (55.81%) while a positive tone was used the least (17.44%). A neutral tone was once more used only approximately one quarter of the time (26.74%). Refer to figure 1 for a breakdown of the tone for component 1 and component 2.

While the use of a neutral tone remains roughly equal when speaking of a specific officer or a police service in general, the use of both a positive and negative tone is inverted between the two. Therefore, when discussing police suicide news media appears to be more likely to point out the problems and issues with police services than it is to just state facts or show support to them by talking about how well they are doing. This may be indicative of underlying feelings that enough is not being done to help prevent police suicides.

While looking at a specific police officer along with their service, the articles had a positive tone towards both in only 6.00% of the sample. Whereas 11.60% of the sample had a positive tone towards the officer and a negative tone towards the service. This supports the hypothesis that in articles regarding police suicide the media will portray police services in a negative tone but will portray the officers who committed suicide in a positive tone. This is likely due to the fact that when an article discusses a specific officer it also discusses how the police service did not do enough to help said officer, thus pointing out an issue with the service. When no officer was spoken about and the article only referred to a police service only 11.60% of the sample used a positive tone while 37.20% used a negative tone. The remaining articles representing 18.60% of the sample used a neutral tone. This supports the hypothesis that in articles regarding police suicide the media will portray police services in a negative tone but will portray the officers who committed suicide in a positive tone.

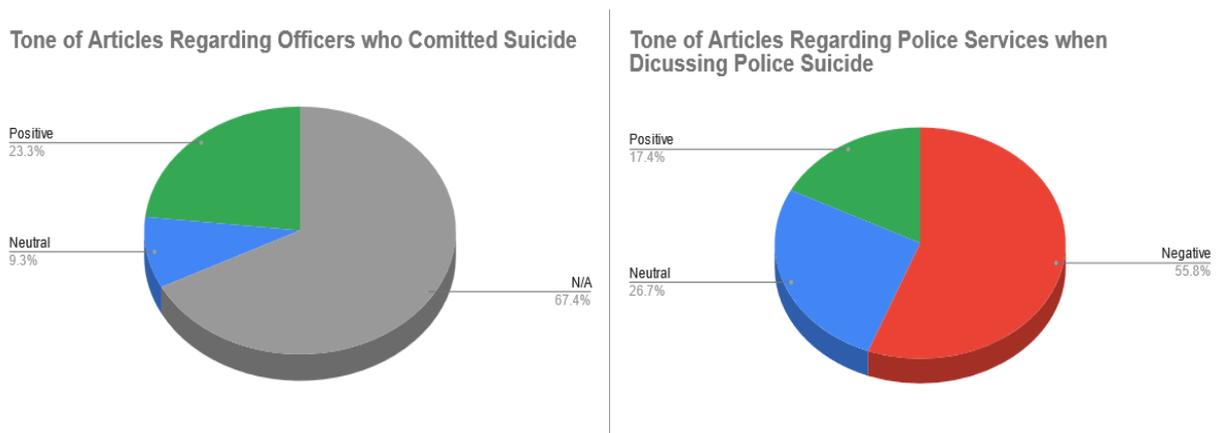


Figure 1: Article Tone Regarding Both Specific Officers and Police Services

## V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine how the police, and officers who committed suicide, were portrayed in articles concerning police suicides in news media during 2019 in Canada? Were the police and the specific officers portrayed in a positive, negative or neutral tone in said articles? It was hypothesized that in such articles the media would portray police services in a negative tone but would portray the officers who committed suicide in a positive tone. The results supported the hypothesis, though for reasons that will be explained that may not be a good thing.

The results of the study showed that in articles regarding police suicide that talked about a specific officer who took his or her own life, the dominant tone used is positive. Not a single article used a negative tone when speaking of an officer that took their own life. A positive tone was more than twice as likely to be used as a neutral tone. The dominant use of a positive tone is hardly surprising though. If the media were to print an article about an officer that took their own life and portray that officer in a negative tone, they would likely receive a wave of backlash from the public. Speaking ill of the dead after all is a common taboo, and one still very much alive today, as evidenced by the death of fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld in 2019. People that spoke of him being a misogynist and as someone who loved fur and was thus for animal cruelty were condemned for speaking ill of him after his death [55]. The only exceptions to this rule would appear to be towards those people who were believed by the public to not have redeeming qualities such as serial killers. It makes

sense in light of this that the media would not talk about a deceased police officer in a negative light. When the articles talked about an officer who took their own life some commonalities appeared among them.

The articles spoke of how great the officers were. They talked about how they had great personalities and how they were great at their job. The articles also mentioned how the officers were heroes and talked about the times they went above and beyond the call of duty. Such as how Detective Thomas Roberts, an Ottawa Police Officer who took his own life, rushed into a burning building and saved a person's life [56], [57], [58], [59], [60]. All the articles that did not talk about this fact all shared a common trait, the name of the officer had not been released yet. Given the prevalence rate of the information, 100%, among articles that knew his identity, it can be reasonably assumed that the others would have contained this information as well, had they known. This positive portrayal of the officers though could potentially have some negative repercussions. That is not to say that the officers should be portrayed in a negative light, but a more neutral tone may be beneficial. This is because of an effect known as suicide contagion or The Werther effect [5], [6], [23].

Suicide contagion boils down to people who observe suicidal behaviour, directly or indirectly, are more likely to imitate it especially when they are already contemplating it [24], [25]. These risks increase further if the person observing it can relate to the one who committed suicide and when the media glorifies the deceased [29], [31], [32]. Now herein lies the problem. If the media is only listing the positive traits of an officer who took their own life then they are in a sense glorifying them. Merriam-Webster (2020) defines the term glorify as bestowing praise and admiration which is exactly what the articles are doing [61]. So take as an example another police officer who is contemplating suicide. The officer can surely relate to the officer who took their own life and the officer sees that when the other officer took their life they were praised and admired. Now this officer has observed suicidal behaviour in a relatable person that was glorified, all of which according to research means that the chances of the officer also committing suicide have increased. Here you can see how a vicious cycle could be created. When an officer takes their life, the media then reports on it glorifying the deceased which in turn makes other officers more likely to commit suicide. Steps need to be taken to reduce the possible effects of suicide contagion among officers.

Studies have found that the best way to do this is to promote help seeking and to increase the awareness of support services [33]. Doing so can reduce the risk of suicide contagion by 99% [29]. If every article that talked about an officer who took their own life also included information about support services and encouraged their use the risk of imitation would be almost nullified. Encouraging media outlets to do this or possibly even mandating it by law could very well save lives. As it stands now only thirteen (13) of the forty-three (43) articles that this study looked at, a mere 30%, provided such information. The best possible solution may be for the media to not cover incidents of police suicide and indeed suicide in general. Having a dedicated reporting service for such incidents would allow the information to be made public in the safest manner. Though such an endeavor would likely face opposition as it may be viewed as a limitation on free press, by preventing them from reporting on the subject. The limitation though may very well be reasonable and justifiable in a free society since its main goal would be to save lives. For such a reporting service to succeed though it is likely that it would have to be a non-profit business so that media outlets did not see it as competition, thus reducing resistance. In contrast to the predominantly positive portrayal of officers who took their own lives, the tone regarding the police in general was more neutral or negative.

The use of a positive tone when discussing a police service or the police in general was in the minority. Many of the articles instead either just listed the facts regarding the suicide and the police service the officer worked for, or they talked about how the police had failed the officer in some way. An article by CBC News (2019b) sums up the main points brought up in articles with a negative tone [62]. The articles talked about the need to improve mental health supports, that the police needed clearer mental health and suicide prevention resources, and that barriers to accessing already available resources were an issue [62]. Articles also talked about how police culture can stigmatize officers with mental health issues which causes them to hide their issues rather than seek help [62]. When articles discussed the police in a positive tone they talked about how the police had done all they could to help the officer, how the police service was striving to improve after the suicide or about the mental health supports it currently had available to officers [60], [63], [64]. The fact that a neutral or negative tone is used more than a positive one though is once again not surprising.

In a study done by Marc Trussler and Stuart Soroka it was found that people respond to negative words faster than positive ones [65]. This finding is corroborated by Crandon (1990) who found that negative news is more popular than positive news [44]. A study by Porter (1995) further demonstrated this when she looked at newspaper articles [34]. So, it once again makes sense that the police would be portrayed in a negative tone, after all as discussed above an officer that took their own life certainly could not be. The media after all is a business that sells you non-fiction stories and every good story has a 'bad guy' so to speak. This is shown in the results as articles where an officer was talked about in a

positive tone were nearly twice as likely to speak of the police in a negative tone rather than in a positive tone. Even when no specific officer was mentioned in an article, it was still three times more likely to use a negative tone than a positive one, and twice as likely to do so instead of a neutral tone. A negative tone though may not be needed in articles regarding police suicide as the very topic itself may be enough to attract readers regardless of the tone. This tendency towards a negative tone though could have some repercussions.

The media may act as the primary means of communication between the public and the police in many cases [43]. Even if the police are accessible, people are still more likely to maintain their distance and use mass media for information [43]. Mass media in turn has the ability to alter perceptions and public opinion depending on how they report on a subject [45], [50], [51]. In light of this, context in an article means quite a lot. By bringing to light the existence of problems and issues in police services the media can place the police under considerable scrutiny. This could affect the public's confidence and trust in the police and ultimately the relationship between the public and the police. However, the use of a negative tone could also have some benefits in the long run.

Negative news is more likely to be remembered by those who read it according to Crandon (1990) [44]. So members of the public who learn that the police in general need to do more to help officers with mental health issues will retain such information longer if the context it is given in is negative, rather than positive. This in turn means that the public is more likely to exert influence on the police in an effort to bring about a positive change. As a result of public opinions police services may, in turn, alter their existing policies and practices [35], [52]. Such change is more likely if the public opinion on the matter is long lasting which in turn is more likely if the tone used to convey it is negative. After all, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) did not come about because everyone thought animal rights were completely respected. It came about because people perceived a social injustice and felt like they should take steps to address it. Meaningful change with regards to police policies pertaining to police suicide intervention and support also likely will not come about unless the public perceives there to be a problem. Though it should be acknowledged that no matter how good your policies are or how well set up your support programs are, you can not help everyone. So, the police should not be criticized regarding every incident of police suicide, in some cases they will truly have done all they could after all. It may be best for the media to take a more tempered approach when speaking of the police then to achieve the best possible outcome.

If the media were to take a more neutral tone when speaking about the police it could be more beneficial to everyone involved. The media could bring to light the problems they find while also stating the positives about the police. An example of which would be talking about how the mental health support program in place is inadequate while also mentioning that the police still did all they could to help the officer. This would help promote a more positive image of the police, and in turn possibly improve public relations. It would also still bring to light the problems that need to be addressed. Though according to Crandon (1990) the time such information would be retained is lessened since the article would not have a negative tone [44]. As such an independent body or organization may be the best way to address the issue of maintaining public interest and attention. Such an organization could spread public awareness campaigns to stimulate public interest in such a way that does not undermine the image of the police. This organization and the dedicated reporting service for suicides could be one and the same. A non-profit that focuses on helping to improve support for those with mental health issues and that focuses on the police in general would certainly go a long way towards addressing the issues mentioned above.

## **VI. LIMITATIONS**

The study's sample size was narrow with only articles from one year being examined. The limited size of the study means that the results may not be widely applicable. A larger sample size would allow for results that would be more broadly applicable. Lastly, no previous research could be found on the subject of media portrayals of police suicides. As such this study did not have prior research on the subject to look into and work from. Variables, sampling criteria and all other parameters of the study had to be devised from scratch and so their effectiveness has yet to be determined.

## **VII. FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research in this area of study should seek to expand the amount of available data on the subject of media portrayals of police suicide. They should increase the sample size from what was used here to improve the generalizability of their results. Future studies should also use software meant to determine the tone of an article to improve generalizability. They could look at different media outlets from different parts of the world to compare their results and to discover any best practices that may be in place elsewhere. Future research could also look into the effects of the media's portrayal of the police on the public and on the police themselves, which was beyond the scope of this study. Determining the correlation,

if any, between how the tone the media uses, and both public opinion and changes in police policies is also an area which requires further research. They could also look into how prevalent suicide contagion is among police officers, and if there is a correlation between police suicide and how the media portrays specific officers in articles about police suicide. Finally, studies could look at how effective any changes to police mental health support programs actually are and if there is any correlation between effectiveness and public opinion.

### **VIII. CONCLUSION**

This study set out to determine how the media portrays the police and officers who committed suicide in news media articles regarding police suicide in Canada during the year of 2019. Do they portray them in a positive tone, neutral tone or negative tone? It was hypothesized that officers who committed suicide would be portrayed in a positive tone while the police in general, and the officers service, would be portrayed in a negative tone. The results of the study support this hypothesis. Though as discussed that may not be a good thing. Suicide contagion means that portraying officers in a positive tone may put other officers contemplating suicide at a greater risk. Likewise portraying the police, in general, in a negative tone can damage public opinion and trust, though it may also increase the odds of positive change among police policies regarding mental health. The best solution to both problems would possibly be to implement a non-profit organization that specifically covers stories of police suicides and works to raise awareness within the public of positive change that needs to happen. Future studies should expand upon this study by increasing the sample size, collecting data from differing geographic locations and determining if any correlations exist between the media portrayal of the police and actual police suicide.

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