



Police officer suicides in Australia

January 2023

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Advisory

This research paper examines the issue of police officer suicide.

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Beyond Blue: 1800 512 348

Executive Summary

The WA Police Union has managed to document 484 suicides of serving and former police officers across Australia. It is among the largest collection of statistics about Australian police officer suicides ever collated. However, the data does not include victim names, regimental numbers, or station / unit.

Police officer suicides have been occurring in Australia for at least 200 years. Some 246 serving officer suicides have been documented for the period 1831 to 1999. Around **82.9 per cent** of these victims were killed with a firearm.

Serving police officers

It is estimated that 103 serving police officers fell victim to suicide throughout 2000 to 2020.

Rates of suicide more than doubled from 5.9 suicides per 100,000 serving officers in 2000 to 12.5 suicides by 2020.

83.3 per cent of serving officer victims were male with an average age of 44 years old. **63.8 per cent** of victims were ranked Sergeant or Senior Constable. Victims had been serving as police officers for an average of 21 years.

77.4 per cent of on-duty victims were killed with a firearm. By contrast, hanging was the most common method for off-duty victims.

NSW Police Force had the highest number of victims over the period. Tasmania and South Australia recorded the highest rates.

Australia's rate of police officer suicides from 2015 to 2020 was lower compared to Great Britain (England and Wales), Italy, France, and the United States. However, Australia's rate has increased significantly more than the others.

Suicide rates for serving police officers in Australia are much lower than 100 years ago. But rates from 100 years ago also demonstrate just how prevalent police suicides can become without appropriate levels of help and support for serving officers.

Former police officers

Far less information is available for suicides among former police officers. It is nonetheless estimated that 38 former police officers were suicide victims over 2000 to 2020. **39.4 per cent** of deaths occurred over the last six years of the period.

The average age of victims was 51 years old. **74 per cent** of victims left the police force with the rank of Sergeant or Senior Constable. The average length of service was 18 years. Hanging was the most common method of suicide followed by firearms.

Nineteen of the 38 victims served in the NSW Police Force. The remaining victims were split between Victoria (6), WA (5), Queensland (4), AFP (2), and SA (1) with one unknown.

Introduction

This research paper has been produced by the WA Police Union (WAPU). Founded in 1912, WAPU has been at the forefront of representing the rights, interests, and welfare of police officers throughout the State. WAPU currently has more than 7,000 Members – **98 per cent** of all police officers and police auxiliary officers in the WA Police Force.

Police officer suicide is of utmost concern to both WAPU and all Police Federation of Australia (PFA) affiliates. Every incident of police officer suicide is both a personal and institutional tragedy. However, reliable statistics on the phenomenon are vital if further suicides are to be prevented.

WAPU has attempted to address this issue by creating a database of police officer suicides from across Australia. The database has been constructed from external research reports as well as news items and historical records.

Methodology

This paper uses the World Health Organisation definition of suicide being the act of deliberately killing oneself¹. WAPU's database does not include acts of attempted suicide.

WAPU has been able to document 479 suicides of serving and former police officers across Australia since 1820. The major focus of this paper is on suicides that occurred during the 2000 to 2020 period.

WAPU created its database using online academic and media reports as well as the following sources:

- National Coronial Information System (NCIS) data report DR17-21, *Intentional Self-Harm Fatalities Involving Persons in Specified Occupations in Australia 2004 – 2014*, produced for the PFA. NCIS data is used to calculate the total number of serving officer suicides from 2004 to 2014 (see page 7).
- Australia & New Zealand Newsstream – <https://proquest.libguides.com/anznewsstream>
- Trove website – <https://trove.nla.gov.au/>
- Australian Police website – <https://www.australianpolice.com.au/>
- Newspapers website – <https://www.newspapers.com/>

“Police suicide rate” refers to the number of suicides per 100,000 serving police officers. Rates were calculated using officer numbers (sworn and auxiliary) from the following publications:

¹ <http://www.emro.who.int/health-topics/suicide/feed/atom.html>

- **Pre-1980:** Australian Institute of Criminology. (1981). *Source book of Australian criminal and social statistics 1900 to 1980*.
- **1990 onward:** State and territory police force Annual Reports.

Except where stated, this paper uses a three-year weighted moving average (WMA) to smooth any short-term data fluctuations within suicide rates.

Out of respect to victims and their families, the database does not include names, regimental numbers, or stations / units. WAPU's database is restricted to the following characteristics:

- Year of death;
- Age of victim;
- Gender;
- Rank;
- Police force membership;
- Officer status – Serving or former;
- Years of service;
- Suicide method; and
- If the death occurred on-duty or off-duty.

This paper analyses suicides among serving and former officers separately given the different dynamics of both groups. However, this paper does not identify the cause(s) of police officer suicides. It only attempts to discern trends and potential contributing factors.

Significant gaps exist in WAPU's database. For example, not all reports indicate if a suicide took place on-duty or elsewhere. Nor does WAPU claim to have documented every serving or former officer who has fallen victim to suicide. But the database still represents one of the most comprehensive collection of statistics about police officer suicide in Australia to date.

Further information

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Serving police officers

There is a greater abundance of information about suicides by serving police officers than former. PFA affiliates are particularly alert to incidents of serving officer suicide. Unfortunately, such incidents are hardly a modern phenomenon.

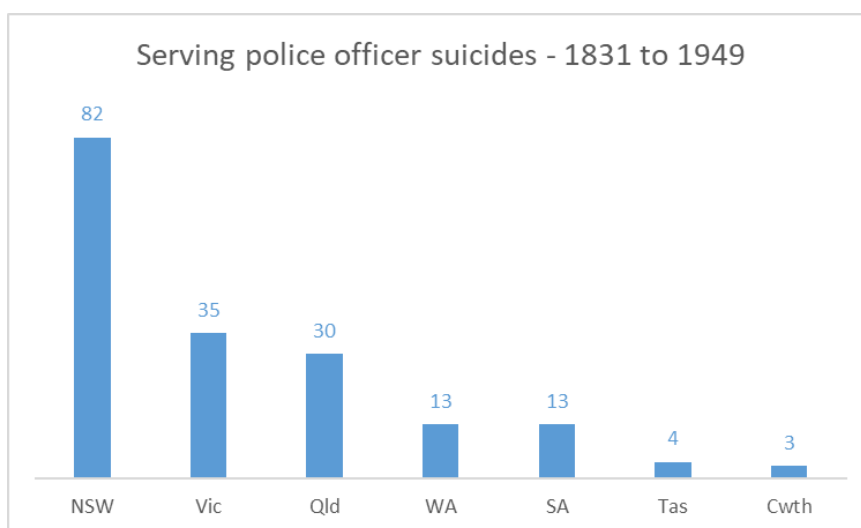
Newspapers reported on suicide far less sensitively in previous decades compared to today. Many articles prior to 1950 give detailed reports about the victim's name, health problems, and method of suicide. Newspapers could claim it was a matter of public interest given suicide was long treated as a criminal offence under Australian law².

This paper examines historical incidents of serving officer suicide to some extent. However, the paper's analysis is centred on the 2000 to 2020 period given the available data is more reliable compared to 100 years ago.

Historical incidents

1831 to 1949

WAPU has been able to document 180 victims for the period 1831 to 1949. Just under half of victims were NSW Police Force officers.



Women were first allowed to serve as police officers in Australia in 1915³. Somewhat reflecting this, all 180 victims were male. Although at least eight victims murdered their intimate partner and / or children immediately prior to their own death.

About **82.2 per cent** of victims used a firearm. Contemporary records indicate at least 114 victims used their service firearm.

Reports prior to 1950 indicate the impact of mental illness with victims described as suffering from "melancholia", "low spirited", "temporary insanity" or "depression". Hints about the

² <https://www.unswlawjournal.unsw.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Jowett-Carpenter-and-Tait.pdf>

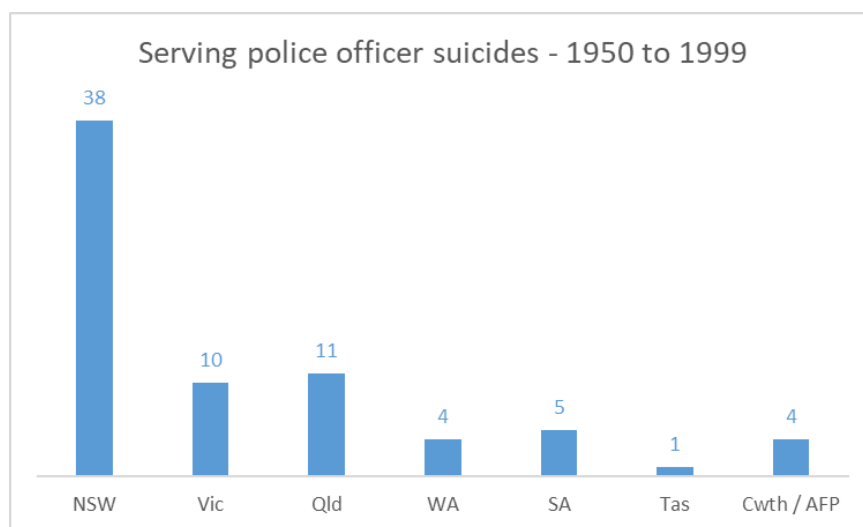
³ <http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0380b.htm>

stigma of seeking professional help can also be found. One officer who died in 1897 in his suicide note wrote about how his mind was becoming “unhinged” and preferred death to living out the rest of his life in an asylum.

1950 to 1999

There were significantly fewer news reports about police officer suicides throughout the 1950s and 1970s. However, the 1980s saw the release of the first formal study to ever document the number of suicides⁴. Interest in the topic further increased in the 1990s given the number of suicides linked with the Royal Commission into the NSW Police Service⁵.

WAPU has been able to document at least 73 serving officer suicides over the period 1950 to 1999. NSW Police accounted for more than half of victims.



Three victims were female officers. Seven male victims murdered someone else (usually their wife and / or children) immediately prior to their own deaths.

The average age of victims was 36 years old. **49.3 per cent** of victims held the rank of either Constable or Senior Constable. The average length of service of victims was unable to be calculated due to insufficient data.

Just over half of suicides occurred off-duty. At least **61.6 per cent** of suicides involved the use of a firearm.

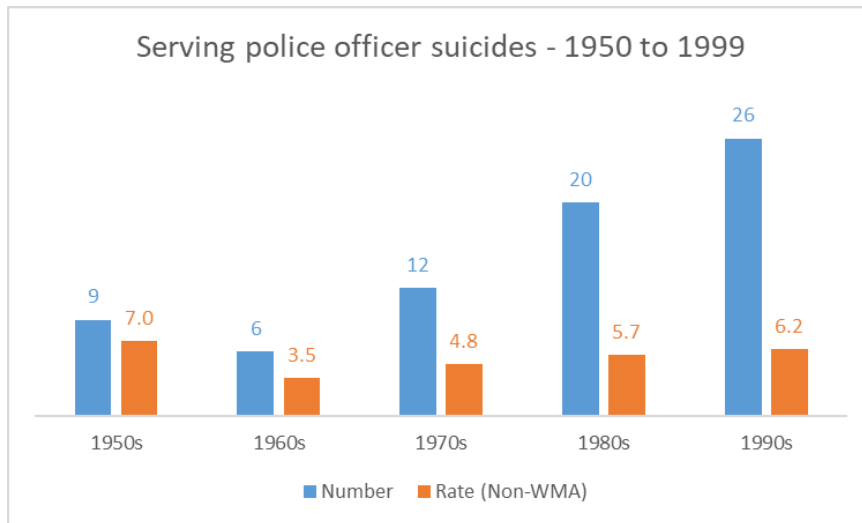
More than **63 per cent** of suicides occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. But the significant increase in the number of police officers employed (including the establishment of the

⁴ Swanton, B. & Walker, J. (1989). *Police employee health: A selective study of mortality and morbidity, and their measurement*. Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra.

⁵

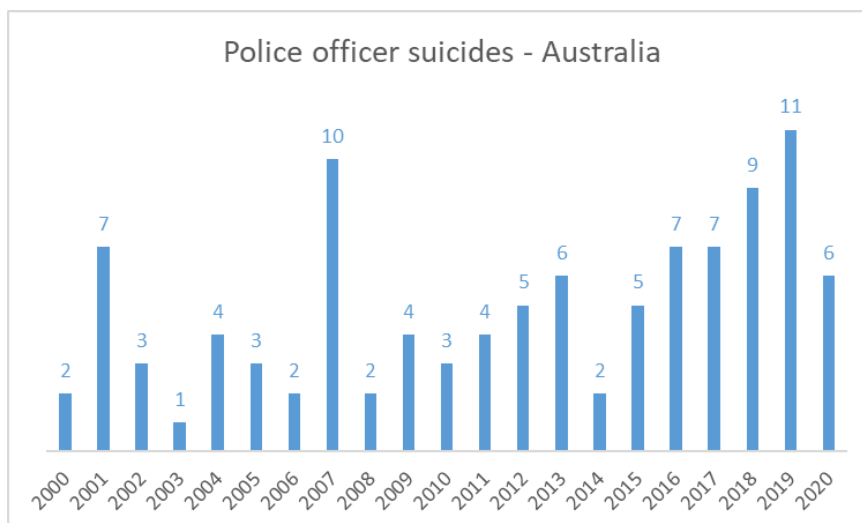
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=la-ca/crimeinthecommunity/subs/sub122_5.pdf

Australian Federal Police) over those two decades meant suicide rates were only slightly higher compared to the 1960s and 1970s.



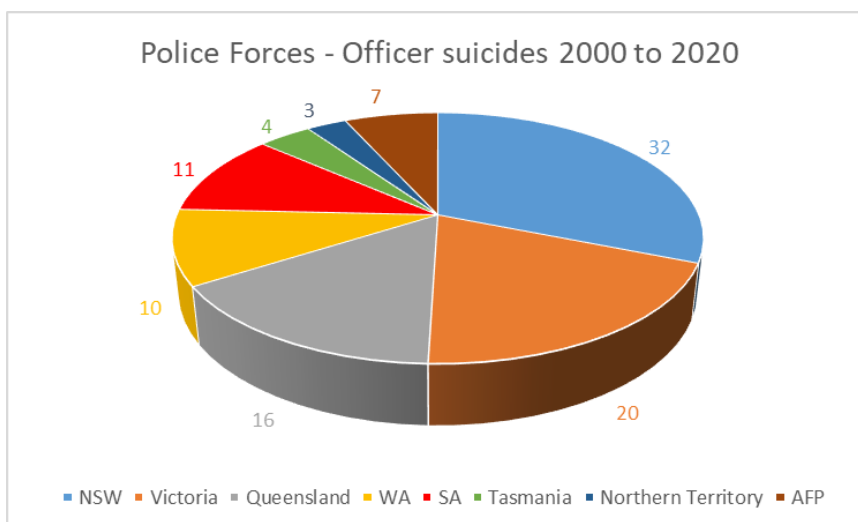
Suicides 2000 to 2020

WAPU estimates a total of 103 serving police officers fell victim to suicide over the 2000 to 2020 period. This represents an average of **4.9 suicides per year**.

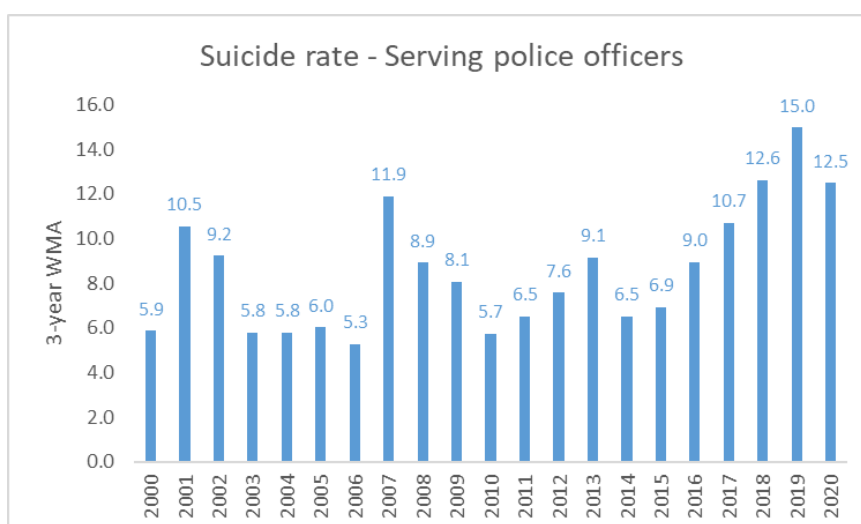


The highest annual total was eleven in 2019 while 2003 was the lowest with just one. **41.7 per cent** of suicides occurred during the last six years of the period.

NSW Police Force easily had the largest number of victims. But South Australia and Tasmania both had a highly disproportionate number of victims considering the size of their police forces. The seven Australian Federal Police (AFP) victims included suicides within the ACT and interstate.



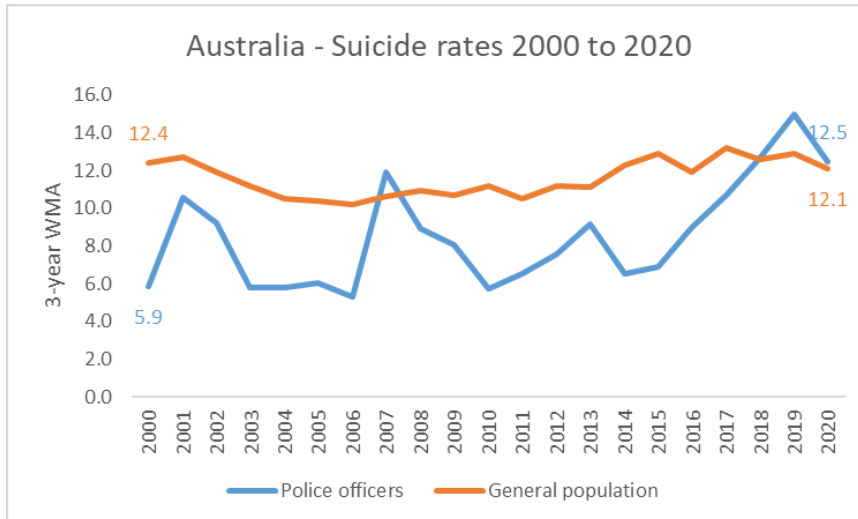
The suicide rate for serving officers is now more than twice that of 20 years ago. Rates since 2016 have all been above the period average of 8.5 suicides per 100,000 serving officers.



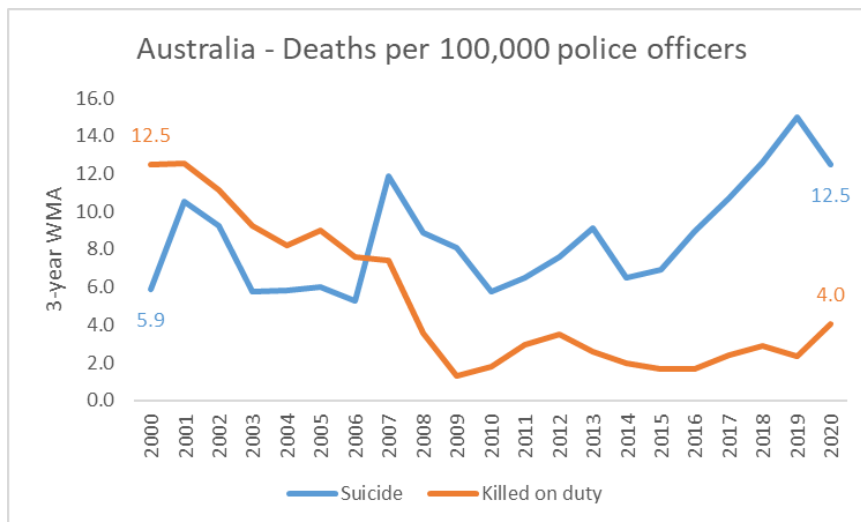
Some have observed that suicide rate rates for serving police officers are little different compared to the wider Australian population⁶. However, caution is needed when making such a comparison. Largely because occupations very rarely reflect the demographics of the general community. For example, the national suicide rate is strongly affected by suicide levels among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The only observation this paper makes is that Australia’s suicide rate from 2000 to 2020 was relatively stable⁷. This is in complete contrast to the increasing rate for serving police officers.

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/police-officer-suicide-its-not-just-about-workplace-stress-but-culture-too-76710>

⁷ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/deaths-by-suicide-in-australia/suicide-deaths-over-time>



Arguably more important for serving officers is to compare suicides with occupational-related deaths. Over the last 20 years, the number of serving officer suicides has overtaken the number killed in the line of duty. Some 55 serving police officers were killed in the line of duty from 2000 to 2020 compared to the 103 who fell victim to suicide.



The above trends indicate that officers are now far more likely to die from suicide than being killed on-duty by an offender or in an accident. However, suicides are not normally counted as a workplace fatality. This means a police force could claim to be meeting its WHS goal of “zero fatalities” no matter how many of its officers fall victim to suicide that year. The causes of suicide are varied and complex for each victim. But existing WHS indicators do not even acknowledge that suicide is an increasing cause of death among serving officers.

Victim characteristics

WAPU was able to document at least one characteristic for 97 victims. Victim gender and rank were the most commonly available characteristics. But the method of suicide could only be identified for just under half of victims.

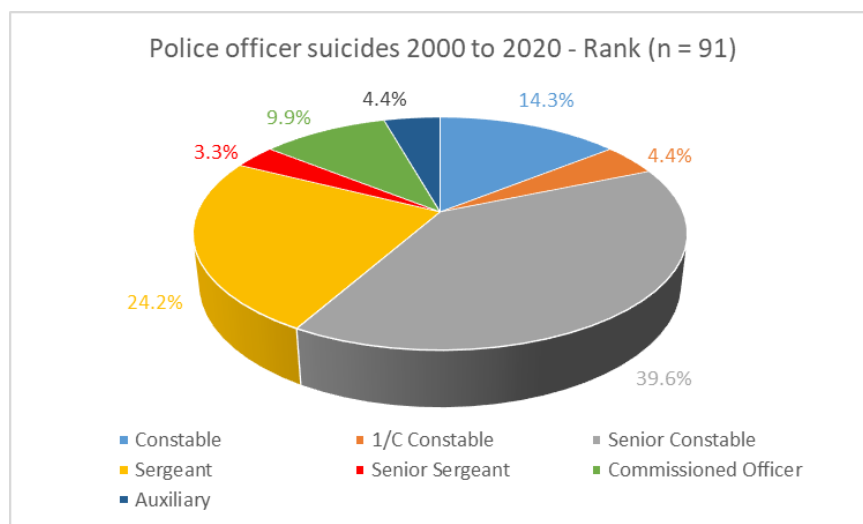
Most suicides occurred in warmer months. This is consistent with medical research on suicides generally⁸. The implication being that suicide could become more prevalent among serving officers if average global temperatures continue to increase.

Season	Victims 2000 to 2020
Spring	27
Summer	24
Autumn	21
Winter	21

Some 80 victims were male and 16 were female. Age could be identified for 87 victims. Female victims tended to be younger than their male counterparts.

Gender	Victims	Average age	Median age
Male	72	44	47
Female	15	42	41
<i>Total</i>	<i>87</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>45</i>

Rank could be identified for 91 victims (uniform and detectives). **63.8 per cent** held the rank of either Senior Constable or Sergeant.



Commissioned Officers accounted for more victims than either First Class Constables or Senior Sergeants, indicating that suicide is a problem to all ranks.

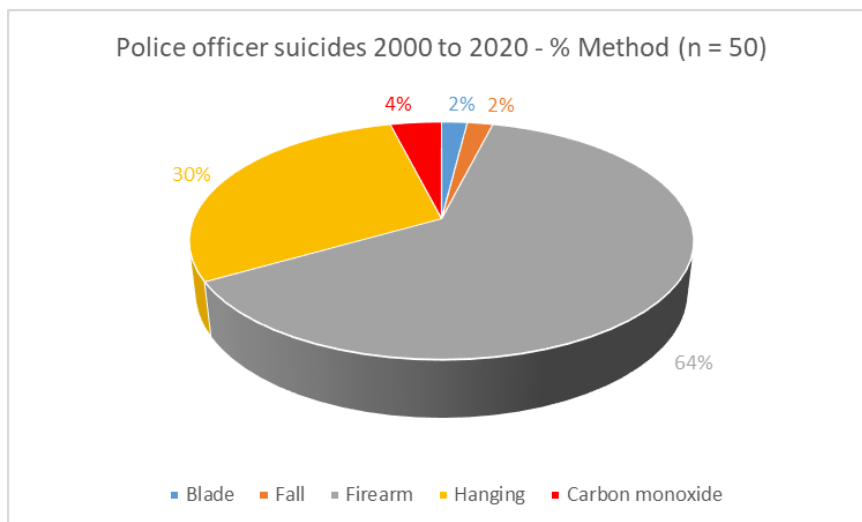
⁸ <https://news.stanford.edu/2019/03/29/effects-climate-change-suicide-rates/>

The average length of service (LOS) for victims was 21 years. Female LOS was only a year less than male victims. The shortest LOS was 2 years while the longest was 41 years.

Gender	Victims	Average LOS	Median LOS
Male	48	22	22
Female	8	21	20
<i>Total</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>20</i>

Some 31 suicides occurred on-duty and 34 occurred off-duty with the duty status of the remainder unknown.

The method of suicide could only be identified in 50 cases. Some **64 per cent** of these were killed with a firearm. Hanging was the next most common method at **30 per cent**.



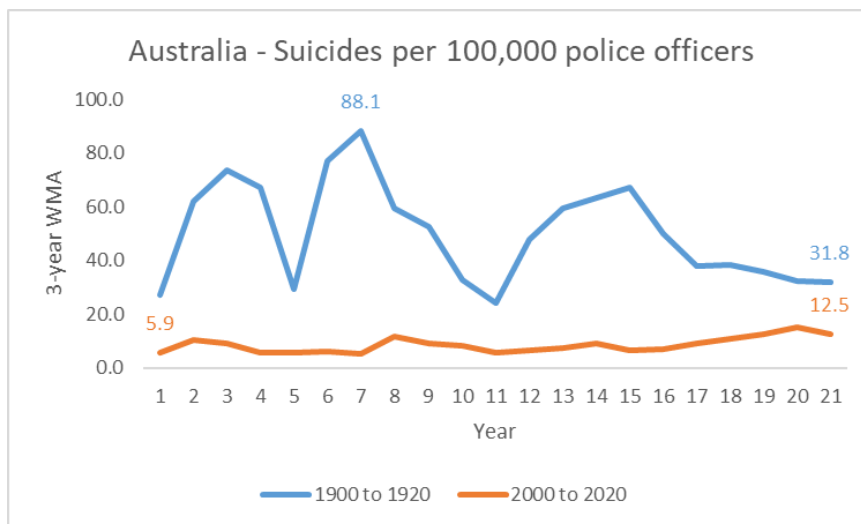
The role of firearms in serving officer suicides cannot be overstated. Of the 31 victims who died on duty, more than **77.4 per cent** used their service firearm. By contrast, off-duty victims were more likely to die by hanging.

On-duty (31 victims)	Off-duty (34 victims)
Firearm – Service (77.4%)	Hanging (26.5%)
Hanging (9.7%)	Firearm – Private (5.9%)
Unknown (12.9%)	Firearm – Service (11.8%)
	Other (11.8%)
	Unknown (44.1%)

The role of firearm accessibility is further underlined when comparing modern suicide rates with those of 100 years ago. Some 65 serving officers fell victim to suicide over the period 1900 to 1920. But the average suicide rate of the period was **almost six times** that of 2000 to 2020.

Period	Victims	Average Rate	Highest Rate
1900 to 1920	65	50.3	88.1
2000 to 2020	103	8.5	15.0

Rates for serving officers a century ago peaked in 1906 before declining by more than two-thirds by the end of the period. Again, this contrasts with 2000 to 2020 where rates more than doubled.



At some level, the higher rate for 1900 to 1920 should not be surprising. Suicide was fundamentally treated as a crime. Subsequently, medical knowledge and research about suicide was scant compared to today. Medication, counselling, and support services for police officers were practically non-existent. Contemporary reports also indicate that some victims may have been suffering PTSD from military service during the Boer War or the First World War. However, the data indicates access to firearms was a major factor for 1900 to 1920 rates being so high.

Contemporary records indicate 53 of 1900 to 1920 victims were killed with a firearm. Further, **54 per cent** of these deaths occurred *off-duty*. This is significantly different to 2000 to 2020 where **79 per cent** of firearm victims died *on-duty*. Police officers over 1900 to 1920 were generally able to access firearms more easily compared to today. This includes accessing firearms while off-duty. The corollary being a greater opportunity to use lethal means of force in any suicide attempt.

Firearm access by police officers is more tightly regulated compared to 100 years ago. It nonetheless remains a considerable risk factor for officer suicides around the world⁹. Some have argued that Australian police officers be allowed to carry their service firearms off-duty for the purposes of protection¹⁰. But the historical experience indicates there is a strong chance this would increase the rate of suicide among serving officers.

States and Territories

At least one suicide could be documented for every Australian state prior to Federation. The earliest recorded victim for the AFP was 40 years ago while the earliest for the Northern Territory was 2004.

Serving police officers	Earliest recorded suicide – Year
New South Wales	1831
Tasmania	1835
Victoria	1856
Queensland	1875
South Australia	1881
Western Australia	1882
Australian Federal Police	1981
Northern Territory	2004

Modern suicide rates in the six Australian states can be compared with rates from 100 years ago. Reflecting national trends, 1900 to 1920 suicide rates were much higher than rates for 2000 to 2020.

⁹ <https://www.policeforum.org/assets/PreventOfficerSuicide.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/bundaberg/calls-for-off-duty-police-to-carry-guns/news-story/72bacc7cba8de5dd38fc6d5ad1e20a46>

Police Force	1900 to 1920 suicides		2000 to 2020 suicides	
	Victims	Rate (non-WMA)	Victims	Rate (non-WMA)
NSW	28	44.7	32	9.8
Vic	15	44.6	20	7.3
Qld	10	49.1	16	7.3
WA	5	49.1	10	8.2
SA	5	52.4	11	11.9
Tas	2	40.4	4	15.8
NT	n/a	n/a	3	11.3
AFP	n/a	n/a	7	8.7
<i>Australia</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>50.0</i>	<i>103</i>	<i>8.8</i>

Suicide rates have changed significantly over the last 20 years alone. Rates over 2015 to 2020 were notable higher in most states and territories.

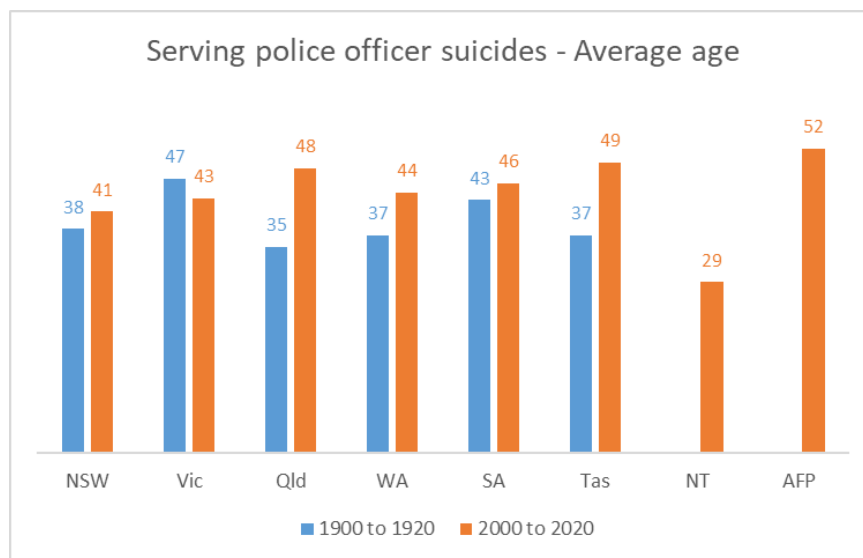
Police Force – Suicide rate (non-WMA)	2000 to 2014	2015 to 2020
NSW	10.7	7.9
Victoria	4.6	12.2
Queensland	6.1	9.8
WA	6.1	12.4
SA	12.6	10.3
Tasmania	0.0	51.7
Northern Territory	11.3	11.3
Australian Federal Police	3.6	20.4
<i>Australia</i>	<i>7.4</i>	<i>11.5</i>

(N.B. WAPU was unable to document any Tasmania Police officer suicides prior to 2015).

Caution should be applied when comparing suicide rates across jurisdictions. Factors such as personnel levels, organisational structure, population demographics and operating environments often vary across PFA affiliates. This paper nonetheless makes the following observations:

- The large majority of NSW and SA victims (24 and 8 respectively) died prior to 2015. This resulted in lower suicide rates for both jurisdictions over 2015 to 2020.
- Rates in Victoria and WA for 2015 to 2020 were more than double that of 2000 to 2014.
- Queensland's rate was **61 per cent** higher during the latter part of the period.
- 5 AFP victims died after 2014. This increased the AFP's rate of victims by more than five-fold.
- Tasmania and the Northern Territory have the smallest number of serving police officers of all PFA affiliates. Even one suicide can cause considerable fluctuations in their rates. But the data nonetheless supports Police Association of Tasmania arguments about a growing mental health crisis among its members¹¹.

Comparing suicides from 1900 to 1920 also reveals the average age of victims has increased for each jurisdiction except Victoria.



No historical comparison can be made for the Northern Territory and AFP. However, the average age of their victims from 2000 to 2020 were respectively much lower and higher than the Australian average of 45 years old. Three AFP victims were Commissioned Officers which likely explains why AFP victims were older on average.

¹¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-02-11/mental-health-toll-leading-to-police-suicides-union-says/13141244>

New Zealand

The New Zealand Police Association (NZPA) is a PFA affiliate. WAPU has nonetheless found it a considerable challenge to source reliable statistics about NZ serving officer suicides.

WAPU used the National Library of New Zealand's digital newspaper archive¹² to document at least 13 serving officer suicides over the period 1882 to 1936. All victims were male with an average age of 37 years old. NZ Police Force has generally been unarmed since its creation¹³. However, ten of the 13 victims killed themselves with a firearm.

Far fewer NZ officers fell victim to suicide between 1900 to 1936 compared to Australia. But the average number of NZ Police officers employed was much smaller compared to Australia. This resulted in Australia's rate being only slightly higher.

Police 1900 to 1936	Suicides	Average annual officers employed	Suicide Rate (non-WMA)
Australia	92	6,983	35.6
New Zealand	9	915	26.5

The latest publicly available data about NZ serving officer suicides WAPU can find was published in a 2010 study¹⁴. This study found that 13 NZ serving officers took their own lives over the period 1974 to 2003. The average rate for male officers was 7.3 and 5.1 for female officers. Insufficient data exists to make a comparison with Australian officers over the same period.

International comparisons

Comparing Australian suicide levels at an international level is even more difficult than comparisons between PFA affiliates. For one, police forces in developed nations tend to have higher levels of independence, accountability and effectiveness compared to those of developing nations¹⁵. But current data about serving officer suicides is still scarce even among developed nations.

The lack of contemporaneous data about serving officer suicides means few international comparisons can be made with Australia. WAPU has nonetheless been able to construct

¹² <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>

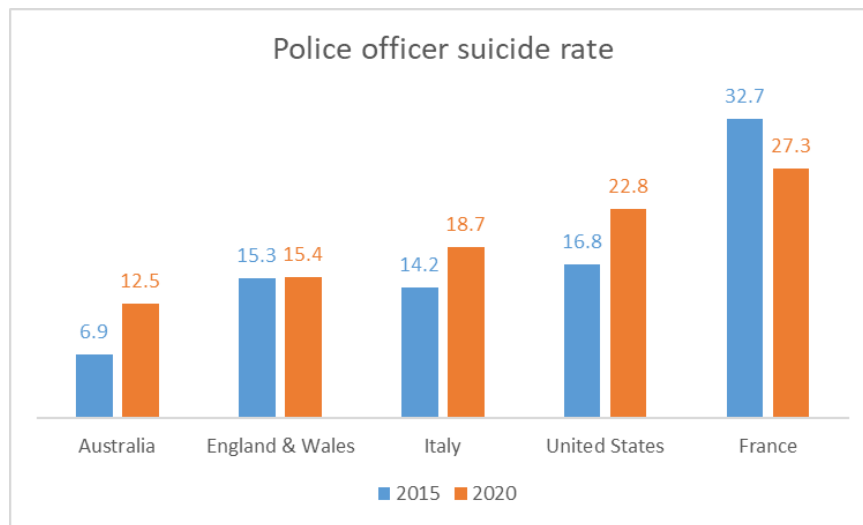
¹³ <https://www.police.govt.nz/about-us/history/establishment>

¹⁴

https://www.academia.edu/28019326/Suicide_by_occupation_does_access_to_means_increase_the_risk?auto=citations&from=cover_page

¹⁵ <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/corruption/police.html>

suicide rates from 2015 to 2020 for four other nations: England and Wales¹⁶, Italy¹⁷, France (National Police only)¹⁸, and the United States¹⁹.



Unlike the other nations, police officers in England and Wales are not generally issued with firearms. Suicide rates for English and Welsh officers were generally higher than their Australian counterparts though. It is particularly notable that 24 English and Welsh officers fell victim to suicide in 2020 compared to 6 Australian officers.

One research paper found Italian police officers suffer more from secondary traumatic stress than health care workers²⁰. One article from 2019 argued Italian officers faced a shortage of appropriate psychological services as well as the stigma of seeking assistance²¹.

Increasing levels of suicide within US law enforcement has been well documented. In June 2020, Congress passed the *Law Enforcement Suicide Data Collection (LESDC) Act* which gave the FBI funding to create an official database about officers who attempt or commit suicide²². The first data from the LESDC could be conditionally accessed in mid-2022.

French rates have been very high for more than a decade. A Paris rally in October 2019 of more than 27,000 officers blamed physical and psychological fatigue as well as organisational pressure to meet performance targets²³. The suicide rate among Australian officers in 2015 was almost one-fifth that of French officers.

¹⁶

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/adhocs/13674suicidebyoccupationenglandandwales2011to2020registrations>

¹⁷ <https://www.cerchioblu.org/osservatoriosuicidipolizia/>

¹⁸ https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/les-policiers-se-suident-ils-plus-que-le-reste-de-la-population-20210609_BO232RNMJJAEXCTM7WCIXC45VQ/&prev=search&pto=aue

¹⁹ <https://bluehelp.org/>

²⁰ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01435/full>

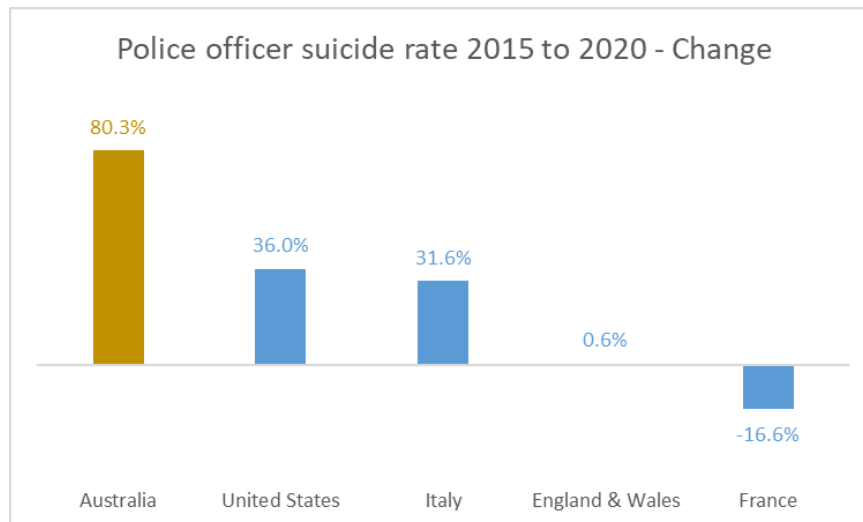
²¹ <https://lindro.it/suicidi-in-divisa-e-strage/>

²² <https://www.hstoday.us/federal-pages/doj/fbi-establishes-law-enforcement-suicide-data-collection/>

²³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/2/french-police-protest-over-working-conditions-citing-suicides>

Australia clearly had the lowest rate of the group. It is tempting to infer that Australia is managing the issue of police officer suicide “better” compared to other nations. Such an inference ignores what is arguably the most significant trend within the data.

France’s rate declined over the period while England and Wales were stable. By contrast, rates in Australia, Italy, and the United States have risen sharply since 2015. More importantly, Australia’s rate increased significantly more than any other nation in the group.



Discussion

Suicide rates for serving police officers in Australia have more than doubled since 2000. Current trends suggest that the rate will continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

The statistics collected by WAPU indicate the risk of suicide is highest among serving officers who are:

- Male;
- Aged in their mid-40’s;
- Sergeants or Senior Constables; and
- Have more than 20 years of service.

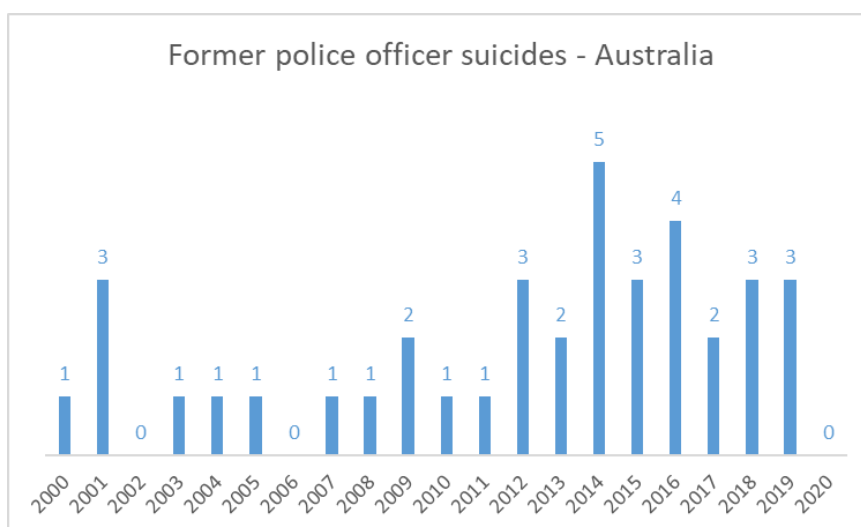
Victims who use firearms are much more likely to do so on-duty. Access to service firearms is a significant contributing factor towards such deaths. Unfortunately, prohibiting access based on suicide risk would inflict a huge stigma on affected officers.

Suicide rates for serving police officers are much lower than 100 years ago. But rates from 100 years ago also demonstrate just how prevalent police suicides can become without appropriate levels of help and support for serving officers.

Former police officers

Suicide statistics for former police officers are more problematic compared to serving officers. For example, “former” could mean retired, medically retired, resigned, or dismissed. Nor are there reliable estimates about the total number of former officers across Australia. This makes it difficult to reliably discern any long-term trends. However, there is still enough data for a few observations to be made.

Some 38 former officers fell victim to suicide throughout the 2000 to 2020 period. More than **39.4 per cent** occurred over the last six years of the period.



All but one of the 38 victims was male. Victims tended to be slightly older than serving officers. The youngest victim was 30 and the oldest was 82.

Suicide – Former officers	Victims	Average	Median
Age (years)	35	51	48
Length of service (years)	22	18	18

Average LOS was 18 years. This was due to several former officers who ceased serving when they were aged 30 to 40 years old.

Final rank could be identified for 32 former officers. Of these, **71 per cent** held the rank of Senior Constable or Sergeant.

The method of suicide was recorded for only 21 victims. Hanging was the most common method with 10 victims followed by 5 victims who killed themselves with a privately owned firearm.

Nineteen of the 38 victims served in the NSW Police Force. The remaining victims were split between Victoria (6), WA (5), Queensland (4), AFP (2), SA (1) with one unknown.

References

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