

# Mental Health Conditions in First Responders

TX RPC Project Legislative Rapid Response Request

April 8, 2025

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. First responders, especially Emergency Medical Service (EMS) personnel, have a higher suicide risk, with many reporting mental health issues and substance use disorders.
2. Key suicide risk factors include prior suicidal thoughts, substance use, intimate partner violence, and PTSD. Female firefighters report experiencing more mental health issues than male firefighters.
3. Many EMS workers report burnout, and many leave the field due to physical and mental health concerns.

### Introduction

- First responders — such as law enforcement officers, emergency medical services (EMS) personnel, public safety telecommunications employees, and firefighters — can experience excessive occupation-related stress.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Occupational stress is associated with increased risk of various adverse mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and even suicidal behaviors.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Adverse Mental Health Outcomes in First Responders

- **676** first responders died by suicide in the U.S. between 2015-2017.<sup>1</sup>
  - **46%** had mental health problems prior to suicide.
  - **22%** experienced alcohol or substance use problems.
  - **25%** received mental health/substance use treatment.
  - **17%** had problems at their job.



#### Number of Suicides by First Responder Type



Law enforcement:  
393 (58%)



Firefighters:  
144 (21%)



EMS personnel:  
124 (18%)



Public safety  
telecommunications:  
15 (2%)

- Suicide rates and mental health issues are likely underreported. Workers may be hesitant to report work and home stressors for reasons including:<sup>2</sup>
  - considering stress as “part of the job”
  - potential workplace backlash for reporting negative mental health issues

## Burnout and Substance Use in First Responders

EMS personnel  
are  
**1.4X**  
more likely to die  
by suicide than  
non-EMS workers<sup>2,7</sup>

**Burnout is the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion.**

- One survey (conducted in April 2022) measured burnout among certified EMS clinicians (emergency medical technicians and paramedics) in the U.S.<sup>3</sup>
  - **Over 50%** of certified EMS reported personal and work-related burnout.
  - **23%** of certified EMS had patient-related burnout.
- Another National Survey on EMS Workforce Satisfaction and Engagement (2022) suggested that concerns about physical and mental health (**44%**) were one of the top reasons that first responders reported leaving EMS.<sup>4</sup>
- According to a study conducted in an urban fire department in a major metropolitan city in the Southwestern U.S.:<sup>5</sup>
  - **Over 30%** of firefighters had potential alcohol abuse.
  - A larger proportion of female firefighters than male firefighters reported:
    - Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (female: 20% vs. male: 12%)
    - Lifetime suicidal ideation (female: 29% vs. male: 15%)
    - Having seen a mental health professional (female: 20% vs. male: 7%)
    - Higher levels of depression and stress

## Texas Violent Death Reporting System (TVDRS)

TVDRS collects data from:<sup>6</sup>



Death  
certificates



Justice of the peace  
inquests



Medical examiner  
reports



Law enforcement  
incident reports



Autopsy and  
toxicology reports

- The TVDRS program can help track violent deaths, including among first responders.<sup>6</sup>
  - Harris County was the first county to participate in the TVDRS program in 2019 to track violent deaths, including suicides, homicides, accidental firearm deaths, and other types of violent deaths.
  - In 2020, Bexar, Tarrant, and Dallas counties joined the TVDRS Expansion program, with Travis, Denton, and El Paso counties joining between 2021 and 2023.
  - By the end of 2025, the TVDRS Expansion program plans to have all Texas counties reporting the types of violent deaths in their areas.

## References

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