

When Trauma Meets Trauma - Training Law Enforcement to Deal with Traumatized Youth

By David Walker and Johanna Wald

As an instructor who teaches Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs) effective strategies for working with teens and young adults, I begin all my trainings by reminding officers that, no matter their age or level of experience, they were all teenagers once. I do this because, from the vantage point of our adult selves, it is easy to forget just how difficult life can seem when you are in the throes of adolescent angst. Teens are undergoing dramatic physical and emotional transformations, coping with rapidly changing bodies, and confronting new, often confusing, urges. Many are obsessed with how they appear to their peers, struggle to meet parental and other adult expectations, and to define their own identity.

While being a teenager has always been hard, it is even more difficult today. The prolonged pandemic, ubiquitous social media, increased levels of violence and racial tensions in some communities are heightening pressures and sense of isolation felt by many teens. Teen suicides are on the rise and teen depression rates hover around 17% compared to an overall depression rate of 10%.

Law enforcement officers face their own hardships and trauma exposures. A recent article published by the COPS Office states:

“Such exposure can impair the mental well-being of officers and affect their ability to perform duties to the public. The potential long-term effects of PTSD in police officers may additionally lead to behavioral dysfunction such as substance abuse, aggression, and suicide. It is estimated that, on average, approximately 15 percent of officers in the U.S. experience PTSD symptoms.”

And, just like adolescents, officers are also dealing with public and cultural pressures, including reduced staffing that requires forced overtime, ongoing risk of contracting COVID, calls to “defund” the police, and heightened public attention on, and dissatisfaction with, police responses to incidents within communities.

Clearly, traumatized youth encountering traumatized police officers can be a toxic combination. What’s the solution? Fortunately, Congress took an important step in 2018 when it passed the Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act. This act sought to improve access to mental health and wellness services for law enforcement. More recently, the IACP released the National Consortium on Preventing Law Enforcement Suicide Toolkit designed to help agencies and departments address officer mental health and wellness concerns; the FBI has introduced training on suicide prevention; and, in August 2022, former Chicago PD commander and Des Plaines police chief Bill Kushner helped launch the web based program [WeNeverWalkAlone](#), a network of peers and professionals available to help prevent law enforcement suicide. Help for police is available and the stigma surrounding the seeking of help appears to be disappearing slowly.

These are positive and necessary improvements. But what has remained missing until about a decade ago was training designed to help law enforcement understand adolescent behavior and the impact that trauma has on teen and young adult decision-making.

Approximately 11 years ago, Lisa Thurau, a juvenile justice attorney, and Dr. Jeff Bostic, an adolescent psychiatrist, developed a curriculum called *Policing the Teen Brain*[™]. This curriculum introduced law enforcement officers to key insights of adolescent brain development, with a focus on how they impact the interactions between police and kids. The training begins with instruction in the physiology of brain development, led by a mental health expert, with an emphasis on how teen responses are largely driven by the part of the brain that is responsible for emotion. Officers learn that behavior that would, in an adult, indicate deception or guilt, may, in teens and young adults, be simply evidence of an undeveloped brain struggling to overcome the fear/anger/anxiety the young person is feeling at that moment, particularly while in the presence of an adult authority figure.

Once officers grasp basic adolescent brain development, the impact of mental illness and trauma are introduced. This is the critical part of the training. Officers learn that, like themselves, youth they frequently interact with are regularly exposed to traumatic experiences. Many of these youths worry about where their next meal will come from; or are concerned about a substance-abusing parent, or fear becoming the victim of violence in their community. For both officers and kids, these trauma exposures build and intensify over time. Trauma is insidious – for both law enforcement and youth.

The obvious question is, “Does the training work?” “Does it make a difference?”

In 2017, an agency in the western U.S. was facing possible litigation over the disproportionate number of student arrests by its School Resource and Security Officers for minor transgressions. The school district was arresting hundreds of students each year for what one of the officers called “contempt of cop” offenses, including “disturbance of assembly”, “failure to comply with an officer’s instructions”, and “resisting.” The relationship between students and officers was, to say the least, strained, with officers expecting the students to misbehave and resist and students expecting the officers to overreact to what they viewed as “no big thing.”

At the request of the school district, Strategies for Youth (the organization formed by Lisa Thureau after teaming up with Jeff Bostix) offered a training to the high school Security Team. The training included the above-mentioned information on adolescent brain development and behavior, the effect of learning and behavior disabilities on youth responses to authority, and information on how the culture and environment surrounding the students affected their views of law enforcement. Additionally, school administrators were invited to participate in an open discussion with the School Security Team to clarify distinctions between disciplinary issues, which should be handled by school personnel, and criminal behavior, which required intervention by the School Resource and Security Officers

Approximately 6 months after the completion of this training, the school district reported an 80% decrease in arrests for minor offenses on school property! When asked why, School Security Officers reported being more tolerant of what they now understood was typical teen behavior in challenging adult authority. Rather than rising to the bait, the team focused on developing

working relationships with the students, giving students the opportunity to vent while actively listening and responding, and partnering with administrators to ensure a consistent and appropriate response. What is even more interesting is that the district also reported that, because they were less focused on minor “contempt of cop” offenses, they were able to better address more serious issues on school property, such as substance abuse, assault, and weapons.

In sum, we know that both teenagers and law enforcement officers face a host of stressful situations every day; and many have been exposed to trauma. We also know that stressors on both law enforcement and teens have intensified in recent years. When an officer’s trauma encounters a teenager’s trauma, the effects can be explosive, tragic, and even fatal. That is why training designed to help law enforcement officers recognize signs of trauma in teenagers, and to understand normal adolescent impulses to challenge authority, are so critical. This training can help them develop new strategies that can “lower the temperature,” keep everyone calm, and prevent either side from escalating tensions. It can simultaneously reduce the number of arrests for “contempt of cop” charges, improve ongoing relations and build stronger rapport between teens and law enforcement officers, while allowing law enforcement to focus on addressing far more serious issues that communities face.

*About the Authors: **David Walker** is the Operations/ Training Director for [Strategies for Youth, Inc.](#) He worked as a police officer helping to create the Latah County Child Abuse Task Force where he served as lead investigator. He joined Strategies for Youth in 2014 and is responsible for the development and delivery of their police training programs nationally. He is INCI certified.*

***Johanna Wald** is a writer and researcher who has written and presented extensively about issues related to criminal and juvenile justice reform, education equity, and implicit bias. She has been published in Slate, salon.com, the Crime Report, U.S.A. Today, the Marshall Project, Huffington Post, Washington Post and Education Week.*

