

# Officers of the Wielkopolska Police Department Awarded the Crystal Star for Saving Lives in Situations of Suicidal Behavior

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## Abstract

Every day, police officers respond to numerous incidents involving violations of the law and moral norms, demonstrating both professionalism and determination in serving the public. However, their efforts to save lives in situations involving suicidal behavior deserve special recognition. When individuals attempt to take their own lives for various reasons, police officers often risk their own lives and health to intervene and prevent these tragedies. One way this bravery is honored is through the Crystal Star, awarded in Greater Poland to officers who prioritize the life and health of every person.

**Keywords:** suicide, suicidal behavior, police, saving lives

## Introduction

In accordance with Article 27(1) of the Police Act of April 6, 1990, before starting duty, a police officer takes the following oath:

I, a citizen of the Republic of Poland, aware of the duties undertaken as a police officer, vow to serve the Nation faithfully, protect the legal order established by the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, and guard the security of the State and its citizens, even at the risk of my life. While performing the tasks entrusted to me, I vow to diligently observe the law, to remain faithful to the constitutional bodies of the Republic of Poland, to observe official discipline, and to carry out the orders and instructions of my superiors. I vow to guard the secrets associated

with the service, the honor, dignity, and good name of the service and to observe the principles of professional ethics. (Ustawa o Policji..., 2024)

In the context of this article, the passages in the oath that emphasize guarding the safety of citizens, even at the risk of one's own life, are particularly relevant. Some police officers fully embody these words, sometimes sacrificing their own lives to save others.

### **Police Officers Saving the Lives of Potential Suicide Victims: Background Information**

However, it happens much more often that police officers who intervene are effective in saving people who want to take their own lives. Interventions can be both direct, when people's lives are physically saved, for example, by preventing a person who wants to commit suicide from jumping out of a window, and by reaching out to these individuals via the internet. When information that someone wants to commit suicide appears on an online forum or social networking site, the administrator of the site, informed in advance by those who have such knowledge, reports the matter to the police authorities, who take appropriate action. In 2018, there were 250 such reports, which is more than a fivefold increase compared to 2017, when 48 such reports were recorded. Police data show that in 227 cases, the Police Combating Cybercrime officers determined the personal data of 145 people who intended to commit suicide, 72 of whom were hospitalized. Eighty-three of the reports turned out to be a prank. This does not change the fact that each such report is treated as a priority by the police. A special procedure is launched to determine the IP address of the device from the service provider or social network, followed by a referral to the appropriate field cell to reach the owner of this number to verify the information (Markowski, 2019).

The vast majority of internet users are young people who often face many social and personal problems. It is important to distinguish between the terms "suicide" and "suicide attempt." Suicide refers to an action that results in death, while a suicide attempt refers to an intentional act aimed at ending one's own life, but which results in injury instead (Witkowska, 2021). The most commonly cited cause of suicide is mental illness or behavioral disorders, followed by addictions to alcohol and psychoactive substances, along with psychological, social, moral, religious, and economic factors. To prevent suicide, various measures are being taken in the United States, including education, counseling, and clinical management. These efforts are a crucial part of public health protection.

Prevention initiatives include educational campaigns, school programs, media training to counter suicidal behaviors, and school crisis response plans and teams (National

Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2006). These targeted efforts primarily reach those at high risk of suicide (Goldsmith et al., 2002). Considering the legal and criminal approach to this problem, the intention of the law is to protect the most precious good, namely human life, while also fostering a sense of social solidarity in individuals facing life-threatening situations. Article 162(1) of the Criminal Code does not mandate the prevention of suicide, but requires every citizen to take action to avert danger when human life or health is at risk (Zoll, 1995). However, even though there is no explicit provision prohibiting suicide, the lawmakers' intent is to treat such acts as prohibited. According to the above-mentioned provision, a third party is obligated to provide assistance, even if it involves facing opposition in any form (Wąsek, 1999).

Given this context, we must consider whether a person who wishes to commit suicide should be prevented or allowed to proceed. These two approaches differ in terms of the factual subject matter, but it is important to consider not only the legal provision, but also the broader social interest and the individual's welfare. Often, a person attempting suicide cannot consciously guide their decision due to emotional agitation, illness, or the influence of alcohol or psychotropic drugs.

The designer of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, which opened in 1937, believed it was suicide-proof, but he was wrong. Since then, more than 1,600 people have jumped off the bridge. Could these deaths have been avoided? These are the questions asked by retired police officer Kevin Briggs, who decided to patrol the bridge. Over his years of service, he saved more than 200 people who attempted suicide there. However, he believes that "save" is not the most accurate word, as the decision to commit suicide is an act of desperation. Kevin Briggs tries to listen to people rather than offer empty reassurances that everything will work out.

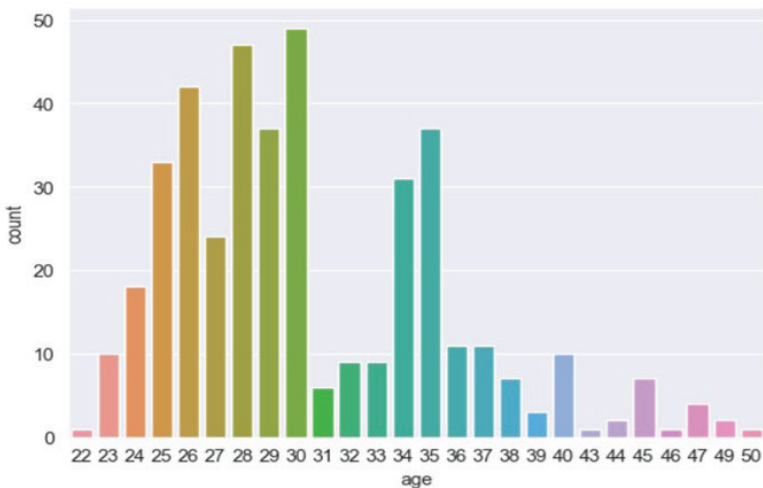
### **Who are the Wielkopolska Police Officers Awarded the Crystal Star for Preventing Suicide?**

Wielkopolska, a region in Poland, is notable for its recognition of police officers who honor their oath, even at the risk of their own lives. These officers have successfully intervened in suicide attempts, demonstrating courage and determination. For their bravery, they were awarded the Crystal Star.

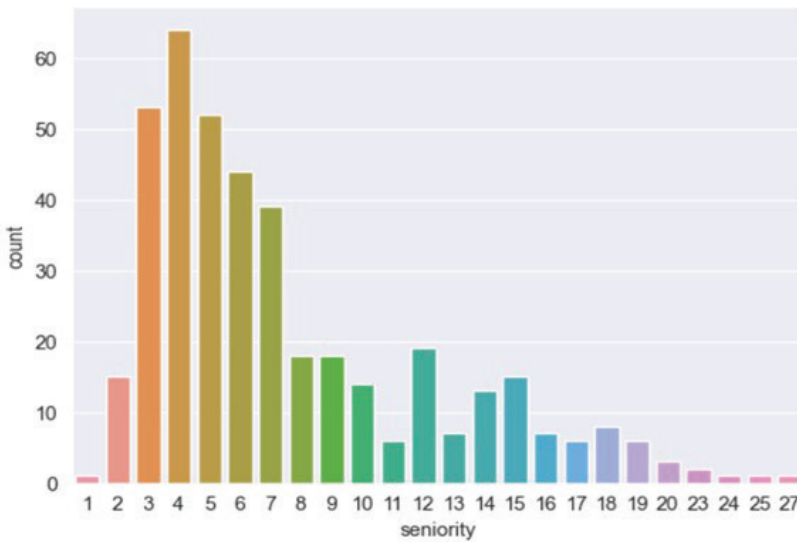


Photo: I. Liszczyńska

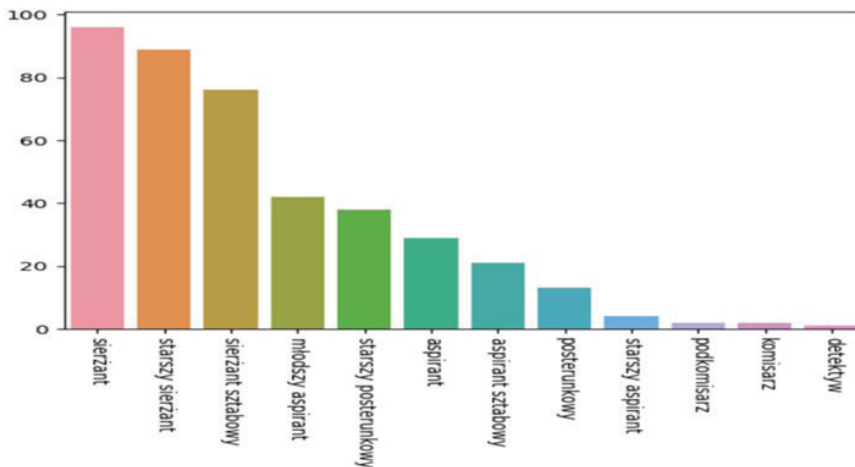
This decoration is awarded to police officers who, whether on or off duty, responded to danger by putting the health and lives of bystanders above their own. Focusing on the issue of suicide, this analysis examines data on life-saving interventions by police officers in situations involving suicidal behavior. From June 2013 to September 2021 in the Wielkopolska voivodeship, 223 suicide attempts were thwarted thanks to effective interventions by 380 policemen and 33 policewomen (Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy Policjantów woj. wielkopolskiego, 2021). The chart below provides a breakdown by age.



The largest group of police officers rewarded for rescuing would-be suicide victims are those in the age brackets of 25–30 and 34–35. When considering the seniority of these officers, we find that the most numerous group had between 3 and 7 years of service, while the number of officers with over 15 years of service is significantly lower, as shown in the chart below.



Regarding the ranks of the decorated officers (ranging from Senior Constable to General Police Inspector), the majority are from the sergeant ranks (Sergeant, Senior Sergeant, and Staff Sergeant), while the least represented ranks are junior officers and the most senior ranks.

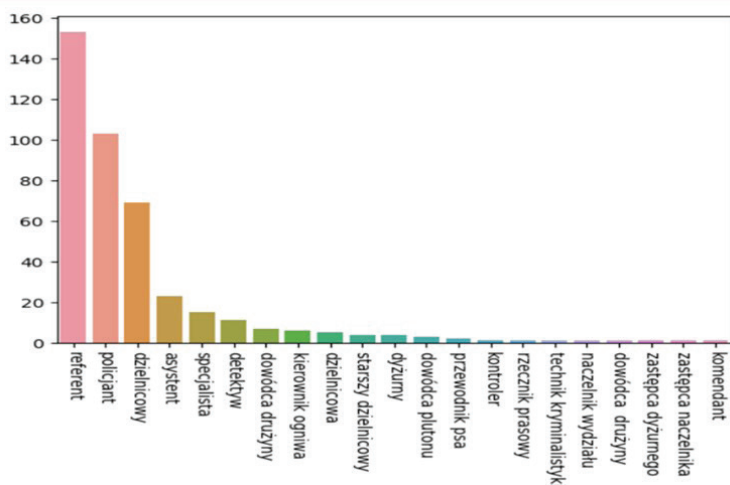


The numerical breakdown by rank is as follows:

- Sergeant: 96
- Senior Sergeant: 89
- Staff Sergeant: 76
- Junior Aspirant: 42
- Senior Constable: 38
- Aspirant: 29
- Staff Sergeant: 21
- Constable: 13
- Senior Aspirant: 4
- Deputy Commissioner: 2
- Commissioner: 2
- Detective: 1

In the police force, besides distinctions by rank, there are also distinctions by official position. Positions range from Trainee, the first grade, to Chief of Police, the 16th grade. The most common grades are from 3 to 6, including roles such as Clerk, Cell Manager, Deputy Duty Officer, Station Manager, District Manager, Duty Officer, Platoon Commander, and Specialist.

This structure is similarly reflected among the officers awarded the Crystal Star.



In numerical terms, the breakdown is as follows:

- Police Clerk: 153
- Police Officer: 103



The numerical breakdown is as follows:

- Hanging (neck noose): 53
- Jumping from a building: 33
- Throwing oneself under a train: 16
- Jumping into water: 12
- Rope around the neck: 12
- Jumping from a bridge: 10
- Jumping off an overpass: 9
- Swallowing pills: 9
- Blowing up a building: 5
- Knife pointed at the body: 5
- Cuts: 3
- Cuts to the body: 3
- Dousing oneself with a flammable substance and attempting to set fire: 3
- Unscrewing a gas tank: 2
- Jumping into water: 1
- Gas poisoning: 1
- Jumping from a crane: 1
- Arson: 1
- Self-harm: 1
- Stabbing oneself with a screwdriver: 1
- Cut wounds to the neck: 1
- Jumping from a building: 1
- Drowning: 1
- Cut wounds to the throat: 1
- Cut wounds to the arm: 1
- Stab wounds to the abdomen: 1
- Firearm pointed at the body: 1
- Cut wounds to the head: 1
- Jumping from a building: 1
- Stab wounds with a knife: 1

The various methods that potential suicide victims use to attempt taking their own lives reveal a predominant trend: hanging by tightening a noose around the neck, which can result in strangulation or cervical spine fracture, severing the spinal cord. This aligns with Anna Nimecunowicz-Janica's analysis, which found that over 60% of men and 12% of women choose this method (Bolechała et al., 2003). When officers respond to such reports, they typically rush to the scene and act quickly to cut the noose or remove it from the victim's neck, followed by cardiopulmonary resuscitation if the spinal cord is not damaged.



In these situations, the officers' decision-making skills, determination, medical training, composure, and experience in handling suicide interventions are crucial (Osteen, 2020). To understand the full scope of what officers face, it is important to consider their psychological profile. They are often deeply committed to their duty, which can lead to stress from the demands of their job, conflicts with superiors, the threat of disciplinary action, lack of support from colleagues, unclear promotion paths, and bureaucratic burdens (Hołyst, 2012).

Additionally, officers deal with personal issues such as marital and family conflicts, low pay, bank debt, low social prestige of their job, high demands, and stress management difficulties (Ogińska-Bulik, 2003). These factors contribute to a higher risk among officers of depression (14.6%), post-traumatic stress (14.2%), and suicidal thoughts (27.7%) (Syed, 2020). Understanding these pressures helps put into perspective the challenges officers face when trying to dissuade someone from committing suicide.

## Conclusion

Police officers face a wide range of situations daily, involving chases, thefts, murders, and human corpses, including those of children (Hallenberger, 1998). These experiences expose them to mental strain and tension that often cannot be immediately relieved. Despite these challenges, they continually face their own burdens and limitations while making difficult decisions for which they bear responsibility. Every officer understands the weight of this responsibility, especially when saving a life in a situation of suicide. Between June 2013 and September 2021, there were 223 successful life-saving interventions, each unique with its own set of circumstances and unknowns. During these moments, officers felt pride, joy, and a sense of purpose in their duties. Police officers often face unpredictable and dangerous situations, such as unjustified claims from families if a life is not saved, the risk of being pulled along when someone jumps from a building, or threats from individuals attempting suicide who may be wielding sharp instruments or weapons. Despite the risks to their own lives and health, officers intervene because they prioritize saving another person's life over their own safety. Given these facts, it is only fitting to honor officers who remain faithful to their oath with the Crystal Star decoration.

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