

# The Self-Extermination of the Military Personnel of Capixaba: Analysis and Actions to Address Nap/Aspra-Es

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**SUMMARY:** This study investigates the impacts of police work, especially among military police officers, who face high levels of violence and stress, resulting in significant mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In 2023, Brazil saw a 26.2% increase in suicides among police officers, highlighting a mental health crisis within the force. The 2017 public safety crisis in Espírito Santo highlighted police dissatisfaction, affecting public safety and increasing suicide rates. In that same year, 3,310 military personnel were on leave due to mental health problems. The lack of knowledge about mental health policies and the high costs of psychiatric services contribute to the underutilization of available resources. In response, in 2020, ASPRA-ES created the Psychosocial Support Center (NAP), which offers free and unbureaucratic care, in addition to housing the Suicide Observatory, which collects data on suicides and attempts among police officers and firefighters. This article analyzes suicide methods, revealing that 76% of cases among police officers in Espírito Santo involve firearms, with a predominance of enlisted personnel among those who committed suicide. Sports activities were identified as effective preventive strategies. The data show a significant reduction in medical absences due to mental disorders, representing a decrease of 79.72%. The article concludes by highlighting the need for integrated suicide prevention strategies that consider the specificities of the military environment and promote the mental health of public security professionals.

**KEYWORDS:** Suicide; Police; Firefighters; Military; Mental Health.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The nature of police work exposes these officers to violence, confrontations and potential harm on a regular and constant basis. Police work is an inherently stressful occupation, which results in physical and psychological symptoms on a daily basis, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, burnout syndrome and, worst of all, suicides.

Among the various occupations, public security workers, because they are exposed to situations of violence, stress and trauma, are listed as highly vulnerable to the risk of death by suicide (Miranda, 2016; Merlo, 2018)

In addition to being exposed to various risks experienced on the streets in the fight against violence and in the exercise of public safety, Military Police workers experience issues related to the organization of work, marked by high prescriptive rigor and based on a permanent system of discipline. Daily contact with the various forms of violence related to police work makes this professional category quite vulnerable to the production of psychological suffering (Spode and Merlo, 2006).

Valla (2002) states that the military profession is characterized by requiring countless sacrifices from the individual, including that of his own life, for the sake of the life of others. Death is a reality in the life of this professional since he has to know how to deal with the death of victims, criminals, his own work colleagues and also with the idea that his own life is in danger.

In the same dimension, Seligmann-Silva (2011) points out cases of professional exhaustion, depression, organizational changes, threats of dismissal and harassment, which can constitute causes in the development of work-related mental illnesses and can culminate in suicide attempts.

Regarding suicides, the 2024 Brazilian Public Security Forum yearbook reports that, in 2023, 118 Brazilian police officers committed suicide, representing an increase of 26.2% compared to 2022.

In addition to the inherent difficulties of the profession, in the state of Espírito Santo, in 2017, military police officers and firefighters faced a period of significant instability due to strike movements demanding better working conditions for these public safety professionals. These protests reflected accumulated dissatisfaction with pay and operating conditions, highlighting the urgent need for structural improvements and recognition of these operators. The situation had a significant impact on public safety, resulting in additional challenges for security management in the state.

According to data from the State Secretariat for Public Security and Social Defense (Sesp), 49 PMs have attempted to take their own lives, and eight have died by suicide since the strike in February 2017. Currently, according to information from Sesp, 500 military personnel are away from their activities for health reasons.<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, data from SIARHES (Integrated Human Resources Administration System of Espírito Santo) identified a total of 3,310 military personnel from the Military Police of the State of Espírito Santo (PMES) and the Military Fire Department of the State of Espírito Santo (CBMES) on medical leave due to mental and behavioral disorders, classified under the ICD code F. This number is significantly high when compared to the total number of personnel in the corporations, which did not exceed 12,000 military personnel.

Data from the professional association that represents military police officers and military firefighters in the state of Espírito Santo, now known as the Association of Military Police Officers and Military Firefighters of the State of Espírito Santo - ASPRA-ES<sup>2</sup> - carried out its first survey on mental health with state military personnel in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Military Police Strike: 57 police officers attempted suicide; eight killed themselves. A Gazeta, Vitória, January 16, 2019. Available at: <<https://www.agazeta.com.br/es/gv/greve-da-pm-57-policiais-tentaram-suicidio-oito-se-mataram-0119>>. Accessed on: August 31, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> ASPRA-ES - Association of Military Police and Military Firefighters of the State of Espírito Santo - was renamed on March 11, 2024, when the entity turned 48. At the time of the research, this same organization was called ACSPMBM-ES - Association of Corporals and Soldiers of the Military Police and Military Firefighters of Espírito Santo.

Professor MSc. Robson Carlos de Souza, Research Coordinator, developed a questionnaire with 20 (twenty) closed questions to collect data, with the aim of indicating the mental health of military personnel in Espírito Santo, identifying the problems that most affect the mental health of military personnel and comparing mental health among members of the PMES and CBMES. Military personnel from Battalions based in the state of Espírito Santo were interviewed, involving a population sample of 550 (five hundred and fifty) military police officers from the PMES and 120 (one hundred and twenty) military firefighters from the CBMES, totaling 670 (six hundred and seventy) military personnel interviewed from different positions and ranks. Data collection took place in the PMES battalions and companies, as well as in the CBMES barracks, during the months of May, June, July and early August 2019.

The survey revealed an alarming scenario: 51.29% of the military police officers interviewed, totaling 282 professionals, indicated that they feel the need for medical assistance for mental health issues. In contrast, in the Military Fire Department, the proportion was 31.67% of those interviewed, which corresponds to 38 military firefighters.

When asked about the State government's prevention actions with institutional objectives (permanent public policies) to address the mental health of military personnel and military police officers, 84.91% of survey participants responded that they were not aware of any action promoted by the state or institutionally.

Once the research was completed, it was observed that urgent actions should be taken, given the relevant data showing that military police officers and firefighters from Espírito Santo needed to seek treatment and/or therapies. It is important to point out that they did not obtain it, and were also unaware of the ways to achieve it.

Furthermore, "the biographies demonstrate that the lack of interest in these services is largely due to economic issues and prejudice. The cost of psychiatric services in the country is very high" (Miranda, 2016, p. 78).

In 2020, ASPRA-ES established the Psychosocial Support Center (NAP), which aims to promote actions focused on the mental health of state military personnel. The NAP has a multidisciplinary team composed of psychologists, social workers, doctors, including psychiatrists, aiming to provide free, simplified and unbureaucratic treatment to military personnel who need this care.

Another relevant sector of NAP/ASPRA-ES is the Suicide Observatory, whose role is to catalog information related to completed and attempted suicides by military police officers and firefighters in the state of Espírito Santo. Furthermore, this sector is responsible for accessing the Unified Bulletin<sup>3</sup> records in order to identify the means used, the professional category and the corporation of the military officer, in addition to the circumstances surrounding the suicide cases.

The creation of the Suicide Observatory is justified by the complexity of obtaining reliable data on suicide cases within military corporations, given the tendency to hide or camouflage such occurrences.

It is important to remember that suicide cases are stigmatized and underreported events. The stigma surrounding suicide and mental health as a whole often prevents people from seeking help, which could prevent deaths (Epidemiological Bulletin, 2024).

Access to reliable data on suicide attempts in Brazil and around the world is even more complex when we shift the focus of the analysis to military police institutions whose organizational structures are highly hierarchical and rigid. This difficulty is also confirmed in international studies (Violanti, 2007).

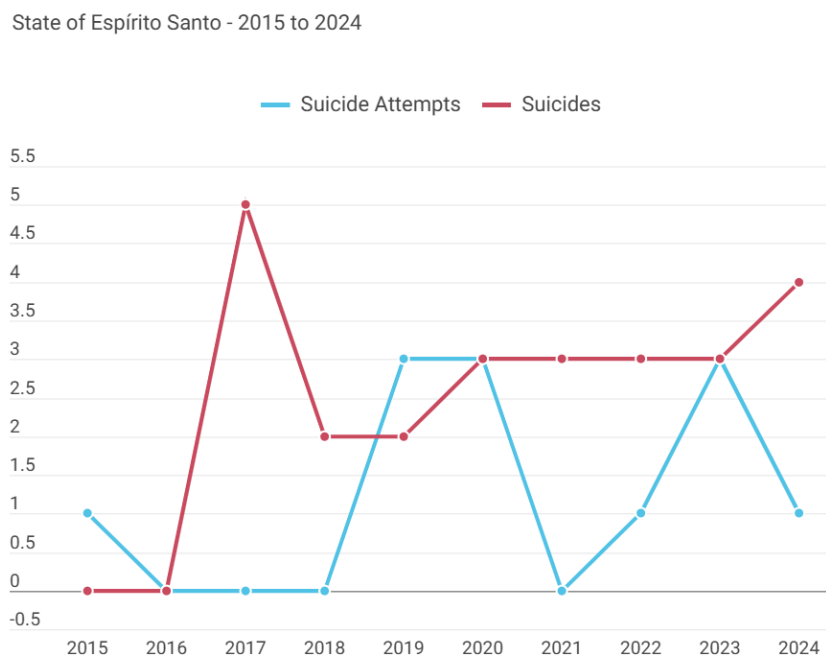
Since we started addressing the issue in the Yearbooks, we have drawn attention to the fact that these records are underreported, since there is a lot of taboo surrounding the issue, especially in public security institutions (Brazilian Public Security Yearbook, 2024).

Suicide among workers generally occurs after events that “disqualify the contribution” of the person in their activity. However, there is a relative tendency to associate suicide with personal and individual issues, without putting work in perspective as a cause despite the centrality it occupies in people’s lives. (Merlo, 2018).

<sup>3</sup>The Unified Bulletin is an official document that aims to formalize and consolidate, in a single record, the data collected by all security forces in the state of Espírito Santo regarding the occurrence of crimes or activities carried out by any security force linked to the Secretariat of Public Security and Social Defense (SESP). This document replaces the old procedure of drawing up a Police Report (BO), unifying this information in a single instrument.

The NAP/ASPRA-ES Suicide Observatory has been independently collecting information on suicides and attempted suicides of active or inactive military police officers and firefighters belonging to the military police and military fire department of Espírito Santo since 2015, as shown in the graph below:

Figure 1 - Suicides and attempted suicides by military police officers and firefighters



Adapted from Suicide Observatory of ASPRA-ES - Association of Military Police and Military Fire Department Officers of the State of Espírito Santo, 2024.

Since the beginning of the monitoring carried out by the NAP/ASPRA-ES Observatory in 2015, a significant increase in suicide cases was observed in 2017. This year in particular can be associated with the events and repercussions of the strike movement that occurred at the same time, which possibly influenced the registration of five cases of suicide among military personnel.

In subsequent years, 2018 and 2019, there was a sharp decrease in records, with only two cases reported. However, as of 2020, the State of Espírito Santo had been reporting an annual average of three cases of suicide among military personnel. However, in 2024, Espírito Santo recorded four cases, indicating an increase in the number of suicide cases, a level close to that of 2017.

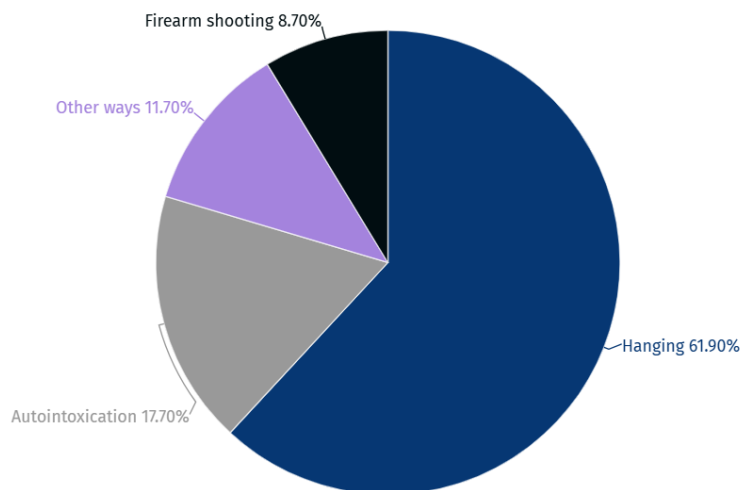
## II. ANALYSIS OF THE METHODS USED AND PROFILE OF THE ES MILITARY PERSONNEL

Methods highlighted by research carried out by the World Health Organization - WHO - have shown that the most common means of committing suicide globally are: hanging, poisoning and the use of firearms.

The 2017 Epidemiological Bulletin produced by the Health and Environmental Surveillance Secretariat of the Ministry of Health recorded, from 2011 to 2015, 55,649 deaths by suicide in Brazil, with an overall rate of 5.5/100,000 inhabitants, ranging from 5.3 in 2011 to 5.7 in 2015.

Hanging remains the main method used to commit suicide, but firearms are losing ground to deaths caused by exogenous poisoning. The most common methods used to cause deaths by suicide from 2011 to 2015 were: hanging (61.9%); self-poisoning (17.7%); gunshot (8.7%); others (11.7%), as illustrated below:

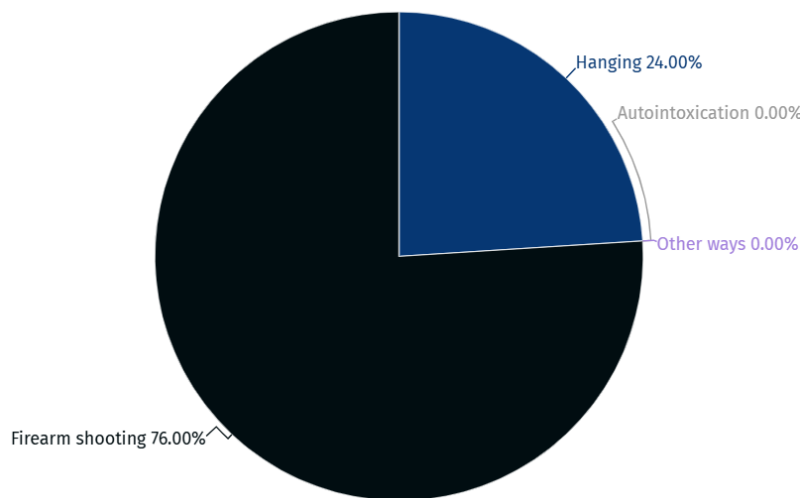
Figure 2 - Methods used to commit suicide by the general public in Brazil between 2011 and 2015



Source: adapted from epidemiological bulletin produced by the Health and Environmental Surveillance Secretariat of the Ministry of Health, 2017.

In the workplace of police officers, unlike the general population, the opportunities for access to available lethal means are greater, making firearms the main means of causing suicide. Of the 25 cases of suicides among military police officers and firefighters from Espírito Santo recorded by the NAP/ASPRA-ES Suicide Observatory, 19 military personnel (76%) used the material common to their work instrument as their main means of killing themselves: a firearm. Of the remaining 6 military personnel (24%) used hanging to end their own lives, as shown in figure 3:

Figure 3 - Methods used to commit suicide by military police officers and military firefighters in the state of Espírito Santo between 2017 and 2024



Source: adapted from the suicide observatory of ASPRA-ES - Association of Military Police Officers and from the Military Fire Department of the state of Espírito Santo, 2024.

The NAP/ASPRA-ES Suicide Observatory identified that, among the 19 cases of suicide registered among military personnel in the State of Espírito Santo who used firearms, 9 were committed with privately owned weapons. The other 9 occurrences involved weapons that belonged to the corporation to which the military personnel was linked. In one case, it was not possible to determine the category of the weapon used, due to the lack of data in the Unified Bulletin (BU).

This survey highlights the importance of investigating the circumstances and contexts in which firearms are accessed and used, contributing to the formulation of prevention and intervention strategies in the area of military mental health.

Another piece of data collected indicates a relevant aspect in the analysis of suicide cases among military personnel in Espírito Santo: the predominance of enlisted personnel among the individuals who committed suicide. Of the registered cases, 96% (24 soldiers) belonged to the category of enlisted men, while only 4% (1 soldier) were officers.

When examining the two sources of data on violent deaths in the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro (PMERJ), Miranda (2016) concludes that the profile of military police officers who committed suicide between 2005 and 2009 presents common characteristics. These individuals are predominantly men, married or in a stable relationship, with children, and are mostly evangelical and belong to the rank and file, including sergeants, corporals and soldiers.

Of the 26 military personnel analyzed by Miranda (2016), 24 were enlisted personnel, including warrant officers, sergeants, corporals and soldiers. In addition, the sample included two colonels. This hierarchical distribution highlights the predominance of enlisted personnel among the cases, which may indicate the need for special attention to issues affecting this specific group within the military forces.

Analysis of data collected by the NAP/ASPRA-ES Observatory reveals a significant distribution of ranks among military personnel who committed suicide. Among the cases catalogued, soldiers stand out as the most

representative category, corresponding to 48% (12 cases) of the total. Next, sergeants represent 28% (7 cases), while corporals correspond to 20% (5 cases).

Additionally, it is noted that the only case recorded among military officers refers to a senior officer, specifically in the rank of major.

Among the military personnel mentioned, it is observed that the majority of the individuals involved were on active duty. Specifically, 68% (17 military personnel) of cases registered belonged to the active staff of the Espírito Santo State Military Police (PMES) and the Espírito Santo State Military Fire Department (CBMES). In the other hand, 32% (8 soldiers) were inactive, including those who were in a situation of unpaid reserve or reform, which is analogous to retirement.

Although the numbers present worrying data, the information provided by the 2024 Brazilian Public Security Yearbook reveals that the state of Espírito Santo recorded the lowest number of suicide cases among police officers in the Southeast region, in the years 2022 and 2023. Specifically, 03 cases were recorded in each of these years in Espírito Santo, contrasting with the absolute numbers of other states in the region: Rio de Janeiro, 05 cases in 2022 and 13 cases in 2023; in Minas Gerais, 16 cases in 2022 and 13 cases in 2023; and in São Paulo, 19 cases in 2022 and 31 cases in 2023.

Still in the southeast region of Brazil, when analyzing the suicide rates per group of 1,000 active police officers in 2023, Espírito Santo remains tied with the states of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais, with a rate of 0.3%, with the state of São Paulo standing out with a rate of 0.4%.

### **III. PREVENTION AND CARE ACTIONS DEVELOPED BY ASPRA-ES**

ASPRA-ES is recognized as a representative entity of the state military class and considered a public utility by state law no. 10,976, of 01/19/2019. In order to minimize the impacts on the mental health of military workers, the front line of the work developed by it is the salary appreciation of these agents before the state's political authorities.

Cited by Miranda (2016) in her diagnostic research on the Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro, she identified a pattern of motivations among "suicidal" police officers, showing that the majority of police officers attributed their act to family issues, conflicts in the workplace, health issues and, lastly, financial problems.

Reinforcing the relevance of the class representative entity and the financial aspect in the mental health of police officers and firefighters, Law No. 14,531, of January 10, 2023, was recently sanctioned by the President of the Republic, which institutes the National Policy for the Prevention of Self-harm and Suicide, to provide for the implementation of social assistance actions, the promotion of mental health and the prevention of suicide among public security and social defense professionals and to institute national guidelines for the promotion and defense of the human rights of public security and social defense professionals.

Art. 42-D establishes that: "The following are the object of special attention of the occupational health and safety guidelines for public security and social defense professionals: VII - the remuneration policy with collective negotiation to restore the purchasing power of remuneration, with the participation of representative entities;" (Law No. 14,531, 2023, p. 6).

Another important mission, created by ASPRA-ES in 2020, the Psychosocial Support Center - NAP - has been providing psychological assistance to military police officers and firefighters, extending to their dependents.

Records from 2020 until the end of the first half of 2024 show the number of more than 3,000 psychological consultations carried out for more than 1,734 patients/people served.

In the ranking of the main demands brought by police officers and firefighters from Espírito Santo for psychological care to NAP/ASPRA, the center's psychologist Jhenifer Costa highlights in descending order: anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, burnout syndrome, suicidal behavior, problems with interpersonal relationships and alcohol and/or drug abuse.

In particular regarding suicidal behavior, most of these demands are presented by military personnel who are held in the Military Prison, located within the QCG - PMES General Command Headquarters.

In the field of prevention, ASPRA-ES adopts the preventive strategy of encouraging the practice of sports activities and various physical exercises. This approach has the potential to reduce the risk and incidence of mental and somatic illnesses, in addition to creating an environment that is favorable to maintaining a healthy standard of living. By providing support for military personnel to maintain or develop an active lifestyle, it is possible to achieve better levels of performance and quality in their social and professional activities.

Regular physical activity is recognized as a crucial element in promoting a healthy lifestyle, contributing significantly to work capacity, well-being, mental health and quality of life (Karnoven, 1996).

The sporting event entitled 'ASPRA-ES Football Cup', whose first edition took place in 2019, is held annually with the participation of military personnel from units belonging to the PMES and CBMES battalions. It is a statewide competition, with the participation of battalions located both in the Greater Vitória Metropolitan Region and in the interior of the state. The competition has a significant participation, exceeding the mark of 500 military personnel registered per edition, in addition to lasting for a long period due to the extensive schedule of games involved.

The antidepressant effects of physical exercise were found most frequently in studies carried out with aerobic exercises, although these effects can also be attributed to anaerobic exercises (Martinsen, Hoffart & Solberg, 1989).

Also active in sports, ASPRA-ES promotes annually, in August, the sports event called 'Corrida do Soldado', in allusion to the commemorative date of Soldier's Day, celebrated nationally on August 25th. This athletic competition aims to pay tribute not only to active military personnel in the rank of soldier, but to all members of military corporations.

In contrast to the rules of the ASPRA-ES Football Cup, the sports event entitled "Corrida do Soldado" allows civilians to participate, bringing together approximately two thousand people, of which around 25% (500 participants) are members of the Espírito Santo military corporations, acting as competitors. At the end of the athletic event, there is a space dedicated to socializing and interaction among the participants, intended for post-competition activities.

To improve the quality of life of police officers and firefighters, ASPRA-ES also promotes several other collective institutional events that aim to reunite colleagues and bring their families closer together.

The association has dedicated itself to organizing special events on special dates, such as Christmas, Easter and Children's Day, with the aim of creating moments of joy and fellowship for the military community. These initiatives are essential to promote a welcoming and festive environment, contributing to the reduction of stress, anxiety and depression among participants.

Well-planned and executed events can contribute significantly to the quality of life of participants, promoting not only physical well-being, but also social and emotional well-being (Getz, 2008).

According to Cohen and Wills (1985), social support can act as a protection against the adverse impacts of stress, which can lead to an improvement in quality of life.

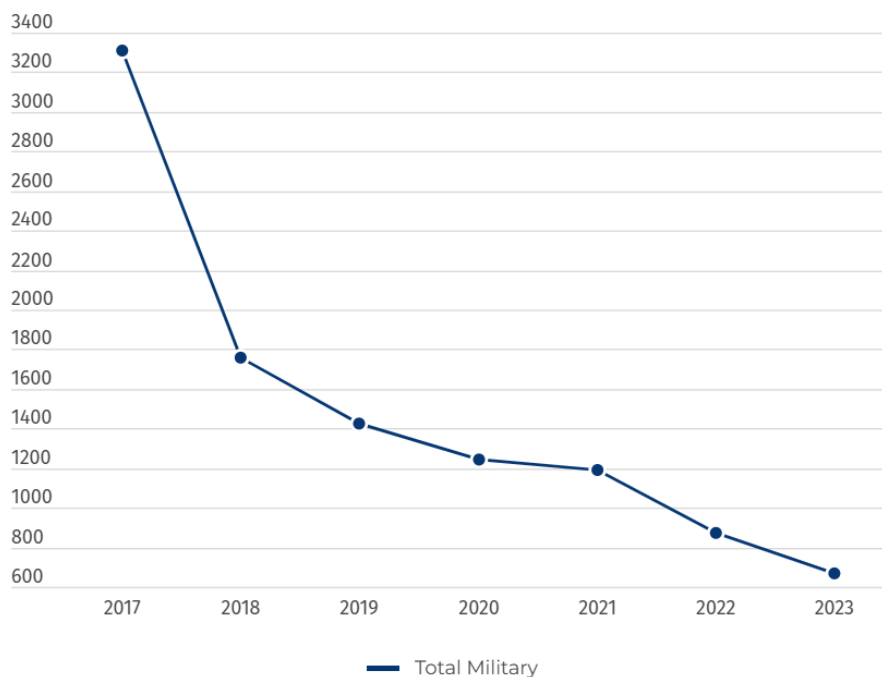
Events provide a safe and inclusive space where people can interact, socialize and strengthen community bonds. The joy generated by these celebrations not only lifts the spirits of those who attend, but also acts as a protective factor against mental health issues, promoting emotional well-being.

Diener and Seligman (2004) state that quality of life is influenced not only by economic aspects, but also by emotional well-being and social interactions.

Based on several prevention initiatives implemented by the association, which reaffirms its commitment to promoting the mental health and well-being of military police officers and firefighters, a reduction in the rates of medical absences for this category was observed in the state of Espírito Santo.

Data from SIARHES demonstrate the effectiveness of the reduction in sick leave related to ICD F, which covers mental and behavioral disorders. In 2017, the PMES and CBMES corporations recorded a total of 3,310 military personnel who were laid off for this reason. In contrast, in 2023, only 671 police officers and firefighters were laid off from their activities, which represents a significant decrease of 79.72% in this type of sick leave, as illustrated below:

Figure 4 - Medical leave for PMES and CBMES employees with CID F classification.



Source: adapted from SIARHES Statistics Results -Integrated Human Resources Management System of Espírito Santo, 2024.

#### IV. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Note the relevance of professional associations in supporting the mental health of military professionals, despite the existence of pertinent legislation and the limited implementation of public policies.

Suicide rates vary across occupations depending on the availability of lethal methods. In the context of law enforcement, firearms can be seen as a facilitating factor. While the most common method of suicide among the general population is hanging, firearms are the most common method among security and social defense professionals.

It is noted that since the emergence of the ASPRA-ES Psychosocial Support Center, the number of sick leave absences for PMES and CBMES employees classified as having mental and behavioral disorders has been decreasing.

The NAP/ASPRA-ES Suicide Observatory, by analyzing the implications of social and institutional factors that may be related to these statistics, contributes to the understanding and prevention of suicide in the military population.

Numerous studies show that regular moderate-intensity physical activity helps maintain and restore overall health, and is also positively related to mental and social health. This results in beneficial changes in lifestyle, leading to an improvement in quality of life.

The literature shows that suicides can be prevented, and it is essential to implement comprehensive and integrated prevention actions involving various sectors of society, including education. Among the strategies to prevent suicide, the importance of the participation of managers and health professionals in planning initiatives and defining interventions focused on prevention stands out. In addition, it is essential to promote intersectoral collaboration that results in the formation of community support networks.

Despite the progress observed over the years, data on victimization remain unsatisfactory and require substantial improvement. It is clear that suicide continues to be a taboo subject, which suggests the possibility of significant underreporting of cases. In this context, we believe that a crucial step would be to direct efforts to improve reporting mechanisms for these incidents, as well as to increase the visibility of statistics and characteristics associated with the phenomenon, with the aim of supporting the formulation of effective prevention strategies.

Federal Law No. 14,531/2023, which establishes the National Policy for the Prevention of Self-Harm and Suicide, addresses the mitigation of suicide among police professionals, highlighting the growing demand and concern about this issue. It is clear that the functions performed by state military personnel are immersed in a diverse range of constraints, both in the contexts in which they operate and in the emergencies they respond to. These professionals, men and women, maintain direct contact with the population and face serious social issues related to violence and crime. Thus, it is plausible, without the need for great effort, to conceive of the variabilities and complexities inherent in their activities, as well as the physical, cognitive, and psychological demands to which they are subjected.

It is worth noting that addressing the phenomenon of suicide in a responsible manner acts much more as a preventive element than as a risk factor, and can even help to deconstruct the stigma surrounding this issue.

Therefore, discussing this issue in a thoughtful manner and confronting stigmas, in addition to promoting awareness and encouraging prevention, can help combat the public health problem that suicide represents. Expanding the care network at all levels of complexity is also an essential action, especially with regard to specialized outpatient care and support in crisis and emergency situations.

Keeping a close eye on the work environment is essential and can be an indicator of the overall well-being of

the workforce. Ensuring that each element of the workplace is functioning at its optimal capacity not only facilitates the harmonious functioning of the entire system, but also protects against the effects of critical work-related incidents and adverse life events that are experienced as part of the daily routine. As we better understand the influence of this variable on mental health over time, potential interventions that can help reduce stressors in the military environment will become clearer and more appropriate. These actions will undoubtedly not only impact all aspects of the workplace, but will also have a broader effect on morale and unity among military personnel.

Efficient interventions, based on evidence and reliable data, can be applied to specific groups and individuals to prevent suicide attempts and death. Preventing suicide means preserving the investments of the State, society and the person's family.

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