

Analysis of Line-of-Duty Deaths

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm Jennifer Donelan, your host. Today, we're going to be talking about a new publication, *Making It Safer*. It was released by the COPS Office and the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund in late March. But we have John Matthews. He is the director of Federal Partnerships with the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, and he's going to be talking with us about the report. And really, what was the story behind the development of this report?

John Matthews

00:45

Well, the real genesis of the report is that we wanted to look at officer line of duty death fatalities but not just to examine how the officers died, but to see if there were patterns, trends, behaviors, actions, decisions that we could cull out of the research to keep other officers alive. And so in paying tribute to our fallen officers, we looked at the data. We studied the research. We analyzed it, and we said we have some key findings that we think we can pass on to the law enforcement community to help keep our officers safe out there on the street.

Donelan

01:21

Was this a big undertaking looking at all of these numbers from across the country?

Matthews

01:27

At the Memorial Fund, we have records. Our research team has records of all of the officer line of duty deaths, and so we have that in our database. I think it's the most comprehensive officer line of duty death database in the entire nation. We update our stats every single day. You can go onto our website and find out today exactly where you are as far as line of duty deaths, were they firearm, were they traffic, or other type of fatalities.

This report took us over a year to complete, and it looked at data from 2010 to 2016. But since we finished it up at the end of the year, we also included 2017 data. So a little over three months from the time we stopped the data collection, the report was on the street and out into the hands of the law enforcement community so that they could look at this important data.

Donelan

02:21

Having data in real time, there is really nothing more effective there. The key findings. This is really looking into the past, looking into the lives that we've lost, and learning and taking from those lessons in an effort to have a safer future for those who are out there, serving and protecting us as we speak. What were the key findings?

Matthews

02:42

Well, I'll give you some of the key data points first such as domestic violence. Again, it's the most dangerous call for service. We see more officers killed by that call than any other but followed at number two by suspicious persons. That's really, really different because suspicious persons a lot of times we don't get very much information on it. The dispatcher just says oh it's a suspicious person, respond to it. So what we take from that is you have to keep a heightened sense of awareness all the time when you're on duty. You've got to be situationally aware. When you're going into a domestic call, we know that we've got to be careful and we try to take the best actions we can. Suspicious persons, we really got to be careful and say, no, I want to be prepared because I could face anything. In our domestic violence calls, handguns were still the number one weapon used to kill officers.

Certainly, in 2016 you saw a huge spike in ambush attacks, and so we lost many, many officers in ambush attacks. And so a large part of this report was looking at where did we lose the officers. Unfortunately, a significant percentage, almost half of the officers that we lost were not on patrol. They were not responding to a call for service. They were sitting in their squad car. They were eating lunch. They were in a diner. They were filling their car up with gas. So that's very, very disturbing to us in law enforcement.

Some other key findings we saw of course are the officers that don't wear their seatbelts. If there's one thing that we can tell you, if you want to go home to your family at night, you want to see your loved ones again, wear your seatbelt and wear your body armor. Very, very disturbing that every single year when we look at this report, when we do the analysis, the number of officers that are not wearing their seatbelt and are killed especially in a single vehicle crash, and then the number of officers that are not wearing their body armor.

So that is very disheartening, and so we want that message to go out to our law enforcement partners all throughout the nation. Encourage your officers. First line supervisors, make sure they're wearing their belts and wearing their body armor. And one other thing that is a big takeaway from this is complacency. Officers cannot be complacent. They've got to remain situationally aware. Many times we had officers like on traffic stops lose their life even before they exited the vehicle. You've got to be tactically aware anytime you're out there and on duty. Those are some of the big takeaways.

Donelan

05:21

What's the argument from the law enforcement side or what are you up against in trying to convince law enforcement officers to wear their seatbelts? Is it the response time? Is it your argument that my response time will be reduced or somehow affected if I have to remove that seatbelt?

Matthews

05:41

You know I've heard every excuse in the world and it's an excuse. I've been in law enforcement for 34 years. I've done every position in law enforcement and let me tell you, even when I'm responding to a call for service or if I'm out on the street, as I'm slowing down, as I'm approaching the call, as I'm putting my vehicle in park, I'm undoing my belt, I'm flicking it out, I'm putting it to the side of me so it doesn't get hung up on my name badge, and it doesn't get hung up on my gun belt if I'm left-handed. I've heard every excuse.

And when you have to go through officer line of duty deaths every day and every year and you have to see the needless deaths, let me tell you, there is no good reason, tactical reason, law enforcement reason that you're not wearing your seatbelt. And the thing that really gets me is this generation of officers—they've all grown up on seatbelts. Right?

Donelan

06:35

Oh, sure. [Cross-talking]

Matthews

06:38

As children they were put in their booster seat. They were put in a car seat. They got in their car. They wore their seatbelt. They wore it all the way up until they put the badge on, and then stopped wearing it. We want to tell you, to plead with you, wear your seatbelt, wear your vest, and go home at night to your family, your friends, your loved one.

Donelan

06:59

You brought up police ambushes and the number of that, just the dramatic increase that you've seen in that. When you talk about situational awareness, is that the one thing that an officer out there on the streets right now—because it is an ambush. These are ambush attacks. How do you guide law enforcement to protect themselves against that?

Matthews

07:26

Jennifer, that is a great question because you think by definition an ambush is a surprise attack, and it is a surprise attack. But when we break down the data and we look at the individual cases, a lot of times we are finding that there is communication failures. Say two officers are responding to a call for service.

The first officer may be the primary officer. The dispatcher is his dispatcher, and she'll advise him. This is a call with the individual that's got prior mental health issues. This is a call with someone that may have weapons and may have had violent encounters with the police before. And the backup officer, who may be from another jurisdiction doesn't get the same information. And so sometimes it's a communication problem. But there are things that we can be doing in law enforcement to try to help reduce these ambush attacks. Being situationally aware at all times is imperative. Knowing your surroundings, changing your route to and from work. One of the things that I found was amazing is that 56 percent of the time when we were ambushed, we weren't answering a call for service. Nowadays, when you're sitting in that squad car, I mean that's a huge target for someone that is bent on seeking out law enforcement officers. So we want you to be aware of that.

Donelan

08:41

Is this—my last question to you—because we're talking about an emotional topic, you're talking about lives lost, you're talking about people's feelings, you're talking about people with PTSD as a result, damage, wounds, the whole nine. Is this a difficult conversation to have when you're talking about lives lost and you're trying to learn lessons and glean lessons from those lives lost in an effort to save more lives? There is obviously a very concrete, wonderful reason behind this. But is it a difficult conversation to have with people? Do people feel like, oh, you're Monday quarterbacking me, or you're Monday quarterbacking what my officer did? When in fact, no, you're trying to save the next officer's life.

Matthews

09:30

That's exactly right, and for us it's not a difficult conversation because we're simply analyzing the data. We're looking at the investigation results and all of the information that we gather on each of these line of duty deaths. Our sole goal is to save future officers. For us, even though it's a hard topic to talk about, even though sometimes people don't want to hear especially a graphic scenario or whatever, if we can go in and we can say listen, if we can give you data points that allow you to change your policy, to modify your procedure, to talk to your officers in roll call, to provide you information, awareness, education that saves somebody's life, it's all worth it.

I don't mind. I've gone to roll call sessions all over the nation and I don't mind taking five minutes out and letting the troops know. Listen, I'm here to talk to you about these officers and how they lost their lives. But it's in the context of I don't want to be back here bearing a flag. I don't want to see you on the wall at the Memorial. I want you to go home to your family every night and if I can tell you two, three, four things that stick with you during your day, during your tour of duty, that you can remember as you're answering a call for service, hey, he said to do this or not to do this, and it keeps you alive, that's the best job you can have. So when you're out there talking and working with these agencies and saving lives, I think it's a fantastic job and a fantastic duty, and an obligation that I have to my fellow officers.

Donelan

11:08

I was going to say tough conversation, utterly critical one to have. Thank you so much, John Matthews, for joining us here. How can listeners find out more about this publication?

Matthews

11:21

The publication is listed on the COPS Office website. It's also on the Memorial Fund website at lawmemorial.org. If you go to our officers safety and wellness section, and you just click on the COPS report, Making It Safer comes up is the first report you're going to see. Take a look at the report. Read it. Look at the graphics, really good graphics in there, and great suggestions at the end of it. We've got a staff directory on there. You can simply call us or email us and we can send you a copy.

Donelan

11:52

Okay. Great. That is lawmemorial.org. Okay. Mr. Matthews, thank you so much for joining us.

Matthews

11:59

Thank you very much.

Donelan

12:01

Thank you for the work that you're doing over there. We know it's saving lives. Listeners, thank you and please be safe out there and thank you for joining us on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

12:12

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

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