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COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

# **Officer Safety and Wellness:** An Overview of the Issues

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## Defining the Issue

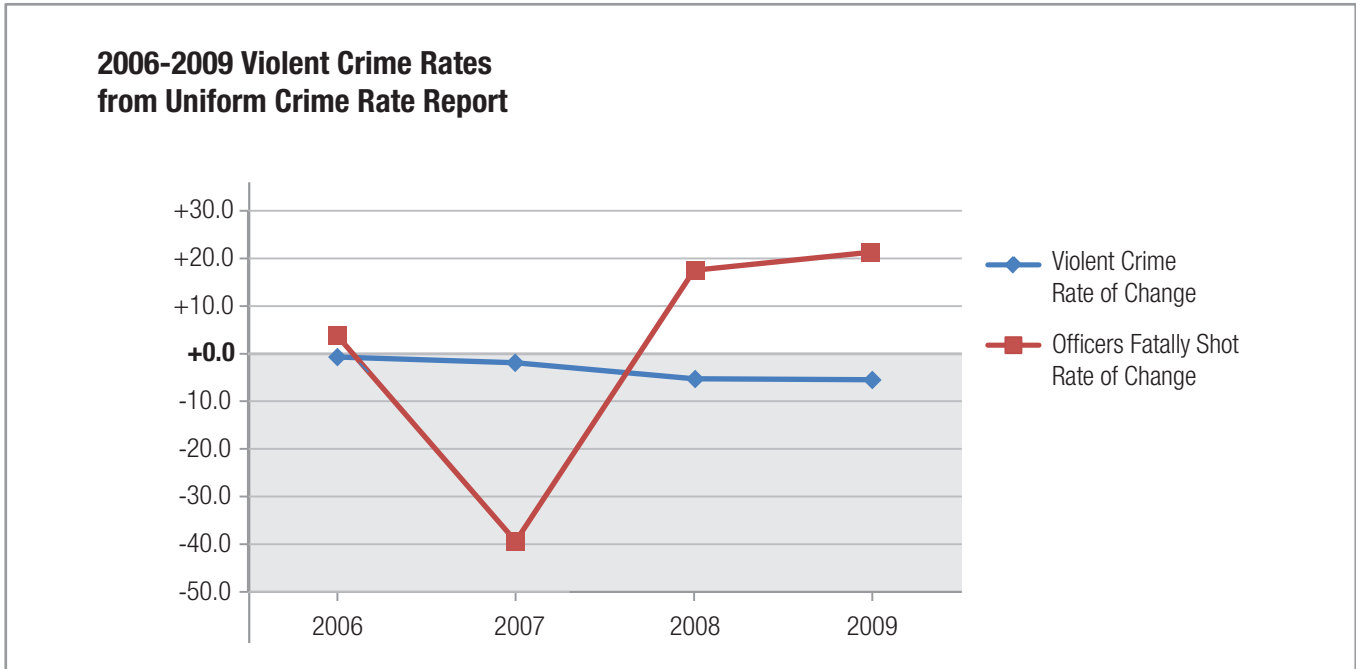
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In the past year, our country has experienced economic challenges that have translated into major changes in the way law enforcement delivers services. Budget cuts for a significant number of law enforcement agencies have resulted in layoffs, furloughs, hiring freezes, retirement incentives, and operation consolidation or elimination. Other agencies, in their attempt to preserve officer strength, are cutting their budgets by eliminating crucial in-service training and health prevention programs.

While agencies are determining how to best manage their shrinking budgets, these changes are impacting officers<sup>1</sup> in various ways, such as creating larger patrol areas to cover, decreasing the number of backup officers, and increasing stress due to a myriad of factors experienced in the field. Most importantly, these changes impact officer safety, wellness, and health. At a time when an agency's most important resource is its personnel, officers are expected to continue providing quality and efficient services under the umbrella of declining opportunities for training, health, and wellness programs—all important factors that contribute to maintaining officer safety and welfare.

Data from Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA)<sup>2</sup> reports that 57,268 officers were assaulted on duty in 2009, with 18,672 of those events occurring at locations from which officers received disturbance calls. This was followed by 8,797 officers assaulted while attempting to make an arrest and 7,274 assaults sustained during handling, transporting, and supervising prisoners.<sup>3</sup> From 2000–2009, a total of 728 officers were accidentally killed due to events such as automobile, motorcycle, or aircraft accidents; being struck by cars; shooting accidents; drowning or falling; or explosion or electrocution accidents.<sup>4</sup>

According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, [www.nleomf.com](http://www.nleomf.com), the total number of officers killed in the line of duty from January 1 to September 14, 2011 is 124, a 4 percent increase compared to 2010. Based on the same timeframe, auto related deaths are down 15 percent, and the number of officers fatally shot is up 14 percent.



**Figure 1. 2006–2009 Rate of Change in Violent Crime of Officers Fatally Shot**

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, unpublished

Violent crime rates were not only down in 2009 but also showed a steady decline since 2006. However, as violent crime rates went down, the number of officers fatally shot in the line of duty has been increasing. Brazen and senseless attacks on officers that have resulted in death have been primarily through ambushed or unprovoked incidents. Ambushes have attributed to nearly 40 percent of the officers feloniously killed in 2011, an increase of 31.25 percent from the 2009 LEOKA data. According to the same data, 21.5 percent of the law enforcement officers feloniously killed from 2000–2009 were the victims of an ambush.<sup>5</sup>

Then there are the silent contributors to an officer’s poor health and well-being, such as stress, poor nutrition, no exercise, post-traumatic stress, and depression. Through diet, exercise, and adequate sleep, officers can reduce their chances of hypertension, heart disease, cancer, degenerative joint diseases, and diabetes.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on officer health, safety, and wellness is critical. As such, this paper is a call to action for agencies to preserve and support the well-being of the law enforcement officer. This is not an exhaustive list of current research, best practices, services, or training opportunities; this paper is a launching point from which to raise national attention to consider and discuss the gaps in research, to recognize best practices, and to identify existing resources available to agencies so that they can preserve their most valuable resource—their personnel.

Fostering a safe working environment, protecting the safety of officers, and supporting health and wellness priorities can be broadly defined under four categories:

- Leadership and Management
- Operational and Emergency Responses
- Training
- Mental and Physical Health Wellness

## **Leadership and Management**

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Leadership and management are the cornerstones to ensuring officer safety, health, and wellness as an organizational value and practice. Setting the tone for the organization begins with walking the walk—leadership should maintain their health and fitness, thus setting the example for all.

Management should ensure officers are provided the best safety policies and procedures, opportunities to train, time to hone their skills and abilities, and resources to make safety a priority for the organization. Some agencies may be tempted to cut training and health and wellness resources, but these should be considered mission critical to the profession and cuts should be avoided at all costs. Just like an agency should not send a cruiser out with low tire pressure or inoperable lights and sirens, an agency should not send an officer into the field who is overweight, overly tired or stressed, or unsure how to best approach an incident.

Maintaining optimum health and well-being for officers is crucial in enabling them to think and perform in a manner that safeguards not only them but also their fellow officers. Numerous services and training are available that encourage physical, nutritional, and mental health. Also, accessibility and support without retribution or shame will optimize an officer's well-being and help to ensure peak performance.

Accountability is the number one factor in upholding the best safety and wellness practices. Constant equipment compliance checks, proper weapons deployment, and policy and procedure enforcement can significantly minimize officer injuries and fatalities. Ongoing monitoring and enforcing compliance will set the tone for meeting high standards, expectations, and practices that help to ensure officer safety.

Examples of tangible strategies for leadership and management are:

- Reviewing and implementing deployment strategies that minimize safety risks
- Utilizing real-time communication and state-of-the art technologies for field officers
- Enforcing the proper fit and wearing of protective body armor and gear

Regarding example one, some things to consider when developing and implementing deployment schedules include the number of officers assigned per car in a high-crime area, geographical distance between units to provide timely backup, and avoidance of situations that contribute to sleep deprivation, such as scheduling night shift officers to report for duty the following day. Sleep deprivation is a major concern, and its impact from overtime and secondary employment should also be considered in deployment schedules.

According to research by Dr. Bryan Vila, a leading sleep research expert on the effects of officer fatigue, sleep deprivation contributes to officers' irritability with the public and inability to maintain calm in situations due to diminishing attentiveness; it also impairs physical and cognitive abilities.<sup>7</sup> Sleep deprivation "sets up a vicious cycle: fatigue decreases your ability to deal with stress and stress decreases your ability to deal with fatigue."<sup>8</sup>

Other contributing causes of fatigue include:

- Shift lengths – officers on compressed (12-hour) shifts feel less fatigue at the beginning of the shift
- Shift assignment policies – older officers assigned to night shifts are less able to cope with fatigue and sleep disturbances
- Commuting – officers confronted with long commuting distances are more fatigued, especially if confronted with high volumes of traffic<sup>9</sup>

Also, utilizing advanced technology and wearing effective safety gear (e.g., body armor and advanced weaponry) help to enhance street safety. It is worth budgeting for technology that increases an officer's capacity to remain safe, such as access to real-time data and multi-jurisdictional criminal records while in the field. Other ways agencies can capitalize on advanced technology is by improving reflective markings on cruisers (e.g., upgrading to LED lighting) and installing new and more effective seatbelt mechanisms that clear the officer's belt and gun holster, thus improving driver safety. One of the latest technological advancements is the wearing of body cameras, which document the events of an incident, leaving no question as to appropriate safety measures and department protocol in handling a situation.

Two of the most proactive measures an agency can take in ensuring officer safety on the streets are 1) mandatory wearing of body armor and 2) maintaining state-of-the-art armories. There are countless stories of body armor having saved officers' lives. LEOKA data shows that 521 officers were feloniously shot and killed from 1997–2006, and 306 of them were wearing body armor.<sup>10</sup> These fatalities, however, were due to shots in other areas of the body that the armor could not shield. Only one officer was fatally shot when struck in the body due to armor failure. As stated in "The BJA/PERF Body Armor National Survey: Protecting the Nation's Law Enforcement Officer" report, out of the 782 agencies surveyed, 99.4 percent wear body armor when on duty, and 41 percent do not require officers to wear body armor.<sup>11</sup>

Equally important is how officers select, care, and maintain their vests. The “Selection and Application Guide to Personal Body Armor” outlines the latest on armor classifications for duty assignments and care and maintenance, among other important related topics.<sup>12</sup> In addition, “Ballistic Resistance of Body Armor NIJ Standard-0101.06” describes “conditioning protocols, revised test methods, changes to the levels of armor classification, and more stringent performance requirements.”<sup>13</sup>

The second most important proactive measure an agency can take is maintaining weaponry and building police arsenals to compete with the criminals on the street (e.g., AR-15s, Tec-9s, AK-47s, and Uzis). With criminals commonly using assault weapons, an officer showing up at a gun fight with a handgun will only jeopardize the safety of his or her own life. Due to the proliferation of assault weapons on the street, more and more agencies are adding high-powered assault rifles to their arsenals. Equipping officers with state-of-the-art weaponry from less than lethal to lethal will help to reduce risk of injury or death.

Electronic control weapons (ECWs) are becoming an agency’s go-to weapon in situations that require less than lethal force. “More than 15,500 law enforcement agencies in more than 40 countries are using ECWs.”<sup>14</sup> Granted, there are safety risks with these weapons, but the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office) recently published the 2011 Electronic Control Weapon Guidelines, which suggests policies and training procedures to improve officer and civilian safety when ECWs are deployed.

## **Operational and Emergency Responses**

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All too often an incident can go wrong when an officer might least expect it, and the unpredictability of a suspect’s actions heightens an officer’s safety risk. Any proactive measures an agency can implement to improve these risks are worthy of its time and resources. Operational and emergency responses can be addressed in numerous areas, but the four topics agencies should immediately begin with are vehicle and foot pursuits, task force operations, offender information, and court security. The only cost is time if agencies review, develop, and implement risk mitigation plans, policies, and procedures.

There have been ongoing discussions over the years regarding the safety and value of vehicle pursuits and the unintended consequences of property damage and vehicular accidents and deaths for officers, the public, and suspects. Recently, the Kansas Department of Transportation released data showing that 38 people died from 2000–2009 in crashes during police pursuits—26 were drivers, 7 were passengers, and 5 were victims who had no involvement in the chase.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Wichita is reviewing their pursuit policies because their police were involved in 170 vehicle pursuits (the lowest since they began keeping record in 2006), of which 1 in 4 resulted in crashes.<sup>16</sup>

Until 2011, the number one cause of officer deaths was motor vehicle crashes, which is now second to officers fatally shot in the line of duty.<sup>17</sup> According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), from 1982–2008 a total of 823 law enforcement officers were killed—733 were in passenger vehicles and 90 were on motorcycles.<sup>18</sup>

Areas to consider when reviewing vehicle pursuits include the types of pursuits, reporting procedures, training, injuries, deaths, litigations, and policies and procedures, all of which will ensure the implementation of best practices. Alternative methods to slowing a suspect's vehicle should be considered as well, although they also have safety risks and should be carefully evaluated for safety deployment procedures.

Foot pursuits have led to numerous officer injuries, which often takes them off the streets. Thus, officers are assigned to light-duty positions, medically retired or, worse, killed in the line of duty. Determining the risks of foot pursuits is imperative, not only for the safety of the pursuing officer but also for the backup officers and public. From January 1 through August 31, 2011, out of 50 officers fatally shot in the United States, two were involved in foot pursuits.<sup>19</sup>

Ongoing training is important to ensure officers understand the contributing risk factors that can lead to an injury or death due to a foot pursuit. Such risk factors include acting alone, chasing someone in unfamiliar areas or where there are hostile feelings toward police, pursuing an armed suspect or multiple suspects, and taking action without available backup.<sup>20</sup> Additional risk factors are officers being physically unfit, having no means of communications, running in poor weather (i.e., icy conditions), and undertaking a chase in darkness.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes, the safety risks may not be worth pursuing a fleeing suspect, and knowing when to stand-down is essential.

Reviewing vehicle and foot policies and procedures to assure they are up-to-date is another component of risk factor mitigation. Even though many agencies send officers policy and procedure updates, the officers are not always dependable in actually looking at the updates, which turns a resource into a potential job hazard for officers if the update discusses the handling of critical incidents. CALEA requires through their standards that agencies post and track the reading of updated policies. However, a lot of agencies are not CALEA-accredited and, therefore, are not required to follow any specific standard of posting updated policies and ensuring their officers are actually reading them.

Task force operations, whether local, regional, or federal, are typically formulated to address high-incident-based criminal activity, such as drugs and weapons or sex trafficking, as well as for warrant services. In analyzing the data on officers fatally shot in the line of duty from January 1 through August 31, 2011, out of the total number of incidents that have occurred, seven involved officers serving arrest warrants that resulted in nine officers fatally shot.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps nothing could have prevented the outcome of these situations, but further analysis would help the field to understand the circumstances and determine what can be learned from these tactical operations.



For example, is there a need for more coordinating training events between local and federal partners, or are there policies and procedures that should be institutionalized?

While officers engaged in task force operations have the benefit of knowing offender history prior to serving warrants, the officer on the street most often does not readily have this information. Officers have access to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC); however, the database is not guaranteed to have the most up-to-date information on the offender. According to NCIC policy, they encourage “the inquiring agency to make contact with the entering agency to verify the information is accurate and up-to-date.”<sup>23</sup>

NCIC definitely helps officers who make traffic stops, but patrol officers, who often must arrive rapidly to a scene, must make quick decisions even though they often do not have complete information on (or even know the identity of) a suspect. Analysts, dispatchers, and police trainers all play an important role in this regard by providing as much detailed information as they can obtain while an officer is in route to a call. Literature is limited, however, regarding which systems and best practices agencies are currently utilizing to provide real-time suspect or address history.

Another critical area for consideration is court security. This year an officer was shot and killed with her service gun when she was overtaken by an offender being walked from court to the prison transportation van.<sup>24</sup> Understanding the vulnerabilities in court security and prisoner transportation is critical to ensure deputy safety in civil courts and court security officers in federal courts. Over the years, court security has been enhanced to include defense tactics, terrorist threats, bomb threats, high-risk trials, and attacks in the courtrooms.<sup>25</sup> The National Center for State Courts has recently released a publication describing best practices for court security and provides comprehensive steps to address, for example, securing access to buildings, courts, chambers, and lobbies; checking security officer staffing levels; handling in-custody defendants; and training.<sup>26</sup>

Ensuring on-the-job safety is everyone’s responsibility, but every agency should review policies and procedures for vehicle and foot pursuits, task force operations, and court security.

## **Training**

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Training is another fundamental factor for officer safety, health, and wellness and thus is not the area to cut corners or costs. It should be the primary investment made by an organization. Yet, when economic times tighten budgets, training is usually the first to be eliminated. Most agencies have annual hours dedicated for in-service training, but often the additional or advanced training opportunities are what enhance officer knowledge, minimize risks or mistakes, and help hone duty-specific skills, knowledge, and abilities.

Tactical training enables officers to keep honing skills such as driving, handling violent encounters, and operating less than lethal and lethal weapons. Driver training keeps officers well informed of best practices and executing those techniques in different training scenarios through classroom learning and driving experiences using range driving, simulators, and computer-based simulators.

Violent encounters are one of the most hazardous risks for officers. Attacks can be direct, physical (e.g., striking, pushing, tripping, grabbing, kicking, scratching, biting, or spitting), or with weapons (e.g., knives, guns, or clubs). Constant training and practicing techniques that prepare officers for situations such as these are crucial in safeguarding their lives.

An additional benefit from training is preventing injuries, which also lowers workers compensation costs. For example, the Municipal Policing Authority provides risk management to 14 police departments and 20 municipalities in Contra Costa County (California). Through their analysis, they found an increasing number of injuries resulting in officer downtime and increasing workers compensation costs primarily due to sprains and strains. They implemented a training program to address injuries caused by lifting, pushing, pulling, twisting, bending, and stooping, as well as proper techniques for stepping over barriers to avoid tripping hazards. “The overall cost of police injuries after the implementation of the Backsafe program has been reduced from \$3.5 million per year to \$1 million per year over a two-year period, representing a 70 percent decrease.”<sup>27</sup>

The corollary to training to prevent injuries is making sure injuries are not incurred while training, whether running through a slalom course or learning how to operate an ECW. Making sure officers are physically fit and understand the safety precautions when engaging in any training situation are two ways to minimize training injuries.

## **Mental and Physical Health Wellness**

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Maintaining physical health, encouraging healthy eating and sleeping patterns, and supporting mental well-being are important for officer wellness. Physical health incorporates regular exercise and proper nutrition. Maintaining a conditioned fitness level protects an officer and his or her fellow officers while working. It also has another benefit—counteracting stress and depression.

Adverse physical conditions resulting from not maintaining physical health and a proper diet include obesity, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal disorders, sleep apnea and other sleep disorders, and type 2 diabetes.<sup>28</sup> Agency requirements vary in weight maintenance and physical condition, but establishing a standard and holding officers accountable is essential to the wellness of the department. Proper exercise and diet help to maintain high-performing officers and thus help to minimize injuries and

maximize mental alertness. With budgetary cuts and increased demands on officers, the need to maintain their physical health and the ways in which agencies provide those opportunities are important areas for discussion and review.

Keeping officers physically fit is also cost effective in its ability to help prevent illness or worse. “Expending at least 2,000 calories a week in physical activity reduces an individual’s risk of dying of any cause by 28 percent. Mortality rates for unfit men were estimated at 64 per 10,000 persons. However, that number drops to 18.6 per 10,000 persons when looking at those that are most fit. Being physically fit translates into fewer sick days, disabilities, and injuries—thereby reducing health-care costs.”<sup>29</sup> Various law enforcement agencies calculated the cost of an in-service heart attack to be in the range of \$400,000 and \$750,000.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, some officers take physical conditioning to the extreme and use performance-enhancing drugs, such as dangerous anabolic steroids, to bulk up. This comes with physical health risks, such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, liver damage, and damage to the left ventricle of the heart, which increases the risk of arrhythmias, congestive heart failure, heart attacks, and sudden cardiac arrest. These drugs also create psychiatric problems such as aggression, violence, and manic behavior. Steroids are addictive, and drug withdrawals occur when discontinued. Intervention in these situations is imperative on all levels—for the health of the officer and the safety of fellow officers and the public.

The mental well-being of an officer is important to consider, especially when that officer suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or severe depression, which can lead to suicide. PTSD can be triggered by experiencing traumatic events, such as crime scenes or exceptionally heinous acts, and can affect returning military vets who experienced combat trauma. Recognizing the triggers, signs, and events that can cause PTSD will help an agency to guide and support officers in seeking the necessary help. There have been numerous studies on providing psychotherapeutic relief for those suffering from PTSD. One such treatment that the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and U.S. Department of Defense consider highly effective is Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). However, whether psychological services are made readily available to officers, whether they are encouraged to access these services, and whether they avoid seeking services from fear of being viewed weak or unable to perform in the line of duty are questions and issues that must be addressed.

Severe depression, which often leads to officer suicides, is sometimes linked to PTSD but can also be brought on by other life-altering trauma or events. In 2010, “there were 145 police suicides in the United States, a slight increase over 2009, during which there were 143. The suicide rate for police officers remains 17/100,000, compared to the general population’s rate of 11/100,000.”<sup>31</sup> Depression is debilitating and does not always result in suicide; it can manifest itself from ongoing stress and fatigue, which can also lead to alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence.

Often linked to mental well-being, emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to be aware of self-emotions and having self-confidence. Having EI helps a person not only in his or her personal competencies, such as self-awareness and self-control, but also in being able to interpret situations and manage through them effectively. “EI is not about becoming emotionally detached; it is becoming emotionally mature and confident.... According to the later version of EI that Goleman [adjunct professor at the University of New Haven, Connecticut] promulgated, EI includes:

- becoming more aware of emotional triggers that can instigate an angry violent response, such as when officers are called pigs;
- learning tactics to manage one’s own mental state during stressful situations, such as a hazardous police chase;
- being more attentive to the impact of daily emotions on long-term moods and attitudes toward colleagues and others.”<sup>32</sup>

The many aspects of mental and physical health go well beyond the scope of this paper. However, the critical aspects of investing and maintaining officer health are the primary goals to enhancing officer safety.

## **Conclusion**

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Now is the time to refocus attention on officer safety, health, and wellness concerns—to discuss and identify best practices in protecting our officers. In a time of economic uncertainty, officers have more demands than ever to perform in an environment with a declining respect for authority and where the community continues to expect a high level of service despite the decreasing number of officers and operational funds.

More than ever officers need to be able to think and perform with ease and accuracy. Maintaining and investing in officer safety, health, and wellness is one of the most critical actions an agency can take. Finding ways to achieve ongoing development is vital to the perseverance of officer wellness. A starting point for discussing the complexities, available resources, and best practices can be accomplished through leadership and management, policies and procedures, training, and healthy lifestyles.

## Notes

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- 1 For purposes of this paper, *officer* is an inclusive term that represents all sworn personnel, such as sheriffs, deputies, agents, marshals, state troopers, city police, and county police.
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