



LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER SAFETY RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BULLETIN

As part of the Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded initiative, *Using Analytics to Improve Officer Safety*, CNA's Center for Justice Research and Innovation produced this bulletin as a companion document to an issue-brief providing a more in-depth look into the risks officers may face and suggested recommendations to mitigate these risks.

Law enforcement officers (hereafter, officers) respond to some of the most unpredictable, traumatic, and violent encounters of any profession. Although much of an officer's workday entails repetitive interactions, some calls for service or self-initiated interactions may escalate into violent or dangerous encounters. Regardless of how officer line- of-duty assaults, injuries, or fatalities occur, the consequences are tragic and complex. This bulletin provides information that can inform the development of targeted training, policies, and practices to promote officer safety. Specifically, it summarizes officer safety risks related to calls for service, traffic-related encounters, ambushes, and blue-on-blue encounters, and provides recommendations to promote officer safety related to tactical preparedness.

HIGH-RISK OFFICER ENCOUNTERS

CALLS FOR SERVICE

According to Barrick, Strom, and Richardson (2018)¹ responding to highways and roads presents a higher risk than in residences. In addition to location, the type of call also affects the related risk. Johnson (2011)² found that domestic violence (DV) calls more often lead to officer injury than other calls because of the frequency of occurrence of DV calls compared to other calls for service. "Man with a gun" calls can also pose heightened risks to officer safety because, many times there is limited suspect information, and there is a need to respond quickly.

"An analysis of National Incident-Based Reporting System data showed that attempting arrest was the most dangerous activity for officers"

Barrick et. al (2018)³

TRAFFIC-RELATED INCIDENTS

Traffic incidents are the leading cause of officer injuries and deaths in non-emergency situations. Additionally, according to the National Police Foundation⁴, ODMP data shows that from 2010-2019, 41.93% of officers who were killed in automobile or motorcycle crashes were engaged in an emergency response. Seatbelt violations, distracted driving on the part of officers and civilians, and risks associated with operating a motorcycle remain key issues for officers.

"More than 200 law enforcement officers died due to struck-by incidents from 2005–2019 (24% of motor vehicle-related deaths)"

NIOSH (2020)⁵

AMBUSH ATTACKS

Some calls for service and interactions may escalate into violence against officers, including ambush attacks. According to White (2020)⁶, NLEOMF data shows no significant increases in ambush attacks against the police post-2013.

"Over the last 50 years, the annual rate of ambush killings has decreased by more than 90%."

White (2020)⁷

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BLUE-ON-BLUE ENCOUNTERS

The rate of fatal or non-fatal blue-on-blue encounters is low compared to other incidents, but remains an important issue for officer safety. Breul and Luongo (2017) reported that officers mistaking other officers for offenders accounted for 137 cases of officer injuries from 1856–2016.⁸

“Blue-on-blue shootings accounted for 5 percent of all line officer deaths between 2010 and 2016, and the majority occurred during training exercises or at shooting ranges.”

Breul and Luongo (2017)⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROMOTE OFFICER SAFETY

CALLS FOR SERVICE

During the initial call intake and prior to officer’s arrival, dispatchers can screen for factors shown to be a higher risk for leading to assaults. Agencies should also invest time and resources in regular training to reinforce skills associated with officer safety. Realistic **scenario-based**, **simulation-based**, **virtual reality**, and **situational awareness** training are recommended formats for equipping officers with the right combination of tactical knowledge and skills to promote officer safety. **Waiting for backup** can also reduce officer injuries and fatalities during encounters. In smaller or state police agencies, dispatchers often do not send backup to certain calls because of the limited availability of officers. These agencies should **consider creating local or state partnerships** with neighboring agencies to increase the number of officers available for dispatch.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BACK-UP

BJA’s VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Program hosted a podcast, “Can This Wait for Back-Up,”¹⁰ during which officers in rural jurisdictions discuss the importance of waiting for backup.

TRAFFIC-RELATED INCIDENTS

Agencies can promote roadway safety by enacting and enforcing **seatbelt mandatory wear and accountability policies**, **speeding policies**, and **imposing a distracted driving policy**. Agencies should also conduct refresher training for driving skills. Also, officers can wear radio ear pieces during traffic stops to prevent drivers and wanted suspects from hearing information that may alert them to a forthcoming arrest. Agencies can also reduce risk to their officers and enhance roadside visibility by adding **reflective markings on their patrol cars** and having officers **wear reflective vests** or other clothing while conducting roadblocks, directing traffic, and assisting motorists. Departments should add to the reflective vests features such as badge or microphone clips and insignia clearly designating the individual as a law enforcement officer.

ENHANCING ROADWAY SAFETY

Wolfe, Lawson, Rojek, and Alpert (2020)¹¹ determined the “perceived accountability of departmental policy regarding driving behaviors emerged as the strongest predictor of seatbelt use...Put simply, policy without accountability is a waste of time and will not increase officer safety”

AMBUSH ATTACKS

Agencies should consider a mandatory body armor wear policy. Using ballistic **body armor**, **vests**, **shields**, and **helmets** can promote officer safety during expected or unexpected physical altercations. Also, the use of technologies such as **electronic control weapons and conducted energy devices** can reduce risks to officer safety when used correctly. Remaining more than 10 feet from the assailant while the threat is still active and rear-vehicle sensors are shown to provide officers an advantage during these types of encounters (Breul and Luongo, 2017)¹².

PROCURING EQUIPMENT TO ENHANCE TACTICAL SAFETY

Fachner and Thorkildsen (2015)¹³ reported that in the wake of ambush attacks, 23 percent of the 31 agencies that conducted critical incident reviews procured new equipment, including ballistic helmets and ballistic shields.

BLUE-ON-BLUE ENCOUNTERS

Agencies should work with dispatchers and 911 operators to **create checklists and collect descriptions** of off-duty, plainclothes, and undercover officers on the scene. Similarly, there should be clear protocols set for officers in **plainclothes to inform the dispatcher** if they are responding and armed. Agencies should also **conduct training** around 'interactive confrontations' for federal law enforcement joint task forces, retired and off-duty officers who are still carrying a weapon across state lines, and identify biases within departments which may contribute to a officers of color being killed at a higher likelihood while off-duty.¹⁵

For officers to adequately mitigate the risks they may encounter while responding to calls for service, they must be well-informed on the types of risks they face, which situations have a higher risk, and what strategies can be used to mitigate these risks. By providing officers with a foundational knowledge of risks to officer safety, agencies will provide a basis for modifications to policy, training, and operations, leading to the implementation of strategies, process, and procedures to keep law enforcement officers and the communities they serve safe.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING TO DECREASE BLUE-ON-BLUE ENCOUNTERS

The Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department used realistic scenario-based training during a study¹⁴ conducted to reduce blue-on-blue encounters. Based on the study's results, the agency discontinued the wearing of badges along the beltline and switched to a policy of wearing badges around the neck.

OFFICER SAFETY AND WELLNESS RESOURCES

To support agencies in implementing the aforementioned recommendations, below are several resources (e.g., programs, grants, and organizations) geared toward improving policies, training, and practices to save lives and decrease risks to officer safety.

- The National Officer Safety and Wellness Working Group¹⁶
- Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement Officers and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR) Initiative¹⁷
- National Law Enforcement Roadway Safety Program¹⁸
- Patrick Leahy Bulletproof Vest Partnership¹⁹
- Body-Worn Camera Policy and Implementation Program²⁰
- Law Enforcement Safety and Wellness Research and Evaluation²¹



ABOUT CNA

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ENDNOTES

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