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LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER SAFETY

RISKS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

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Introduction

Officer safety is of critical importance in an era of increased risk for law enforcement officers. Law enforcement officers (hereafter, "officers") respond to some of the most unpredictable, traumatic, and violent encounters of any profession.[1] Although much of an officer's workday entails repetitive interactions, some calls for service or self-initiated interactions by police officers may escalate into dangerous encounters. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI's) Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) Program, between 2010 and 2018, an average of 51 officers died in a felonious killing per year. LEOKA defines a felonious killing as an "incident type in which the willful and intentional actions of an offender result in the fatal injury of an officer who is performing his or her official duties." Regardless of how officer line-of-duty deaths, assaults, or injuries occur, the consequences are tragic and complex, affecting officers' work and home life.[2] Just as de-escalation, defusing, and crisis intervention tactics are paramount today, so is officer safety.

This brief provides an accessible resource for law enforcement agencies, line officers, and their stakeholders (e.g., policy-makers, training instructors) to inform the development of targeted training, policies, and practices to promote officer safety while in the line of duty. Specifically, this brief offers the following:

- a summary of officer safety risks related to calls for services, traffic-related encounters, ambushes, and blue-on-blue encounters[3];

- recommendations for promoting officer safety related to tactical preparedness; and

- real-world policing initiatives that serve as examples of practices in the field to improve officer safety.

This brief draws on best practices and recommendations identified within the last 15 years in academic literature, technical reports, institutional reports, auxiliary materials (e.g., websites), and resources from the National Officer Safety & Wellness Working Group.[4] This timeframe was chosen to provide a broad overview of emerging officer safety issues and discuss the most up-to-date information related to best practices. Additionally the law enforcement field has seen

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1   Lorie Fridell et al., "The impact of agency context, policies, and practices on violence against police." *Journal of criminal justice* 37, no. 6 (2009): 542-552; Michael D. White et al., "Assessing dangerousness in policing: An analysis of officer deaths in the United States, 1970–2016," *Criminology & Public Policy* 18, no. 1 (2019): 11-35.

2   White et al., "Assessing dangerousness in policing."

3   Defined as "deaths or injuries inflicted by one officer on another."

4   "The National Officer Safety and Wellness (OSW) Group brings together representatives from law enforcement, federal agencies, and the research community to address the significantly high number of officer gunfire fatalities and to improve officer safety and wellness." To learn more, visit: *https://cops.usdoj.gov/oswg*.

Introduction

more advancements in technologies and tactical equipment, as well as a heightened focus on officer safety, during this period than in prior years. This brief is not an exhaustive summary of all available resources related to officer safety. Rather, it summarizes several commonly cited recommendations and practices that agencies can use to foster discussions and learn about training, practices, policies, and procedures to promote safety at the local level.

Review of High-Risk Officer Encounters

CALLS FOR SERVICE

Domestic violence calls are often cited as one of the most dangerous calls for service; however, more recent studies have concluded that domestic violence incidents do not carry the highest risk of assaults or injuries to responding officers. Rather, the number of officers assaulted and injured during such calls

> *"When handling shots fired calls, officers are almost always at a disadvantage as they blindly search for an unknown suspect."*
>
> **-Nick Breul and Desiree Luongo**, *Making It Safer: A Study of Law Enforcement Fatalities between 2010–2016*

is often high because of the frequency of such calls. In other words, officers more frequently incur injures in domestic violence calls because agencies often experience a higher volume of domestic violence calls compared to other calls for service. According to the FBI's LEOKA 2018 data, officers sustained assaults while participating in investigative/enforcement duties, engaging in foot or vehicle pursuits, responding to disorder/disturbance calls, being involved in arrests, responding to crimes in progress, and encountering an emotionally disturbed person.

Responding to firearms-related calls for service, such as "man with a gun"[5] or "shots fired"[6] calls, is becoming an increasing risk to officer safety. In 2016, firearms-related deaths grew to become the leading cause of officer line-of-duty deaths, surpassing traffic-related encounters.[7] Such calls are dangerous and pose heightened risks to officer safety because officers often have limited information on suspects beyond a physical description, lack specific locations (for shots fired calls), and sometimes must respond quickly without waiting for backup.

TRAFFIC-RELATED INCIDENTS

Although the issue of felonious assaults against officers deserves serious attention, reducing traffic-related injuries and fatalities among officers is equally important. **Traffic injuries are the leading cause of most injuries and deaths of officers occurring in non-emergency**

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5   Calls reporting a person in possession of a firearm.

6   Officers are called to investigate the sound of gunshots. See Nick Breul and Desiree Luongo, *Making it Safer: A Study of Law Enforcement Fatalities between 2010–2016*, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2017, *https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-w0858-pub.pdf*.

7   NLEOMF (National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund), *Facts and Figures: Causes of Law Enforcement Deaths over the Past Decade (2008–2017)*, March 2018, *http://www.nleomf.org/facts/officer-fatalities-data/causes.html*.

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situations.[8] Speeding, red light and stop sign violations, improper turns, police pursuits, and distracted driving all contribute to traffic injuries and fatalities of officers.[9]

Traffic and automotive safety concerns such as seatbelt violations, distractions while driving, and risks associated with operating a motorcycle remain key issues for officer safety.[10] According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund,[11] motor vehicle related incidents are a leading cause of death for law enforcement officers; 809 officers were killed in motor vehicle related incidents (struck by and crashes) from 2006 to 2019.[12] In a study of 152 fatal crashes that occurred when officers were on patrol or administrative assignment, responding to a call, or on a self-initiated activity, 47 percent of officers were not wearing seatbelts.[13] In 2016 alone, 52 percent of officers involved in fatal auto crashes were not wearing seatbelts. Moreover, distracted driving has been shown to lead to traffic injuries: officers are often required to navigate a wide array of technology while traveling between calls, which can increase the risk of collision.[14]

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8   Darrel Stephens, Mora L. Fiedler, and Steven Edwards, "OSW Group Meeting Summary: Vehicle Operation, Risk Management, and Problem-Based Learning, April 25, 2012," Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2013; Bryon Gustafson, Geoffrey Alpert, and Stephen M. James, "Distracted driving impairs police patrol officer driving performance," *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 38, no. 3 (2015): 505-516, DOI 10.1108/PIJPSM-03-2015-0030.

9   Eun Young Noh, *Characteristics of Law Enforcement Officers' Fatalities in Motor Vehicle Crashes*, US Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2011, *www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811411.pdf*; G.P. Alpert and R.G. Dunham, "Policing Hot Pursuits: the Discovery of Aleatory Elements," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 80, no. 2 (1989): 521-539; Gustafson, Alpert, and James, "Distracted driving impairs police patrol officer driving performance."

10 Gustafson, Alpert, and James, "Distracted driving impairs police patrol officer driving performance"; H.M. Tiesman et al., "Law enforcement officers ' risk perceptions toward on-duty motor-vehicle events," *Policing: An International Journal* 38 (2015).

11 LEOMF (National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund), Facts and Figures, *https://nleomf.org/facts-figures/causes-of-law-enforcement-deaths*.

12 Wolfe et al., "Characteristics of officer-involved vehicle collisions in California,"*Policing: An International Journal of Strategies & Management* (2015).

13 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

14 Gustafson, Alpert, and James, "Distracted driving impairs police patrol officer driving performance."

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Further, suspicious behavior also poses a risk to officer safety during traffic-related stops. During suspicious person/vehicle contacts, officers do not know who they are stopping or whether the individual is armed. Breul and Luongo reported that **"suspicious person/vehicle" encounters are a concern because officers can be shot at close range during contact with the suspect.**[15] A 2001 report from the California Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training lists suspicious circumstances and suspicious demeanor as two of the threat indicators and warning signs that contributed to the felonious killings of officers.[16]

AMBUSH ATTACKS

Although rare, some calls for service and interactions with the community may escalate into violence against officers, including ambush attacks.[17] An ambush attack is a planned method of assault used in order to quickly and unexpectedly attack officers, placing them at a tactical disadvantage and resulting in officer injury or fatalities.[18] **Ambush deaths can occur while officers are off duty, commuting to and from work, sitting in squad cars, eating, or pumping gas—not just during calls for service, as is commonly believed.**[19]

Although prior data show spikes in ambushes in 2016 and 2018, which may have contributed to the perception of increased ambushes, White (2020) analyzed data from the Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund and reported no significant increases in ambush attacks against the police post-2013. These types of attacks include ambushes that were fatal, injurious, and non-injurious, as well as ambushes involving firearms, sharp objects, blunt objects, and personal weapons (e.g., hands, feet).[20] Although ambush attacks have not significantly increased in the last several years, they remain a prominent concern for officer safety, because of their severity and broad impacts.

15 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

16 California Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training, *California Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted in the Line of Duty, 1995-1999 Report*, 2001, POST.BTB.2001-01.

17 George Fachner and Zoë Thorkildsen, *Ambushes of police: Environment, incident dynamics, and the aftermath of surprise attacks against law enforcement*, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015.

18 Fachner and Thorkildsen, Ambushes of police; Angie De Groot and George Fachner, "Protecting Officers from Ambush Attacks: Key Insights from Law Enforcement Executives," Officer Safety Corner, *Police Chief online* 81 (February 2014): 10–11.

19 Strategic Applications International, *Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety: Emerging Issues and Recommendations*, Officer Safety and Wellness Group Meeting Summary, Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2018.

20 Ambush Killings of the Police.

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BLUE-ON-BLUE ENCOUNTERS

Blue-on-blue (i.e., officer-on-officer) encounters occur when one officer uses force against another officer for reasons such as mistaken identity (e.g., an off-duty, plainclothes, or undercover officer) or an unintentional discharge of a firearm.[21] The rate of fatal or non-fatal blue-on-blue encounters is low compared to rates of other incidents, but remains an important issue for officer safety. Blue-on-blue shootings accounted for 5 percent of all line officer deaths between 2010 and 2016; most occurred during training exercises or at shooting ranges.[22] Other blue-on-blue encounters have resulted from failures to identify plainclothes officers or from officers being mistaken for offenders.[23] Breul and Luongo (2017) reported that officers mistaking other officers for offenders accounted for 137 cases of officer injuries from 1856 to 2016.[24] Many environmental and perceptual factors are related to blue-on-blue encounters, including the following:[25]

- officers experiencing involuntary muscle contractions;
- officers receiving misinterpreted or wrongly reported information from dispatchers;
- poor lighting during incidents;
- poor badge placement;
- misidentification of off-duty officers for offenders;
- plainclothes officers not immediately responding to commands to drop weapons due to not remembering she or he is out of uniform in a rapidly evolving incident.

Although the rate of these shootings is low, improvement is still needed in training and preparedness to reduce the chances of misidentification, misfires in the field, and accidental shootings during training.

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21 Dawn A. O'Neill, William R. Spence, William J. Lewinski, and Emily J. Novak, "Training and Safety: Potentially Lethal Blue-on-Blue Encounters,"*Police Practice and Research: An International Journal*, 2019

22 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

23 Christopher Stone et al., *Reducing Inherent Danger: Report of the Task Force on Police-on-Police Shootings*, New York Task Force on Police-on-Police Shootings, 2010; Breul and Luongo, Making it Safer; James K. Stewart et al., *The Baltimore Police Department Police-Involved Shooting of January 9, 2011: A Report by the Independent Review Board*, October 17, 2011.

24 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

25 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*; O'Neill et al., *Training and Safety: Potentially Lethal Blue-on-Blue Encounters*; Stone et al., *Reducing Inherent Danger*; Ward Smith, *Kansas City Missouri Police Department Badge Placement Study 2011-2012, http://www.bluesheepdog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/KCPD-Badge-Placement-Study.pdf*; Strategic Applications International, *Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety*.

Recommendations to Promote Officer Safety

Literature repeatedly raises the topic of lacking or insufficient tactical preparedness as a significant threat to officer safety. Over the next few pages, we recommend ways for local law enforcement agencies to improve officer safety. The recommendations summarize several best practices cited in recent literature but do not present an exhaustive list, and do not necessarily represent the findings of rigorous research. They are the best practices that we know at this time. Several of the recommendations are already implemented within law enforcement agencies, and we provide examples when possible.

INVEST IN BODY ARMOR AND TECHNOLOGY

The use of ballistic body armor is continually credited with reducing the risk of officer fatalities.[26] **Ballistic body armor/vest, shields, and helmets** can protect officers against blunt force trauma, shield vital organs during crush injuries or vehicle crashes, mitigate harm from weapons such as guns or knives, and protect against severe head strikes. Body armor itself has become less expensive and is more comfortable to wear now that Kevlar and similar fibers are used.

In the wake of recent attacks—the ambush attacks in Dallas and Baton Rouge, the active shooter terrorist incidents such as the Pulse Nightclub Massacre, and the violent protests following the police killing of George Floyd—more agencies are investing in hard armor and helmets for their patrol officers. Fachner and Thorkildsen (2015) 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.[27] Modern ballistic helmets are designed to allow head mobility, and have hearing protection such as electronic ear muffs. A year after the report, in 2016, the New York City Police Department, the Fort Worth Police Department, and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department announced the procurement of ballistic helmets to give officers protection during high-intensity incidents.[28] Pell City, Alabama, has a mandatory wear policy for their ballistic vests, and used city or police foundation funds to outfit every city officer with them.[29]

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26 Breul and Luongo, Making it Safer; Fachner and Thorkildsen, *Ambushes of police; Strategic Applications International, Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety.*

27 Fachner and Thorkildsen, *Ambushes of police.*

28 David Griffith, "Ballistics Helmets on Patrol," *Police Magazine*, May 5, 2017, *https://www.policemag.com/342239/ballistic-helmets-on-patrol.*

29 Pell City Police Department," *Destination Zero*, *https://destinationzero.org/department/pell-city-police-department/.*

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In addition to body armor, evidence has shown that other technologies, such as **electronic control weapons (ECWs)[30] (e.g., Tasers) [31] and conducted energy devices (CEDs)[32] (e.g., stun guns)** reduce risks to officer safety when used correctly. Research on the utilization of ECWs has shown that their use results in fewer officer injuries and serves as an alternative to using deadly force or weapons.[33] However, like any weapon, ECWs and CEDs have been met with mixed reviews because they come with drawbacks and liability issues. For example, research has shown that exposing a suspect to ECWs or CEDs can result in a significantly higher probability of harm to that suspect.[34]

Further, it has been recommended that line officers be equipped with **earpieces**. When officers wear radio earpieces during traffic stops, drivers and wanted suspects cannot hear information that might alert them to a forthcoming arrest, giving them time to vacate the vehicle or harm an officer.[35] An after-action assessment of the 2014 Las Vegas Police Department ambush attack and active-shooter incident found that the use of earpieces rather than shoulder-mounted radios helped during the conceal-and-cover tactical response by reducing the possibility that noise from radios would give away the tactical team's position to the assailants who had fled into the local Walmart. Additionally, to mitigate dangerous and distracted driving, agencies might consider putting governors—a device to automatically shut down a computer—on computers inside law enforcement vehicles when an officer is driving faster than a designated or desirable speed.

Body armor and technologies can be expensive for many agencies, particularly given the recent budget cuts that many law enforcement agencies face nationally. Departments struggling to find financial resources to invest in body armor or technologies should investigate grant programs and local foundations that provide funding—for example, the Patrick Leahy Bulletproof Vest Partnership.

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30 "A device that uses electricity to impair voluntary motor responses or to cause discomfort to gain compliance; overcome resistance; or capture, control, and facilitate constraint." International Association of Chiefs of Police, Model Policy of Electronic Control Weapons, March 2018, *https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/ECWPolicy2018.pdf*.

31 The term "TASER" is used generically in the law enforcement field to describe ECWs, but TASER is a federally registered brand name used by Axon Enterprise, Inc. (Axon). Other manufacturers also provide ECWs to law enforcement.

32 These are electronic devices used to subdue individuals.

33 William Terrill and Eugene A. Paoline III, "Conducted energy devices (CEDs) and citizen injuries: The shocking empirical reality," *Justice Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (2012): 153-182; Alpert et al., *Police use of force, TASERs and other less-lethal weapons*, National Institute of Justice, 2011.

34 Terrill and Paoline, *Conducted energy devices (CEDs) and citizen injuries*, 153-182.

35 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

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PROVIDE ONGOING TACTICAL PREPAREDNESS TRAINING

Ongoing tactical preparedness training for officers is critical for officer safety.[36] The 2018 *State of Policy in Law Enforcement* report found that 80 percent of law enforcement agencies expressed an increased need for training to keep up with societal changes and to stay up to date while facing a variety of challenges.[37] Without ongoing training, officers may become complacent, which results in risks to themselves and others.[38] Participants during a 2018 National Officer Safety & Wellness group meeting recommended ongoing officer training to maintain tactical preparedness, which could reduce the rates of line officer injury, assaults, or line-of-duty deaths. Realistic scenario-based, simulation-based, and situational awareness training are the recommended training formats found both in the literature and in practice for equipping officers with the right combination of tactical knowledge and skills to promote officer safety.

Realistic scenario-based training provides an environment in which officers can learn and hone a host of tactics and skills, including verbal communication, de-escalation, and tactical response during critical incidents. To the extent that training replicates real life, it will replicate the officer's response and management during encounters.[39] Therefore, officer performance in realistic scenario-based training is the closest an agency can get to observing and evaluating performance during a real-life critical incident in real time and in a controlled environment. Given the relatively low frequency of real-life critical incidents, these exercises are an invaluable opportunity for the department to learn about itself and the readiness of its officers.

The Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department (KCPD) used realistic scenario-based training during their in-service training to combat blue-on-blue encounters.[40] During this training, KCPD identified badge placement and low lighting as factors that significantly affected their officers' shooting of "no-shoot" targets.

Simulation-based training utilizes virtual reality through equipment such as a firearms training simulator (FATS) or a multiple interactive learning objectives (MILO) machine, which provide

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36 Richard Beary, "Strengthening the Foundation: How New Trends in Training Can Improve Officers' Safety and Effectiveness," *Police Chief online*, November 7, 2018, *https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/strengthening-the-foundation-new-trends-training/;* Strategic Applications International, *Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety*.

37 PowerDMS, *State of Policy in Law Enforcement*, 2018, *https://www.powerdms.com/state-of-policy/*

38 Strategic Applications International, *Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety*.

39 Nikki Rajakaruna et al., "Ensuring the Validity of Police Use-of-Force Training," *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal* 18, no. 5 (2017): 507–521.

40 Smith, *Missouri Police Department Badge Placement Study 2011-2012*.

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realistic experiences.[41] Simulation training allows line officers to work through situations, problem-solve, work through judgment processes, and build decision-making skills that can improve officer performance in the field. Officers are involved in complex situations that require rapid decision-making, mirroring the real-world stressors that occur during the line of duty. Further, weapons handling, de-escalation, and defusing tactics can all be improved through simulation training. Notably, simulation training should not be used in place of live-fire or weapons training, but should be a supplement to such training. Behind-the-wheel simulation training has also been shown to reduce officer collision rates.[42] Behind-the-wheel simulators can promote cognitive learning and decision-making skills during high-intensity traffic incidents such as those that occur during emergencies or pursuits.

Source: *Virtra.com*

Simulation training often requires large physical mock-ups or simulators that can be expensive for agencies to obtain and maintain. To mitigate the financial barrier, **virtual reality training** that uses gaming technology is potentially a lower cost alternative. Such training is based on scenarios set in 360-degree photos of local locations such as schools, parks, and neighborhoods to mirror officers' actual patrol environment.[43] Virtual reality training requires very little equipment—generally vendor-provided goggles, supporting audiovisual equipment, and simulated weapons. Unlike traditional trainings that require a large amount of space and permanently installed equipment, virtual reality training is portable and can be used in almost any training room.[44]

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41 O'Neill et al., "Training and Safety."

42 Hope M. Tiesman and Rebecca J. Heick, *Law enforcement officer motor vehicle safety: findings from a statewide survey*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 2015 -101.

43 E. Reyes, "How Do Police Use VR? Very Well," National Police Foundation, 2020, *https://www.policefoundation.org/virtual-reality-technology-changes-the-game-for-law-enforcement-training/*.

44 Reyes, "How Do Police Use VR? Very Well."

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Additionally, researchers at the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University are studying the use of realistic scenario based training to evaluate the effect of various dynamic room-entry techniques and measure the shooting accuracy of both the officers and the suspects.

Participants during a 2018 National Officer Safety & Wellness group meeting promoted **situational awareness training**, during basic and in-service training, as a key priority for officer safety training. "Situational awareness training" refers to supporting officers in recognizing and reacting to risk factors—human, environmental, and situational—that threaten an officer's safety during encounters. Officers need to be situationally aware and to learn what they should be aware of during all types of encounters. The Onondaga County, New York, Sheriff's Office[45] presented Situational Awareness Defusing Techniques training to meet the needs of several public safety responders, including line officers and social workers.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH DISPATCHERS

Increased and more effective communication between officers and dispatchers has been identified as a key practice to reduce risks to officer safety.[46] By sharing clear and relevant information, dispatchers lower the risk to officers, especially when officers are responding from different jurisdictions or may not have access to all of the pertinent information (e.g., call information, history of the location, and history of its occupants). Within some public safety systems, dispatchers are assigned to handle radio communications in which the dispatcher serves as a scribe and a second set of ears for the incident commander. This can be a huge asset to officers and command staff during high-intensity situations. For example, dispatchers can readily access weather and traffic condition reports as well as the Internet, so they can quickly find answers to questions for the officers. They also often wear radio headsets that cancel extraneous noise, so they can concentrate on radio traffic.

Regarding domestic disturbances, researchers and practitioners have suggested that, before officers arrive on the scene, dispatchers conduct screenings on offender characteristics shown to increase the likelihood of assaults, in order to create a higher level of situational awareness, and to direct more officer support to the scene if needed. Receiving information from dispatchers about

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45 The Onondaga County, New York, Sheriff's Office reported the training in its 2016 annual report, here: *https://sheriff.ongov.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Sheriffs-2016-Annual-Report-042817a.pdf*.

46 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*; Strategic Applications International, *Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety*.

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a suspect's history regarding gun crimes and registered firearms is another practice suggested in the literature to decrease the risk of officer injury when responding to domestic disturbance calls.[47]

To increase officer safety during traffic stops, it is recommended that officers notify the dispatcher of the driver's location and vehicle description, including license plate number and the number of occupants, prior to contacting the driver. Dispatchers are encouraged to continually conduct welfare checks of officers who are conducting a self-initiated traffic stop, in order to promote officer safety.[48] To decrease the risk of blue-on-blue encounters, Stone et al. urged law enforcement agencies to work with dispatchers and 911 operators to create checklists and collect descriptions of off-duty, plainclothes, and undercover officers on the scene. Similarly, officers in plain clothes should inform the dispatcher if they are responding and are armed.[49]

DISPATCH BACKUP OFFICERS

Failure to wait for backup has proven to be a significant threat to officer safety. **Waiting for backup is repeatedly reported to reduce officer injury and fatalities during encounters.**[50] Research supports the notion that officers working in pairs are less likely to experience injuries than officers working alone.[51] Breul and Luongo (2017) stressed how important it is for dispatchers to not send an officer alone on a disturbance call, for officers to wait for backup, and for dispatchers to maintain communication with the officers who are on scene.[52] In an examination of 796 homicides between 1996 and 2010, Kercher et al. (2013) reported that 30 percent of disturbance calls resulted in an officer homicide where a struggle ensued with a suspect and a lone officer. Participants during the 2018 National Officer Safety & Wellness group meeting stressed that dispatchers and supervisors must be aware of the inherent dangers of domestic disturbance calls. Even when a suspect is reported to have left the scene, it is feasible for the suspect to return and harm a lone officer.

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47 Cassandra Kercher et al., "Homicides of law enforcement officers responding to domestic disturbance calls," *Injury prevention* 19, no. 5 (2013): 331-335; Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

48 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

49 Stone et al., *Reducing Inherent Danger*.

50 K. Barrick, K. Strom, and N. Richardson, "Individual and Situational Influences on Injurious Assaults against the Police,"*Policing: An International Journal of Police: Strategies & Management* 41, no. 2 (2018): 202-214, RTI International, DOI 10.1108/PIJPSM-09-2016-0144; Breul and Luongo, Making it Safer.

51 Barrick, Strom, and Richardson, "Individual and Situational Influences on Injurious Assaults against the Police."

52 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

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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 create local or state partnerships with other neighboring agencies to increase the number of officers available for dispatch.[53]

DEVELOP AND ENFORCE PROGRAMS AND POLICIES

To promote traffic safety, researchers and practitioners often encourage agencies to enact **mandatory wear or accountable policies** to enforce seatbelt usage and combat distracted driving. Some officers disregard department policy regarding seatbelt use, based on a misperception that it may hinder movement during incidents. The Prince George's County (Maryland) Police Department instated a mandatory wear policy, with a resulting reduction in auto-related deaths.[54] Actions may also be taken at the supervisory level to deter traffic injuries.[55] According to Hansen, Rojek, Wolfe, and Alpert (2015), officers in agencies with supervisors who were more likely to **enforce their speeding policies** were "less likely to be involved in two or more on-duty collisions."[56] To combat distracted driving, the International Association of Chiefs of Police recommends the creation of a **distracted driving policy**.[57] The Hillsborough, North Carolina, Police Department (HPD) formed a distracted driving policy that prohibits the use of a wireless device outside of "hands-free" mode that is not work related; the use or viewing of in-car or body-worn camera videos; and eating, grooming, or any other activity that would prevent both hands from being on the wheel or alter the distracted driving device installed in the vehicle. The implementation of this policy led to a reduction in serious crashes, workers' compensation claims, and crash-related injuries for the HPD.[58]

To decrease the risk of blue-on-blue encounters, an internal review board's investigation of the 2011 Baltimore Police Department (BPD) police-involved shooting recommended that the BPD **evaluate and rewrite their policy on plainclothes policing** by assessing their need for plainclothes officers, determining their role in non-life-threatening situations, and requiring

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53 Strategic Applications International, *Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety*.

54 Strategic Applications International, *Officers' Physical and Mental Health and Safety*.

55 Breul and Luongo, *Making it Safer*.

56 J. Andrew Hansen et al., "The Influence of Department Policy and Accountability on Officer-Involved Collisions," *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* (2015).

57 International Association of Chiefs of Police, *Preventing Traffic-Related Line-of-Duty Deaths*, May 2011, *https://cops. usdoj.gov/pdf/OSWG/IACPTrafficReport-May2011.pdf*.

58 "Hillsborough, NC, Police Department – 2016 Officer Safety Traffic Winner," *Destination Zero*, *https:// destinationzero.org/officer-traffic-safety/2016-award-winner-hillsborough-nc-police-department/*.

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officers to wear clearly identifiable garments.[59] To ensure the safety of themselves and others, plainclothes and off-duty officers should clearly announce themselves when responding to a scene along with donning reflective safety vests.[60, 61] Furthermore, common protocols should be developed statewide and nationwide pertaining to identification of off-duty and plainclothes officers, and the response of officers when confronted (Stone, 2010).[62]

The development and use of an **officer safety program** to manage risks, prevent accidents, and decrease injuries is also recommended, to support officer safety. The Fairfax County (Virginia) Police Department developed an officer safety program focused on preventive issues in addition to supporting operational response and training. The program is led by a fulltime safety officer who leads officer training and is routinely called out to incidents that pose potential safety risks.

Another best practice to promote officer safety is the **enforcement of existing computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system policies** for command and control during critical incidents. An internal review board investigation of the Baltimore Police Department police-involved shooting on January 9, 2011, reported that the lack of a CAD report by officers presented problems during the critical incident. Specifically, fewer than half of the responding BPD officers reported to the CAD system, which made tracking and managing the officers more difficult, despite general orders requiring units to identify themselves as they responded to the scene.[63] Keeping dispatchers trained with state-certified courses[64] on up-to-date protocols when responding to high-risk events, such as domestic disturbances, can also enhance officer and community safety. For example, the University of Utah Police Department trained its officers and dispatchers on a lethality assessment program,[65] to ensure that the full array of domestic violence indicators were being assessed, in order to help officers respond appropriately.

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59 CNA, *The Baltimore Police Department Police-Involved Shooting of January 9, 2011*, *https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/IRB_BPD_Final-101711.pdf*.

60 Learn more about off-duty officer safety through the VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness program: *https://www.valorforblue.org/Clearinghouse/42*.

61 CNA, *Baltimore Police Department Police-Involved Shooting of January 9, 2011*.

62 Stone et al., *Reducing Inherent Danger*.

63 CNA, *Baltimore Police Department Police-Involved Shooting of January 9, 2011*.

64 Domestic Violence for Dispatchers, GovTraining, *https://www.govtraining.com/course/domestic-violence-for-dispatchers/*.

65 Lethality Assessment Program, Utah Domestic Violence Coalition, *https://www.udvc.org/resources/lethality-assessment-program.html*.

Summary

In this brief, we described common high-risk incidents that officers encounter during calls for service, traffic-related incidents, ambush attacks, and blue-on-blue encounters. For officers to adequately mitigate risks on a daily basis, they must be well informed about the potential for dangerous incidents, properly trained on how to safely respond to calls for service that pose risks or might escalate into dangerous situations, be equipped with the necessary protective gear, and have targeted safety policies in place that are adhered to and enforced.

Relying on available research, we posed five recommendations for law enforcement agencies to promote officer safety. The recommendations are not an exhaustive list of best practices but represent several that researchers and agencies have found helpful:

1. **Invest in body armor and technology**.
2. **Provide ongoing tactical preparedness training**.
3. **Improve communication with dispatchers**.
4. **Dispatch backup officers**.
5. **Develop and enforce officer safety and wellness programs and policies**.

To support agencies in implementing the aforementioned recommendations, below are several available 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 Group (Bureau of Justice Assistance and the COPS Office)
- Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement Officers and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR) Initiative (Bureau of Justice Assistance)
- National Law Enforcement Roadway Safety Program (Bureau of Justice Assistance)
- Patrick Leahy Bulletproof Vest Partnership (Bureau of Justice Assistance)
- Body-Worn Camera Policy and Implementation Program (Bureau of Justice Assistance)
- Law Enforcement Safety and Wellness Research and Evaluation (National Institute of Justice)

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