

THE POLICE OFFICER'S PRIVATE LIFE



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The National Police Association's free Law Enforcement education series is designed for home school, classroom, or independent learning. As part of our nonprofit educational mission, it prepares you for careers in public safety. This series is authored by [Chief Joel F. Shults, Ed.D.](#)

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The Police Family at Risk

In August of 2020, Officer Joseph Mensah of the Wauwatosa, WI, police was attacked by a mob at his home who were enraged over a police shooting. What reporters described as “protestors” vandalized Mensah’s home while he and his girlfriend were present. As the off-duty officer attempted to talk with the mob, a shotgun was fired at his back door, barely missing him.

While attempts to murder officers at their homes are not usual, law officers and their families must be aware of the potential danger. A survey conducted by the National Center for Police Advocacy revealed that 80% of responding police officers had been threatened with assault if the suspect encountered them out of uniform. Nearly 20% have been threatened while off duty by someone they encountered on duty. Threats of job loss and lawsuits are common at 77% and 88%, respectively. Vandalism to personal property was suffered by 32% of officers responding to the survey.

Police officers have other domestic challenges in protecting their families. Well-documented job stress, added to the normal challenges of managing finances, relationships, and raising children (often in blended families) can take a toll on the police family. Officers must be intentional about their family’s safety and also their emotional well-being. Being well-informed and prepared addresses both aspects,

Officers must inform their family what steps to take if the officer feels it necessary to take action off-duty.

Code words and hand signals should be pre-arranged for possible occasions where a threat is nearby. Codes for “get out!”, “get down”, or “call 911”, or “something is up” should be simple and easily recalled under stress. The family members should know that this is not a time for questions or for discussion, but for immediate obedience.

As tempting as it is, officers should avoid looking like cops when off duty and with the family. Flying the thin blue line on a t-shirt, wearing comfy tactical pants, and poor concealment of their off-duty firearm can signal malcontents, offenders, and self-righteous justice warriors to cause trouble.

Without seeming paranoid or training the family for combat, an officer should get their loved ones in the habit of knowing where safe refuge and escape areas are, and to call 911 as soon as a situation has arisen, and it is safe to do so. The officer also must recognize the importance of carrying a weapon off duty but also realize that not having a protective vest, a radio, and backup. The officer should also know that intervening is not always necessary and that being a good witness is likely to be the best they can do.

If a family member needs to call 911 while their officer is dealing with a situation, it is critical that they communicate to dispatch that there is an off-duty officer involved and to describe the officer so that responding officers know who the good guy with a gun is. They should also understand that they will not likely be treated special if on-duty officers arrive without knowing fully what’s happening and who the suspects

and witnesses are. The officer should be aware that they are at risk of being mistaken for an adversary by police or well-intentioned armed citizen and have law enforcement identification out and on display.

Officers should consider whether members of their family could obtain and use the firearm if the officer is incapacitated but the threat is still immediate.

It is tragic that family members must also bear the burden of their police officer. But law officers do make enemies, especially in recent years when anyone in uniform is considered an enemy by so many. It is just one of the many sacrifices our police officers bear in serving.

Children of the Fallen

Little Riley Cottongim faced his first day of kindergarten without his father, Zachary Cottongim. An officer with the Louisville, KY police department, Cottongim was investigating an abandoned vehicle on Interstate 64 in December of 2021 when he was struck and killed by a vehicle whose driver had lost control on the highway. When Riley arrived for his first class this year, he was greeted by a contingent of over 20 Louisville police officers lining the sidewalk.

Last year another kindergarten student got a police escort as well. Anna Stolinsky ran up and down high-fiving and hugging the La Vergne, TN Police Department members who lined up outside her school. Anna's father, Police Lieutenant Kevin Jay Stolinsky died on duty in November of 2021.

Tarpon Springs, FL Police Officer Charlie Kondek was shot and killed as he responded to a noise complaint call in 2014, leaving six children, including a teenage daughter who was to attend her 2016 prom. Members of the department stepped in for a fallen colleague, taking his place to escort his daughter to prom Saturday night. Major Jeff Young stated that he was "sad because we have to be here, honored because we can be here." Daughter Aleena had not been forgotten.

A dozen Austin, TX police officers attended the 2017 graduation of Mikayla Hunter, daughter of Austin Police Officer Clinton Warren Hunter, who was killed when struck by a vehicle driven by a fleeing felon in

2001 when his daughter was just three years old. “It was so great that they would all come to do this for me, Mikayla said.

Savannah Harris could not hold back the tears when she stepped out of her house on her way to her high school graduation to see a parade of Arizona Department of Public Safety Officers ready to escort her to the event. Savannah’s father, Officer Christopher Russell Marano was killed in a pursuit crash in December of 2009 when she was just seven years old.

These are just a few of the many examples of how the cohesiveness of the law enforcement community extends to the families of fallen officers. Another example is the organization Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS) which, according to its website “Was organized in 1984 with 110 individual members. Today, C.O.P.S. membership is over 75,000 survivors. Survivors include spouses, children, parents, siblings, significant others, and co-workers of officers who have died in the line of duty.”

C.O.P.S. Kids Camp is a special program for children of fallen officers “that provides families the opportunity to interact in a relaxed setting that is removed from everyday life. Oftentimes, young children who lose a parent do not have a safe, comfortable place to share their struggles with their peers. C.O.P.S. Kids Camp offers that, as well as a place for parents/guardians to do the same. Campers will have the opportunity to attend age appropriate grief counseling sessions that will address their needs. Licensed mental health professionals will support all campers, adult and child

alike, by facilitating these sessions and presenting tools for families to implement at home in the future. Attending C.O.P.S. Kids Camp will also give campers the chance to participate in fun, challenging activities while providing a camp-like structure that encourages relationship building. We hope that all campers leave the week with an increased sense of personal growth, and a strong support system made up of peers who can truly understand.”

To be honest, not all families find such support. Most people who deal with the loss of a loved one know the experience of getting sympathy and ministry. Friends and colleagues attend memorial services. Flowers and cards express sympathy. There may be an old-fashioned meal train to provide food for a time. But as the intensity of the moment passes and people necessarily move on with their lives, those left to deal with the loss may feel a sense of abandonment. The ethos of fraternity and never forgetting is shown in law enforcement by the acts of brother and sister officers caring for surviving family members so that no one feels left alone.

To be honest, this doesn't always happen. Personnel change and a legacy depicted by a photo on the wall of the squad room that is no replacement for the active memory of those who worked with them and knew them. This is especially true with wounded officers who must leave the agency due to their injury and can easily be forgotten with no ceremony, no grieving, and no photo on the walls.

Nevertheless, with whatever faults they bring, the blue family often sticks together, especially if it brings a smile

to a child's face to know that there are those who still remember and still care.

Sleep Deprivation – A Public Safety Threat

Picture this. A young police officer works a combination of night shifts rotating between straight midnights and a “power shift” from 7P-3A. He is scheduled for days off to coincide with his Army National Guard drills one weekend of every month. He was working on his master’s degree, taking classes during the day. To supplement his income for his young family he takes occasional off-duty security work and takes overtime shifts in addition to his other side job running a propane truck delivery route in the early morning. That didn’t count those days when a manhunt or other major event required working multiple shifts without relief. His eyelids scratched over his reddened eyes like sandpaper and a cup of 7-11 coffee is a constant presence on patrol.

That was me. It was not a permanent condition of my professional life, but it wasn’t rare either. Being the young stud that I once was I just calculated that it was a cost of being a small town midnight cop trying to get ahead and a test of my resilience as a first responder. In retrospect, not that I could have done much differently, my younger self didn’t know how harmful sleep deprivation is, and neither did my peers or leadership.

“Sleep deficiency can lead to physical and mental health problems, injuries, loss of productivity, and even a greater likelihood of death” according to a publication of the U.S. National Institute of Health, and “is linked to many chronic health problems, including heart disease, kidney disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke,

obesity, and depression. Sleep deficiency is also linked to a higher chance of injury.”

With current staffing shortages across the nation, more officers are working extra shifts and overtime. If poor or inadequate sleep just affected the officer, we could chalk it up to the cost of doing business along with stress and other factors that are reported to be life-shortening consequences of law enforcement. These factors may explain why the Public Safety Cardiac Foundation reports that while the average age for the onset of a cardiac event is 67, it is age 49 for first responders. The Office of Justice Programs reports that the life expectancy of a police officer is twelve years fewer than the average for the civilian population, dying an average of five years after retirement.

Such dire consequences pose a substantial risk to sleep-deprived officers and the public they serve. Decision-making while fatigued is compromised, making stress-filled, complex decisions slower and less accurate. Tired brains reduce spatial perception and the ability to put stimuli in context, and motor skills needed to react swiftly are reduced while increasing anxiety and irritability. Forty percent of police officers report falling asleep while driving. The National Institute of Justice cites studies that show “not sleeping for 17 hours impaired a person’s motor skills to an extent equivalent to having an alcohol toxicity of 0.05 percent. Not sleeping for 24 hours was equivalent to a toxicity level of 0.10 percent.”

There are solutions in addition to humane scheduling practices. Proper nutrition (also a victim of lack of sleep

as my Hostess Cupcake diet and 7-11 Coffee attest) improves sleep, as does healthy physical activity, regular sleep routines, and support from friends and family. Before I was married, I shared an apartment with a roommate who very kindly knocked on my sleeping room door at noon asking if I wanted to share lunch. Having gone to bed around 8 that morning, “lunch” lost its meaning. I cured him of the habit by stopping by at 3 a.m. to wake him asking if he wanted breakfast. Officers might need to keep their phones on for emergency calls, but calls and visits during sleep time should be avoided without guilt. Strategies to measure optimum sleep time, which varies from person to person, can help calculate healthier sleep habits.

In the scheme of overall officer wellness, adequate rest is essential to maximum performance in serving the public. Leaders must make it a priority.

Never Off Duty

People may ask “Do you always carry a gun?” For many, if not most officers, the answer is yes.

An off-duty New Hanover County, North Carolina Deputy was shopping at Food Lion. Kenneth Alan Stout, age 63, was being sought by the U.S. Marshals Service as a dangerous fugitive wanted for a West Virginia murder. The deputy’s sharp eye recognized Stout as looking like the wanted poster photograph of the murder suspect and called 911. He assisted arriving deputies in capturing Stout.

John Hetland, an officer with the Racine, Wisconsin Police Department was off duty at Teezer’s Bar and Grill grabbing a bite to eat with a friend when he confronted a masked, armed man who was robbing the establishment. Hetland struggled with the gunman and was shot and killed by the robber, who then fled.

Off-duty officers are just as vulnerable to a random criminal attack as any citizen. In July 2020 a Colorado Springs officer was in his personal vehicle when a man unknown to the officer entered the vehicle claiming he had a gun. The officer was able to shoot the invader who was later found to have been under the influence of methamphetamines and amphetamines.

A 26-year-old New York City Police Officer Adeed Fayaz was off-duty with his brother-in-law and meeting a person ostensibly to purchase a car that had been advertised on the Facebook marketplace. The officer

was shot and killed in what turned out to be a robbery. The brother-in-law used Fayaz's weapon to fire shots at the suspect, who fled and was not injured. A 38-year-old suspect was subsequently arrested for robbery and murder.

Areannah Preston, a Chicago Police Officer was killed during an apparent robbery outside of her home in the South Side area. Five suspects have been arrested. Preston had been an officer for five years and was a few weeks from graduating from Loyola University with her master's degree.

In rural areas where officers are known by many residents, an off-duty officer may be a target of revenge by those whom they may have encountered on duty. This can happen even in metropolitan areas, too, but a trip to Walmart or the park can result in confrontations with malcontents or wanted persons in smaller jurisdictions. These officers may also be recognized by citizens who need help and call on the officer to take action on a complaint or in an emergency when they are recognized.

This reality requires officers to be vigilant even while enjoying the normal daily activities of life and even in their own homes. Officers' homes and even families have been attacked. Even retired officers often continue to carry their weapon to ensure their safety.

Federal legislation allows retired officers in good standing to carry their sidearms throughout the U.S. with proper ID and regular firearms qualification. Many officers also obtain concealed carry permits, but are

subject to reciprocity agreements when traveling out of their home state just like any other concealed carry permit holders.

Some law enforcement agencies require officers to carry their weapon off-duty and be available to intercede even out of uniform and off shift. Fewer agencies have this requirement since it carries their liability to each officer 24/7, but the mandate isn't required for most officers who are conditioned to be prepared to act. The general rule is that officers best serve by being a good witness. Having no backup nor the resources normally available in their patrol vehicles, acting alone and off-duty has extra perils attached. The decision to take no immediate action can be the wisest course.

One of those is being sure to be able to identify themselves when on-duty officers arrive on the scene so that they are not mistaken for an adversary. In January of this year, an off-duty officer who engaged a robbery suspect was shot by an arriving deputy who mistook the officer for the suspect. The deputy was cleared of charges and considered to have acted in good faith given the totality of the circumstances in the tragic death.

When a person takes on the role of a law enforcement officer it can be truly said that they are never really off-duty.

The Unexpired Oath

To all the rookies, all the mid-career officers, and all the twilight officers watching the calendar for their retirement eligibility, know that there are a thousand eyes watching and rooting for you. They are the ones who finally aged out, made it to retirement, or had to leave with a disability. You can say that they don't know what it's like to be a cop these days, but they do. They haven't forgotten.

Sure, there are some who left the job with a great sigh of relief to be done with cop life. They pay little attention to the news. They are in their wood shops or fishing holes or part-time jobs recovering from the law enforcement life. Many have had their fill and they are done thinking about it. But some would have stayed longer if they could, or regret pulling the plug on their career as early as they did. Even more are still carrying a firearm, still keeping their head on a swivel, and they still slow down when they see an officer on a traffic stop to see if they are OK.

Many retired officers carry firearms under the federal Law Enforcement Officers Safety Act which grants police officers authority to carry concealed weapons anywhere in the U.S. and extends that authority to qualified retired law enforcement officers. Others carry under their state laws with or without a concealed carry permit, depending on state regulations.

Retired police officers who continue to carry do so for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons is that they

have learned that threats can appear anywhere at any time. Another is that they still have a sense of calling to protect others and want to be ready to do so. In addition, officers may have made a few enemies over their years of service who may not hesitate to confront them out of uniform.

Some former police officers can give up the habits of watching everyone who enters a public place for suspicious behavior, keeping their gun hands empty, and sitting with their backs to the wall. Many think they have left those habits behind, but their intuition never leaves them.

A common observation of retired or even still working but older cops is the lack of due respect from their young counterparts. Maybe that's a two-way street, but there's no doubt that a lot of knowledge and perspective remains in those old bones. If all of the old guard would write down their wisdom, it's not likely that anybody would read it. Experience can only be learned by experience and nothing can replace that first fight, first weapon call, first dead body, or that first death notification.

One thing that officers still working the streets can know about their retired colleagues is that they see you. They remember the sandpaper feeling in their eyelids from working midnights plus that second job or college classes. They remember the enthusiasm for wanting to help people that never goes away but gets punched in the gut almost daily. They see your missed dinners, family get-togethers, birthdays, and anniversaries.

They see you reading the latest policy that comes from above and doesn't seem to work in the real world. They feel the sprains and strains and bruises that you should report on a workers comp claim because someday those cumulative injuries will catch up to you but you walk it off and work through it because that's what you do. They remember the weight of the ballistics vest and the equipment belt packed with tools of the trade that make your back ache. They remember the weight of the calls where you wish you could do more for the victim, the kid, or the vagrant.

They know the close friendship and fellowship of your fellow officers and miss that most of all. They know the extremes of heat and cold you endure, the hours on your feet at a crash scene, or crouched on the perimeter of a barricaded suspect. They know what it feels like to wonder if you're going to win that fight, duck that bullet, catch that burglar.

These are the graying heroes that aren't too old to fight, they're just too old to want to. But they see you. They will be your silent back up. They took an oath a long time ago, and it had no expiration date.

Police Families Sacrifice for the Profession

Holistic wellness for police officers is finally coming of age. With new understanding of brain science and the effects of stress and trauma, more law enforcement agencies and even state legislatures are making laws and policies to strengthen first responders mental, physical, and career health.

A critical component of overall wellness is the strength of relationships in a person's life and policing is no exception. The most important relationships are not found at police headquarters, but in the homes to which police officers hope to return at the end of their shifts. How can individuals and their employers maintain those strong family ties in an era that may be the most challenging in our nation's history for law enforcement?

First, there must be an awareness of the shared experience of loved ones in the police mission. For most officers, and certainly, through the earliest stages of their law enforcement careers, shift work, long hours, fatigue, and danger are hallmarks of the police experience. While many officers do what they can to shield their families and not take their work home with them, it isn't entirely possible.

One of the questions that an officer must face is what to share with their family. Avoiding in-depth conversations about a particularly challenging day may or may not be the best strategy, but even if the officer doesn't want to talk about the dead body, injured children, assaultive intoxicated arrestee, or being written up for a policy

violation, the voice and body language will tell part of the story. The tension between what an officer holds back and what their loved ones want and need to know is a matter for negotiation and boundaries.

One strategy for reducing stress at home is exercising good personal management. Typical stressors of child-rearing, finances, and schedule conflicts occur in all families. Being intentional about managing these issues can reduce the overall stress level in the home and provide some space for work-related burdens.

Recovery time is a biological imperative for dealing with stress. Some downtime before engaging with the family can be helpful. As the chemistry related to stress has been at high levels during the day or the constant stress of alertness even when nothing major happens circulates in the body, it takes a minimum of twenty minutes for that protective brain chemistry to dissipate after being away from the source. A relaxing commute, a physical workout, or a quiet time of breathing and relaxing can help. This is a challenge for the officer who is greeted at the door by family members who are also anxious to share about their day, so some negotiation and patience about the officer's homecoming routine is in order.

Positive physical touch, deep breathing, laughter, and social interactions are good stress reducers, so planning time for those things – and being open to spontaneity as well – is as important as eating well (which is another often neglected aspect of wellness for police officers). An officer should be open, complete with honest

conversations at an appropriate time, to actively listen to the families' concerns about the effect of the job.

The “police personality” is a real thing. A police officer may grow more cynical, and emotionally distant over time. Asking the people who know the officer the best how they think they are doing and how the work may be affecting the person and the relationship is a brave step toward navigating the law enforcement family. It might be best to unload on a therapist or peer, but never exclude sharing your feelings with the family. Honest with children will depend on their maturity level, but they almost always know more than you think.

When police officers and other first responders share about their shift they must recognize that their non-police family members have had good and bad experiences also. It may be tempting to disregard the spouse's work trials and tribulations at the office since they can't compare to the fiery crash, but the point of sharing is to be heard and valued, not to compete for who had it worse.

Police officers will not totally relax when off duty. They should brief their family on what to do in the case of an emergency, accept the possibility of an off-duty encounter, and be ready to evacuate or find a safe place if the officer is called into action to intervene. The officer must also be willing to be a good witness and use good judgment when deciding whether or not to get involved in an incident when off-duty.

Supporting America's law enforcement officers means supporting their families as well.

What Keeps a Police Marriage Working?

An Atlanta divorce attorney, Katie K. Leonard, communicated in a recent TikTok video that police officers are among the top five professions that women should avoid as marriage partners. Leonard does not rank the top five in order but includes firemen, military men, surgeons, and pilots along with police officers. Leonard only addresses women whose men are among these professions, so the question of other gender mixes remains unexamined.

The challenges of a police marriage are no mystery in the profession, nor are they necessarily unique to law enforcement. The combination of shift work, the physical toll of being on constant alert, the learned behavior of being suspicious and distrustful, and the strong professional bonds that can alienate wives from the officer's social milieu can be a soul-killing acid that slowly dissolves marriage partnerships.

Leonard described these five categories as gods in their professions, taking a 'scorched earth' attitude in divorce litigation, with a tendency to narcissism. Her observations are subjective and based on her perceptions as a divorce lawyer, but her thoughts are a caution for police marriages. Leonard also states that the most vulnerable and frustrated women in divorce cases are stay-at-home moms, for economic and social reasons.

The most common advice in marriage counseling is to develop healthy communication skills. For the police

officer, this is a challenge because communication in a family setting is a significant contrast to their typically highly developed professional communication skills.

Communication on duty for police officers typically involves one-way communications. They are receivers of one-way communication in orders, policies, and memos. They give orders and directions on the job with no room or time for feedback or discussion. The officer is the gatherer of facts and interpreter of facts at rapidly evolving events and makes immediate decisions based on their experience and training. Nothing is more frustrating to a police officer than for his directions to be questioned or altered. This is obviously not a model for marital communication.

That is not to say that law officers are not good listeners. They listen for facts, processing all the while, make notes, verify information, alert for inconsistencies and lies. They listen while there is chaos in the background, necessarily distracted by the squawking radio. They know eye contact is important, but they also know they have to keep aware of their environment to stay safe and protect others. They can be genuinely sympathetic, but never give over to emotion. These listening skills are different than those their spouse needs at home.

Any spouse, but especially the police officer, must incorporate different listening skills for their children and marriage partner than they practice on duty. This requires an intentional shift in the brain that many find best accomplished with a private ceremony before walking into the door of their home. For some, it is a symbolic touching of the mailbox or porch rail to ground

them to their family and release their work. For some, it is a prayer, a pause, a pledge, or a hand over their badge to make the transition from cop to loved one.

The officer should make their expectations known early in their career and marriage about what those first few moments through the door will look like. Some need a hug, some need to sit in silence for a few moments. Some will want to talk about their day – most probably will not. Listening to the spouse's day is sometimes a challenge. It is here that the police officer must resist the temptation to compare the injury crash they worked to the banality of the other spouse's complaints that Betty in Accounting sent an insulting memo or little Bobby broke the toilet paper dispenser.

Making eye contact and physical contact to focus on the spouse's words will help avoid mental distractions. Hearing the feelings rather than just the facts and accepting them as valid and truthful uses a domestic skill, not a professional one. Whether an officer decides to be completely honest about what happened during the day and how they feel about it will vary from relationship to relationship. Most officers will want to shield their loved ones from the harsh reality of the world they face. Most probably shield themselves by not processing the depth of their emotional exhaustion and trauma, much less pour it out on their family.

Having a strong family is an immeasurable benefit to an officer's success personally and professionally. It takes as much attention to developing skills at the officer's house as it does at the station house.

Injuries Reported as Non-Life Threatening can be Life Altering

I'm always skeptical of the description of a law enforcement officer's injury in a duty-related incident as "non-life threatening". In addition to the lingering physical and mental injuries that may result, these injuries are often life-shortening.

There are also those injuries that are reported immediately after a crash, shooting, or assault where the officer remains in serious condition. Sadly, these officers are often forgotten as the news cycle refreshes to the latest headlines.

The most startling roster of delayed mortality is the list of 426 police officers who have died after the 2001 World Trade Center attacks who were not among the 72 officers killed in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist event. Even in 2023, the toll continues with the passing of Lieutenant Robert Daniel Rice of the New York City Police Department who was among the many involved in the toxic environment surrounding the rescue and recovery process after the attacks.

NYPD officers and Port Authority police were assisted by many other agencies during the rescue efforts as many volunteered for the assignment. Officers who were eventually felled by disease and illness from the effort include a District Attorney Investigator, a campus police officer from New Jersey, Nassau County officers, New York State Police Troopers, FBI agents, ICE enforcement officers, a Peekskill, NY detective, Suffolk

County, NY officers, New York State conservation officers, U.S. Marshals, ATF agents, a Newton, Connecticut officer, an Arlington County Police Department, VA officer, an investigator for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Humane Law Enforcement of New York, a Deputy Chief from City University of New York Department of Public Safety, NY, officers from the New Jersey State Police, a Harrison Police Department, NY officer, Connecticut State Police officers, A New Rochelle, NY officer, a Harrison Police Department, NY officer, a Harrison Police Department, NY officer, a Harrison Police Department, NY officer, and an officer from Yonkers Police Department, NY.

Some officers succumb to the effects of their injuries years and even decades after their fatal encounters. Deputy Dale Wyman of Tennessee died in October of 2021 from a 2012 crash while responding to a vehicle accident call. Oregon State Trooper Sgt. John Burrighit died 20 years after being struck by a vehicle while assisting a motorist. Two other officers died at that scene. Det. Stephen Arnold of Jefferson Parish, Louisiana was shot in 2016 while attempting to serve an arrest warrant. He died as a result of that attack in May of 2021. Deputy Stanley Burdick of Douglas County, Oregon was shot in 1980 and one bullet grazed his spine. His family said he suffered extreme pain for much of his life, never fully recovered from the incident, and died prematurely in 2021.

Los Angeles County Deputy Steven Belanger died in 2018 from injuries he suffered when he was shot in the head during a traffic stop in December of 1994. The

bullet was lodged in his brain and could not be removed, causing ongoing medical issues. Bernard Domagala, a former Chicago police officer who was left with brain damage after he was shot in the line of duty 29 years ago, died in 2017 as a result of his injuries. An autopsy showed Domagala died of complications from a bullet wound to his head, and his death was ruled a homicide.

These are just a sampling of deaths from chronic damage that can last for months or years. On reflection, most officers will concede that they know that death is a possibility in their duties. Harder to contemplate is the reality that they may live, but with life-long pain or disability and premature mortality. We must never forget the sacrifice of those who have faded from the headlines.

That Thin Blue Line – What Does It Really Mean?

The story dates from the middle ages that a particular blue clothing dye from the town of Coventry, England was of such high quality that it remained true blue and did not fade. Blue has since come to represent loyalty and fidelity.

Another British phrase is associated with colors that have meaning comes from the red-coated regiment of Scottish soldiers bravely trying to hold ground from the enemy during the Crimean war. Their tenacity and willingness to sacrifice became known as the thin red line.

Symbols are important to cultures and classes. The imagery of American policing has come to be represented by the thin blue line. A flag created around that theme is black and white with a blue line as the center horizontal stripe. The blue line represents the men and women of law enforcement who stand in the gap between the lawless and the innocent. The background to the flag is stark, representing the men and women who have died defending that line, all embracing the American flag and the unity it symbolizes.

The thin blue line is sometimes mistaken for what some have called the blue wall of silence. That wall, which has indeed existed in some times and places, refers to the shielding of police officers by their colleagues from responsibility for misconduct. The representation of the blue wall of silence is not a revered value to police

officers, but a vestige of the past that leaders must still work to overcome.

The rich and deep symbolism of the thin blue line, and the flag on which it appears, is not a flag of defiance. It is not part of a battle cry by police officers of aggression toward the public or those who oppose law and order. It is not a flag pronouncing superiority of class or privilege. It is a symbol to the citizenry that the thin blue line will not be broken. When it appears it says of the bearer that they support the concept of justice and reason, as well as the strength of the law as enforced by those entrusted to do so. For a police officer, it says they are a part of something bigger than themselves. For the civilian, it says they are willing to stand with those who join in everyone's responsibility to maintain peace and those whose vocation is dedicated to maintaining peace.

The blue line and blue line flag have perversely been labeled offensive by those who oppose the mission of law enforcement, and who have been deceived by the narrative of violence and racism as an epidemic among the hundreds of thousands of police officers that serve our communities and are accountable to them. This is no more accurate than believing that the medical symbol of the caduceus represents malpractice. The symbol has been banned by some homeowner associations, has been removed from patrol vehicles, and forbidden as a part of the uniform, including COVID-19 masks.

The American flag has been burned and trampled. The rainbow flag has been torn down. The sacred symbol of life and prosperity used by several indigenous tribes on

the continent has been raped of its beauty by Nazi appropriation of the swastika. The symbolism of the thin blue line is uniquely American, symbolizing an American ideal – that the police are the public and the public are the police, and that local law enforcement is accountable to the community, in partnership with the community, and not part of the military or the federal government.

The beauty of the thin blue line and the flag in which it is embedded should stand as a unifying force among people of good faith and peaceful intention. It must not be relegated to the ever-increasing waste bin of political correctness where the slightest offense to any tender soul defines hate speech. We are not asked to pledge allegiance to the blue line flag, only to the republic for which it stands.

Flying the flag or sporting a blue line decal requires courage these days. There are those willing to commit violence to those who subscribe to the ideals which the blue line announces. Vandalism and violence against free expression have always been the great enemy of our Constitutional rights. When the lawless become brave and the law-abiding become fearful, it is truly only the thin blue line that can protect us.

Conversations About Cops With Friends

I knew when one of my most supportive friends, a former combat pilot and conservative, asked what was going on in law enforcement after hearing so much controversy in the wake of the Michael Brown case in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, that the assumption of support from the silent majority was in peril.

No one can blame the average citizen, inundated with negative news, to wonder if there is trouble behind the smoke and mirrors. Solidifying those concerns are police leaders who quickly capitulate to political demands without establishing a truthful narrative about the realities of enforcing the law. In the absence of balance, truthful narratives about law enforcement, many politicians have been empowered to promote, often successfully, highly damaging legislation and policy. When police supporters encounter these false narratives, there are answers to common questions that often surprise the honest skeptic.

Q. Why is there so much racism in law enforcement?

A. Police agencies were among the quickest employers to diversify their ranks. 34% of officers are non-white, and 15% of officers are female, with those categories increasing. The great majority of black residents do not favor reducing police presence in their neighborhoods and are willing to call police to report crime. The numbers that purport to support claims of disparate treatment are improving. Realize that officers operate in high crime and violence areas, and there is no racism

in citing the disproportionate numbers in black on black crime, which is not traceable to police conduct. If a black person is subject to a life of different treatment, from pre-natal care, to education, to employment, to housing, to exposure to violence and fractured family structure, an encounter with law enforcement is not the first exposure to the result of racism remnants of our history and certainly not the blaming point for high imprisonment rates.

Q. Why aren't officers held accountable?

No profession is held more accountable. Body cams record their daily activities and bystanders record more. Officers are subject to lawsuit on both the state and federal level, criminal prosecution on the state and federal level, and internal discipline including loss of career. The claims that it is hard to prosecute police may be true simply because most officers act within the law, which recognizes the complex and rapidly changing decisions the profession requires.

Q. Why do police get inadequate training?

Law enforcement training has improved immensely over the past generation of officers. Background checks and police academies are well regulated. Ongoing training is required throughout the officers' career on a multitude of critical areas and changing laws. Officers encounter an incredibly wide variety of situations which require critical decisions in areas that are unique and have no easy answers. Officers are well trained over their careers. The calls for more de-escalation training are redundant because officers develop those skills in

existing training as well as on the job. Brain science tells us that the fight/flight chemistry at work in the brain can take over 20 minutes to recede so that a person can make a rational decision during a police encounter. Add to that time the mental problems that interfere with good decisions and the fact that a significant number of encounters are with people that are impaired by alcohol or other drugs and it is clear that an officer facing a deadly weapon cannot control the decisions of a person under duress when seconds count.

Q. Why aren't college degrees required for law enforcement?

Over half of police officers have college degrees. The research shows that there are only minor differences in the performance of degreed officers over non-degreed.

Q. Shouldn't social workers do a lot of what police are doing?

Probably, but social workers won't be dispatched to high hazard calls where violence or weapons are present, nor are they always available. Police officers have done a remarkable job in dealing with persons in various conditions of distress. Nationwide, officers make literally millions of citizen contacts resulting in a very small percentage of use of force and an even smaller use of lethal force. Studies show that officers are frequently confronted with situations where deadly force is legally justified but act with restraint to avoid it, often at their own risk.

Q. Shouldn't we be spending less money on policing and more on prevention?

Recent analysis shows that law enforcement has remained consistently at an average of less than 4% of government budgets over many years, while staffing of police has not kept up with population growth. It is clear that when policing is not supported, communities suffer in higher crime rates, slower response time, and fewer resources to engage in crime prevention and suppression. Look at any major city where anti-police politics have gained strength and see how their violent crime rate is rising. Whether more tax dollars should be allocated to other social concerns is a separate issue than reducing resources for law enforcement. Law enforcement budgets are not the source of funding for other social concerns.

Many of the reforms that have been proposed have been part of police leaders' agendas for years and are already in place. It is no mere opinion that police officers do a good job, nor is it argued that there is no need for continued research and improvement.

About The Author



This series is authored by [Chief Joel F. Shults, Ed.D.](#) Joel is a retired police chief. He is an award-winning writer, college professor, trainer, and first responder chaplain.