

THE  
**STRUGGLE  
IS REAL**



**Chief Joel F. Shults, Ed.D**

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.](#)

Published by the National Police Association. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

The [National Police Association](#) is a 501(c)3 Alliance/Advocacy nonprofit in the IRS Educational Organizations category. Donations are tax-deductible.

## Table of Contents

---

- 1** Most criminals have already gotten away with so much that the threat of punishment means very little to them
- 4** Holistic Health for Law Enforcement
- 9** Prejudice or politics? Why cop hate could be getting worse when cops are getting better
- 14** Thoughts and Prayers – Do They Make a Difference?
- 17** The Compliance Crisis
- 20** Police Week - the Asterisk\*
- 23** The Badge and The Brain
- 27** The Last Officer Down
- 31** A Cop's Holiday
- 34** The Thin Blue Line is a Rainbow
- 37** About The Author



## Most criminals have already gotten away with so much that the threat of punishment means very little to them

---

I'll just say it upfront – I rooted for the Chiefs to win the Super Bowl because of my Missouri ties. I'll also say I care very little for football. Frankly, I've never understood the game but apparently, one group wants to go someplace the other group doesn't want them to go to in possession of something that both of them think belongs to them.

They can assault each other but, fortunately, the players wear pads and helmets to try to avoid getting hurt. And there are rules. When making a tackle, the defensive player can grab his opponent's jersey or body in an attempt to stop his forward process. This includes grabbing the player's legs to trip him or hitting him with your shoulder. The play stops once the defensive player has the offensive player on the ground or has stopped the offensive player from moving forward. And no tripping. There are penalties for unnecessary roughness for leading with his helmet, hitting an offensive player in the head during a tackle, tackling a player who's out of bounds, and for tackling a player after the whistle has blown.

The referees can rule that the other team gets the football or that any ground gained can be reduced. Defenders receive 15-yard penalties for roughing the passer for tackling a quarterback after he throws the ball. Defensive players are penalized 15 yards if they grab the back of a player's shoulder pads to make a

tackle – known as a “horse collar” tackle. Players receive either a 5- or 15-yard penalty if they hold the face mask of a player’s helmet when making a tackle.

Games originated, one presumes, as a less lethal practice for combat, hunting, or other survival skill that tribe members needed to know and for which there needed to be champions as role models. Games test leadership, decision-making, physical prowess, and endurance.

Even with referees and replays, there are still arguments in front of television sets in living rooms and bars across the world about what really happened or what should have happened, or what so-and-so would have done if it had been him in that situation. Coaches and commentators get verbally skewered. But in the end, nobody dies, nobody gets sued, and the game doesn’t define every football player everywhere.

Even the most elite millionaire athletes are not expected to perform to perfection. With the benefit of advance knowledge of the playing field and their opponents, none make 100% of their passes, goals, shots, hits, kicks, or pitches. The crowd may be roaring, and there may be the occasional item thrown on the field – or the occasional naked guy – but rarely is an angry crowd a lethal threat to a player.

For those in battle with opponents on the streets and roads patrolled by America’s police officers, there are no referees to stop the play. The penalties are not a setback in the game, but life and liberty. There is no instant replay, only body camera video released after

legal considerations are considered and long after the amateur cell phone journalists have cemented their own edited version and narrative.

Sports are great and fans are great. Just because the struggles of police officers are different than the challenges facing athletes, there is no reason to hold one in higher or lower esteem than the other. It would just be nice if more of the public would give the same respect and regard to law enforcement officers in their fields of battle as they do for their teams. Officers make split-second decisions too, under far less controlled and predictable conditions. They operate under a set of rules that their opponents do not. The criminal opponent is allowed to use any weapon and any means to fight the police officers while the officer has many constraints. Sure, the criminal may face a long time in the steel-barred penalty box, but it seems to be of little concern to the bad actors who have already gotten away with so many violations that the threat of punishment means very little to them.

The men and women policing America could use fewer Monday morning quarterbacks and more folks cheering for them.

## Holistic Health for Law Enforcement

---

Recent surveys of police officers are showing, to no one's surprise, that stress and anxiety are hitting historic highs for our nation's police officers. While many police leaders are taking steps to provide support for their public servants, there is no end to the challenges facing those under the weight of the badge. Here are some areas that administrators and communities should consider.

### Financial

An area often overlooked is the financial stress facing police officers. While wages and benefits have improved significantly over the years for law enforcement, the burdens of debt and the threat of financial collapse can loom ominously.

Education on financial planning and management should be made available to every police family. With the increased potential for lawsuits and firings, poor services for injured officers, and the unfortunate reality of death on the job, officers need to be intentional with their income.

Many officers rely on secondary employment to supplement their income. While this is great for providing "extras" when officers rely on their police credentials for working overtime or off-duty employment there is a risk of that supplement disappearing if they lose their job or are on suspension



during internal investigations. Budgeting with an emergency fund in place is essential, but budgeting is a skill that has escaped many Americans.

Officers should be familiar with their life insurance benefits, including the federal death benefit for public safety personnel. Insurance outside of the workplace should be in place as well. Educational materials and resources can be made available at little cost to an agency.

## Family

Divorce and relationship conflicts are epidemic in policing. Officers should be aware of counseling services available through their employer and in the community. Dependents in law enforcement families deserve encouragement, support, and recognition. Officers should have pre-arranged plans for emergency notification, especially if their life situation changes. Those who are in relationships not legally recognized should know that laws protecting spouses are not automatically extended to other types of relationships and officers' wishes may need to be spelled out separately as a matter of record.

Police families are well aware of the sacrifices they must endure when their officer misses holidays and special events. Where possible, scheduling accommodations should be considered to keep families connected. These relationship supports are important to officer well-being and performance.

## Physical

Policing can be very physically demanding on occasions. Although patrol and investigations are mostly sedentary, the burst of activity from a sudden pursuit or struggle is especially taxing on the human system. Allowing and encouraging opportunities for physical fitness should be part of an overall wellness strategy for police departments. The return on this investment will be fewer sick and injury days lost, as well as the proven benefits of exercise on mental health.

Erratic schedules and a lot of overtime demands can erode performance, and sleep deprivation is a serious health and performance concern for shift workers. Education on fitness and nutrition strategies is essential for endurance and longevity.

## Spiritual

Chaplaincy services are available at many agencies. Chaplains should be well trained in law enforcement ministry with the understanding that their services are for all officers regardless of their faith preferences or absence thereof. Regardless of one's beliefs, there are existential and moral crises that every officer faces. Having the availability of chaplain services can be a reassurance that departments recognize this aspect in the life of our police officers.

In addition to confidential counseling services for substance abuse and depression, chaplains can be a useful partner in preventing long-term problems,

including the risk of suicide or other self-destructive behavior.

## Brain health

The physical aspects of stress and trauma are often overshadowed by the misunderstanding that these issues are “just emotional”. Education on the anatomical realities of what happens to the brain chemistry and body is important to overcome resistance to “touchy-feely” programs that are perceived by many officers as catering to weakness.

## Emotional

Recognizing the physiology of stress doesn't remove the emotional aspect of mental health. Pessimism, framing occurrences with a consistent world view, and taking things personally are challenges to any mature adult. Officers and their leaders can encourage one another in healthy thinking patterns that go hand in hand with physical and mental health.

## Support staff

Communication officers and other civilian support staff are often overlooked when it comes to support and encouragement in police operations. Their vicarious stress and deadlines can lead to the same unhealthy lifestyles and coping mechanisms.

## The community can help

Holistic wellness is not just the job of police administrators. Citizen support of police officers is a vital component of job satisfaction and performance for a police officer. Knowing that there is appreciation and gratitude for their service can make a world of difference. A card, a word of encouragement, or thoughtful gifts to the department are always appreciated – now, more than ever.

## Prejudice or politics? Why cop hate could be getting worse when cops are getting better

---

A highly educated, intelligent, and moderately conservative acquaintance recently posted a story on his Facebook from a woman who had a police encounter to relate. The woman used social media to tell of a car stop of a vehicle in which she was a passenger and her boyfriend was the driver. The officer and the driver engaged in an escalation of tension ending with the officer pointing a gun at the driver. Upon their complaint to the officer's supervisors, the officer reported that he had his Taser out and not a firearm, and there was no finding of wrongdoing. The woman decried that nothing had been done to discipline the officer. Her version was the only one presented. My acquaintance made this introduction to his sharing of the woman's account: "Some of our police are heroes worthy of honor. But we need to reign in those who think that a badge and a gun make them lords among men." That statement is factually true but bathed in the not so subtle prejudice that implies the worst of most officers. It sounds suspiciously like "I have a \_\_\_(black, gay, muslim, etc) friend and a lot of them are fine people...."

There was a time when critics of law enforcement were scofflaws and lawbreakers, or those who had personally experienced an unpleasant encounter with the police. Now we have ordinary and outstanding citizens who vicariously join ranks with the harshest critics, damning with faint praise with statements like "some of our police are good." Losing the support of solid citizens

who succumb to prejudice against the police is a blow to quality law enforcement.

How did the narrative of deeply flawed policing catch fire at a time when police officers have never been more carefully selected and trained, with higher education levels and more professional leadership than ever? Why do the carefully edited and selected videos proffered by the media and anti-police activists gain superior credibility over scientific studies on the realities of violent encounters? Why is Michael Brown still a hands-up-don't-shoot hero when every investigation says exactly the opposite?

The answer to these questions of how prejudices develop is in psychology. The answers to why is in politics.

## Origins of Prejudice

Prejudices are just one way that the brain processes information seeking to enhance pleasure and avoid danger. We are programmed to generalize and predict. When we get information, we use that to establish templates for decision making. What is familiar to us does not alert strong feelings of fear or disgust. What is unfamiliar we approach with caution.

Another factor is the human inclination to associate with groups or tribes. We know who our friends are and who else is like our friend group. We develop a sense of who is in and who is out and, further, we begin to build real or imaginary walls and defenses against the out-group for our protection.

Throughout our lifetime we accumulate the information that our brains use to decide if something is safe and familiar or foreign and potentially a threat. We tend to pay attention to information that verifies our existing conclusions, but our experiences and new information can eventually change our prejudices. Prejudices are not based on mathematical probabilities. Most sticks are not snakes. Most berries are not poison. Most cops are not jerks. But if very many things you thought were sticks turn out to be snakes, you will hate both sticks and snakes.

Changes in prejudices seldom happen immediately and completely. If, for example, a person has an embedded mistrust of police, they can have a positive experience or friendship with a law enforcement officer. The person will consider that positive relationship an exception to the rule rather than an endorsement of all police officers in order to hold on to their preconceptions. A more general trust or appreciation of the broader group will take more intense experiences and positive information.

## The Politics of Prejudice

Whether intentional or not, the playing and replaying of controversial videos of violent encounters with law enforcement feeds information to a public increasingly willing to interpret those images negatively and apply them broadly. Because department spokespersons are usually not the first to frame the story or are rendered silent by legal issues, those negative first impressions get more attention from the brain of the civilian.

Viral videos, whether on traditional mass media or social media, are often shown in edited form and with a sensationalistic narrative. Untrained observers are likely to be repulsed by the intensity of the encounter and immediately begin a mental process of denial to deal with the images. The denial process allows the civilian to believe that they wouldn't act like the suspect or the officer, thus immediately making the persons in the video part of an out-group. And, if they identify with the suspect in some way, it places the law enforcement officer further away from the public's embrace.

Even events that are eminently explainable from a police perspective get imprinted as negative and no amount of scrubbing will convince most people that their first impressions were wrong. Those who profit from sensationalism, and those who benefit from opposition to the police, jump on these many opportunities to fan the flames of misinformation. Individuals come to believe that those negative impressions are the norm, providing more validation to an already existing bias. A police officer, who sees those in their in-group getting unfairly treated, is prone to respond defensively and angrily, often playing into the hands of critics ready to paint defensiveness as guilt. Can the good guys win the perception wars?

If the frequency of confusing images and negative messaging is a major cause of anti-police sentiment, the cure may be more frequent positive messaging. Police agencies may no longer be content for the occasional feel-good newspaper article or community relations program. Consistent, persistent, positive messaging



through multiple avenues is a new essential in law enforcement leadership. Constantly building credibility with the public is not a distraction from fighting crime, it is an essential element in effective contemporary policing.

## Thoughts and Prayers – Do They Make a Difference?

---

As a writer on law enforcement issues, I get almost daily notices of officers killed, injured, or being prosecuted in the line of duty. Many of those announcements include the request for “thoughts and prayers”, and the occasional “vibe”. Some organizations have dropped the “prayers” part in order not to offend the 19% of Americans who claim no belief in God.

One of my law enforcement roles has been as a first responder chaplain. In that role, I am called to offer comfort, aid, encouragement, and hope to those burdened by life’s circumstances. Sometimes that is in the wake of a horrific crisis and sometimes in the fatigue of the long grind of hardship and grief. With a sincere understanding that not everyone is a part of my religious faith, I am careful to meet folks where they are within their own view of the world. However, I seldom fail to offer to pray with them if they would like. Most are appreciative, some refuse the offer as a meaningless gesture, and some are too mad at God or the universe to bear another’s piety at that moment.

A popular mockery of thoughts and prayers after national tragedies, especially violence in which firearms were the instrument of the wrongdoers’ evil, attempts to point out that such meditative efforts are a waste of time in lieu of action (i.e. more federal laws). Scoffers at these mental exercises view them as not merely impotent, but selfishly harmful, as though they inevitably displace something better.

The irony is that if you say action should replace thoughts and prayers, the logical implication is that no thought or prayer should take place. Is the vacuum that replaces thoughts and prayers to be filled with thoughtless activity? If the question is selfishness (as in “people say that but then they don’t really do anything constructive”) then are we similarly prohibited by that same ethic to avoid the marching and letter writing if motivated by the good vibes we get from such righteousness?

I am in favor of thoughts and prayers. I like the idea that somebody might be thinking about me. The Psalmist is amazed as he asks “What is man that you are mindful of him?”, and worships, knowing we are in God’s very thoughts. Willie Nelson apologizes for inaction but assures his lover that “you were always on my mind, you were always on my mind”. What is a Facebook “like” but a little endorphin shot that causes us to know someone was thinking of us?

Is it not thought that precedes action? Isn’t it pondering that inspires? Isn’t it one of our greatest compliments to say “Oh, how thoughtful!” And thoughts are the antecedent of prayer.

Ah, prayer. Yes, pray for our public servants. Pray for the suffering. Pray for victory in battle. To the humanist who would have us appeal to no deity, prayer is a silly ritual. But who doesn’t tout the virtue of meditation? To focus one’s mind, to shut out distractions, to appeal to some higher good is applauded. But to bring in God? That is foolishness? Then let me be a fool.

If I am a fool for believing there is something greater than I, I would be a greater fool to believe it and fail to appeal to that Greatness. Were the prayers of others that covered me during dark, dangerous nights, times of sickness and grief, and quietly confided moments of weakness the words of fools? Then I covet foolishness.

We should certainly be inspired to do something when there is an appropriate duty or charity to be done. Taking action by donating money, baking a cake, or sending a card should always follow thoughts and prayers when possible. But I doubt there will be much doing unless there has been some thoughts and prayers spurring us to act.

## The Compliance Crisis

---

Compliance is a dirty word to Americans. We want to hold to our rebellious ancestry and our modern narcissism. Add to this the oft-repeated narrative that the police will kill you for having a license plate light burned out and the message that if the cops fight you they'll have to fight everyone in the riots to follow and it is no mystery why resisting lawful commands is an epidemic.

I'm not sure if there are any research statistics on the matter, but I guarantee if you ask any law enforcement officer who has worked patrol for at least ten years if non-compliance and disrespect have dramatically increased, they'll tell you that it is more frequent than ever.

Disrespect is a Constitutional right, but non-compliance with a lawful order is not. State laws and well-settled court cases define when a citizen is required to do what a police officer orders them to do. It is part of our social contract with others that we accept limitations on otherwise unbridled liberty for the good of all. We can debate the extent and philosophy of that idea forever, but we all know that if we don't allow momentary inconvenience to promote an orderly society in a complex world chaos and criminality will follow. If the reader disagrees with that foundational statement, please read your newspaper.

When I first started, my mere appearance in uniform usually brought a pause in the disturbance, like the bell

at a boxing match telling combatants to go to their corners where they could bounce and snarl all they wanted, but the fighting had to stop. Granted, that was not always the case, but even in my rookie days at 5'10" 140 pounds, and cherubic 21-year-old face, most folks had enough fear or enough respect to pause and pay attention. We've lost much of that in the current state of things.

Although there have been many graphic representations in police training to teach police officers how to gain compliance when enforcing the laws, a foundational framework is known as The Use of Force Continuum (UFC) which has been used for decades. The UFC is often visualized as a stairway with each level of resistance and officer response one step at a time. For a variety of reasons, this framework has been modified and even rejected as more helpful models have been developed represented by a ladder, a wheel, a triangle, a Venn diagram, and other illustrations. In recent years, the concept of de-escalation has been more fully integrated into these models, but de-escalation has been implied and practiced since the first person to ever wear a badge realized that no use of force in gaining compliance is optimal.

In most of these models, including the UFC, the first level of gaining compliance is known as officer presence. The very appearance of an officer of the law should remind a citizen that the law and social convention require submission to lawful authority. When a citizen accepts this legal and moral requirement, further use of persuasion and physical force is not needed.

An essential component of officer presence is not merely showing up, but doing so with a degree of gravity in attitude and appearance. It is easier to respect authority when all of the symbols afforded to peace officers are present. This includes posture, confidence, patience, and physical appearance enhanced by a uniform worn in such a way that the officer himself shows respect for their appearance. While there is a balance between an authoritative appearance and an authoritarian attitude, an officer should project the expectation that things are to be brought under control and handled efficiently and professionally, just as other professions, whether a doctor, lawyer, or plumber should project the confidence that the business at hand will be handled well.

If officer presence fails, then verbal commands follow, then hands-on techniques from joint locks to pressure points to strikes, then stepping up to impact weapons, and ultimately the last resort of deadly force. This is why officer presence and citizen compliance are so critical in avoiding physical force. This is also why non-compliance after a pedestrian contact or traffic stop can escalate – not due to the officer doing their job, but due to the citizen’s refusal to obey the law regarding compliance.

The increasing problem of non-compliance and false narratives (driver shot for broken taillight!) has resulted in some prohibitions on traffic enforcement and the reluctance of many officers to make a contact at all. This spiral is a contributing factor to the rise in crime as police officers are, by policy or by fear of reprisal, deciding it just isn’t worth the battle.

## Police Week - the Asterisk\*

---

I remember walking, tourist-like, through an old cemetery in Savannah, Georgia on a weekend road trip while at FLETC. I just like old cemeteries. One of the saddest benevolent lies is found there: "Gone but not forgotten". As I scanned the ancient headstones, I notice that there seemed to be one that had garnered special attention. I moved closer and began to read that this was the resting place of the remains of one Button Gwinnet, one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence. I inhaled with whispered "Wow" and suddenly felt that I was on an especially sacred patch of ground.

There is hardly a culture where remembrance is not a part. As the son of a WWII soldier part of my DNA is saluting the flag, wearing the poppy pin, and standing at attention at somber ceremonies remembering the fallen. We are compelled to remember our heroes. Even our collective American guilt over our treatment of our Vietnam soldiers blossomed into yellow ribbons for our Iraq war veterans and we finally invited those Vietnam conflict era veterans to the party.

When a police officer dies, we offer a final parade more massive than any Presidential motorcade. Their name is engraved in our nation's capital and perhaps in state and local monuments. Even in the current era of hostility toward law enforcement, local communities find an outpouring of support when a police officer is killed. Flowers, cards, and teddy bears cover the places where the blood was spilled.



And that is as it should be. Never forget. Never forget.

Then we look around at those memorials and see in the crowd the wheelchair bound former police officer whose career was derailed by a line of duty injury. We see those with the slight, tell-tale limp of a prosthetic. We see one with the stoic expression well practiced to mask the pulsing wincing of chronic pain. We don't see the ones still in their hospital beds attached to tubes and monitors. We don't see the ones at the rehab center learning how to walk again. We don't see the ones whose injuries were once described in the newspaper as "non-life threatening" sitting in the darkness trying to talk their own brain out of a panic.

It's not a competition between those survivors of a line of duty death of a loved one and those who are called into a life of caring for a living survivor. Children left without a mother or father, and children whose lives have also been changed and now must adjust to a mother or father who simply cannot be who they once were, have their own grief and loss to bear. It isn't fair to measure the feeling of abandonment by the family of a line of duty death when the thin blue line breaks with the passage of time against the feeling of abandonment when an officer's injury makes them of no use to their agency and they become unemployed and uninsured.

But for the catastrophically injured to be forgotten during a time declared by Presidential proclamation to be devoted to both the dead and wounded is for us to fail in our remembrance of the totality of heroism and sacrifice.

To forget those law enforcement veterans robs our culture, both as a profession and as a nation, of the completeness of our honor to those who have served with utmost devotion.

If we forget the hurting of any hero, we may forget the fullness of our own willingness to give all. For behind every dead and wounded police officer stands the living, serving, able ones ready to make that same journey out of safety and into danger. We see it every day. Only by honoring all of those who have given much can we stand resolute to carry on.

\*Police week honors the fallen. Let us also honor and help those who fell and are still working to rise up again.

## The Badge and The Brain

---

Dr. Daniel Amen is a noted psychiatrist who is a fervent promoter of a healthy brain. In a series of books and in the practice of Amen clinics across the country, Dr. Amen preaches basic brain care to help prolong physical and mental health. In reading Amen's books it becomes clear that police work is hard on the brain. Officers, their loved ones, and police leaders should be actively engaged in promoting brain health. The result will be better officers with better life quality and better job performance.

### Traumatic Brain Injury and Concussions

Head injuries of combat veterans have prompted more research on their effects. Controversy about head injury in professional and amateur youth sports has resulted in greater attention to protective gear, and treatment and prevention of concussion. While serious injuries from car crashes or roadside bombs are clear indicators of potentially problematic head injuries, most blows to the head are not considered life-changing. We shake them off and go on with life.

But normal encounters with falls and bumps from activity can result in changes in the brain that may take years to manifest. Amen highly recommends keeping kids out of sports that have a likelihood of brain injuries like soccer, football, and gymnastics. While officers cannot always avoid activities that pose a risk of concussion, the use of helmets should be much more widespread than currently.

Helmets should be worn on fight calls, especially those involving a brawl with several persons, increasing the likelihood of an attack on an officer from behind or from a thrown object. This will require a shift in most officers' thinking since wearing helmets on what are considered routine fight calls is not currently common.

## PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder is not merely an emotional problem, but rather, a neurological condition that results from traumatic events that, in effect, rewire parts of the brain. Amen explains his theory of why an event may have little effect on one person but a tremendous effect on another. Every person has a set of experiences and coping mechanisms that usually operate in a brain with reserve capacity. When a brain has little reserve due to repeated trauma or other biological or emotional challenges, an event can be the proverbial last straw.

Maintaining that reserve is important through healthy maintenance that includes exercise, healthy thinking patterns, nutrition, and avoiding harmful substances. Prompt and positive attention to both cumulative and single event trauma, along with professional attention when needed can keep an officer productively employed.

## Healthy sleep

One of the biggest health and performance challenges in law enforcement is getting restful sleep. Quality sleep allows the brain to relax and cope with unresolved issues. It allows restoration of a balanced body chemistry, as well as a time to heal worn muscles and nerves. Sleep that is interrupted by apnea, nightmares, or disturbed by irregular sleep times as a result of shift work fails to be as restorative as the mind and body need.

A study on sleep deprivation reported by the National Institutes of Health found that “After 17–19 hours without sleep, corresponding to 2230 and 0100, performance on some tests was equivalent or worse than that at a BAC of 0.05%. Response speeds were up to 50% slower for some tests and accuracy measures were significantly poorer than at this level of alcohol. After longer periods without sleep, performance reached levels equivalent to the maximum alcohol”. This should create an urgent response from police leaders to provide adequate leave time, manage shifts and overtime demands, as well as limiting off-duty employment.

## Chemical exposure

Although more thought is given to firefighters on the subject of exposure to toxic chemicals, police officers can have their share of exposure to toxic materials from fire scenes, crime scenes, and drug enforcement. Voluntary ingestion of nicotine and alcohol, and perhaps increasingly from marijuana, all have potentially harmful effects on brain health.

The biochemistry of the body that is naturally generated during stressful situations is dissipated by physical activity and time. Constant lower levels of stress can also do considerable damage over time. These stressor sources are often ghosts. Vicarious adrenaline bursts come from hearing a pursuit on the radio even if it is miles away. Anticipatory stress increases adrenaline on routine patrol as officers contemplate ambush or encountering a violent crime in progress. Normal stressors of home, finances, and job scrutiny add to the mix.

Police officers must be intentional in managing or avoiding these toxic influences.

## Love your brain

Dr. Amen urges everyone to love their brain, do what is good for the brain, and avoid or treat things that are bad for the brain. The risk of anxiety, depression, and anger are high in law enforcement. Loving one's brain is one way to be the best you can be.

## The Last Officer Down

---

As we watch the numbers throughout each year, week by week we read of the officers lost in the line of duty. Crashes, shootings, ambushes, and duty-related illnesses, take their toll. We hold our breath at the end of the year, wondering with fearful anticipation who might be the last officer murdered as midnight, December 31st comes around.

In 2021 on December 31st Cleveland Ohio rookie officer Shane Bartek, age 25, died while off duty attempting to arrest an armed hijacker. The suspect female approached Bartek with the intent to steal his car at gunpoint. Bartek attempted to disarm the offender and was shot during the struggle. He had served 1 ½ years. The suspect and an associate were apprehended in Bartek's stolen vehicle later that day.

In 2020 on December 16th Concord, North Carolina Police Officer Jason Shuping was shot and killed while responding to an attempted carjacking. Like Bartek, in addition to dying while intervening in a carjacking, Shuping was also 25 with 1 ½ years on the job. While investigating a crash with an abandoned vehicle, a citizen reported an attempted carjacking at a nearby Sonic restaurant. Officers arrived, encountered the suspect, and came under immediate gunfire. Shuping was killed and a fellow officer was wounded. The suspect attempted to flee by stealing another car but was engaged by other responding officers who killed the suspect in an exchange of gunfire.

In 2019 in the wee hours of the last day of December, Deputy Sheriff Chris Dickerson of the Panola County Sheriff's Office, Texas was shot and killed while making a traffic stop. During the contact, the driver suddenly emerged from the vehicle with a rifle and shot Dickerson six times. Neighbors who went to investigate the sound of gunshots found the deputy laying wounded in the roadway. He was taken to the hospital where he died a short time later. The suspect was arrested later in Louisiana after a K9 located him where he had fled from crashing his car. Deputy Dickerson was a military veteran and had served Panola County for eight years.

In 2018 Henry County Police Department, Georgia Officer Michael Smith succumbed to a gunshot wound sustained on December 6th, the complications from which resulted in his death on December 28th. Smith was called to a dentist's office on a man causing a disturbance. The man was combative on Smith's arrival and the two struggled. Smith used his Taser on the suspect with no effect. The suspect attempted to gain control of Smith's duty weapon during which time the weapon discharged, killing the suspect and wounding the officer. Smith, 33, had served the department for seven years.

In 2017 Douglas County Sheriff's Office, Colorado Deputy Sheriff Zackari Parrish responded to an emotionally disturbed man at an apartment complex. Parrish and other officers attempted to communicate with the man who barricaded himself in a bedroom in the apartment. The man opened fire with a rifle, wounding three other officers and killing Parrish. Arriving SWAT officers attempted to re-enter the



apartment to rescue Parrish and the suspect fired again wounding another officer but was killed by officers. The suspect had wounded two civilians in addition to the officers he shot. During his attack, the suspect fired over 100 rounds. Parrish had nine years of law enforcement service.

In 2016 Pennsylvania State Police Trooper Landon Eugene Weaver was the last officer murdered that year. Trooper Weaver had served for just one year when he responded to a report of a domestic disturbance in rural Huntingdon County. Weaver was shot as he arrived to investigate a restraining order violation. The suspect had been released on bail earlier that month on a previous felony charge. Fellow troopers shot and killed the suspect the following morning when he was confronted and reached for a weapon.

The stories of the last law enforcement officer murdered in each year could go back over 100 years. In fact, the last officer murdered in 1922, 100 Decembers ago, was Patrolman Daniel John Conley with the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Bureau of Police. Conley was shot investigating suspicious behavior of a group of young men who were out past the 3:00 a.m. curfew on December 30th when one drew a weapon and shot Conley six times. The officer died in an alley, discovered by a fellow officer scheduled to meet him at the call box every hour.

The last officer murdered in 2022 was Riverside County Deputy Sheriff Isaiah Cordero was shot and killed while making a traffic stop in the 3900 block of Golden West Avenue in the Jurupa Valley area of California on

December 29th. The suspect, Willian McKay had an extensive violent criminal history but was out on bond even after previously failing to appear in court while awaiting a prison sentence. McKay was killed in a gunfight with officers after a lengthy vehicle pursuit.

## A Cop's Holiday

---

I like working holidays. Things are either very serene and quiet or very intense and filled with pathos.

One Christmas eve day I responded to a report of a missing 6-year-old boy. Lost and missing children calls strike at the heart. A missing child call conjures up so many possible and terrible scenarios. Most of those cases are quickly resolved, some when the child is found at a friend's house, some when the child has been hiding inside the house to avoid a spanking.

The distraught mother reported that she and her little boy had an argument over Christmas presents, and shortly after, he disappeared. I got a description and photograph, alerted all agencies in the vicinity, and I and my colleagues began the methodical searches and contacts according to protocol. As I widened my patrol I spotted a small figure along a side road that led to a major highway. As I pulled over it was obvious that this was my little runaway, who had managed to hike over a mile from his home.

He looked the part, right down to the bundle tied to a stick that he carried over his shoulder. Somewhere he had seen the image of a hobo with a cartoon-like kerchief bundling all their worldly possession in a kerchief on a stick.

I approached the determined little guy carefully, hoping that the boy wouldn't run into the woods like a scared rabbit. He didn't run, and if he was afraid of me, he didn't

show it. I knelt at eye level and ask him where he was headed. "My teacher's house", he said. In his kindergarten mind, the one person he knew would love him was his teacher. He wasn't exactly sure where she lived but knew it was in the next town over. He had another 15 miles ahead of him. I was glad I got him before he reached the highway.

I asked what was in his pouch. "Socks", he said. Six pairs of socks. I told him we'd need to get him back home, that his mother was very worried. He didn't debate the idea. His adventure had already begun to wear on him.

The problem with runaways, whether they are 6 or 16, is that sometimes they are running away from a situation that really is terrible. The last thing I wanted to do was to put this child back into a potentially abusive situation. Cops carry on conversations for a lot of reasons. It can be to help people calm down, to build trust and empathy, and to create time for observations and assessment. I wanted to know if he'd been hurt at home, if he was afraid, or if there was anyone who was threatening him. I wanted a happy reunion, not a return to a nightmare. As we talked, I looked for signs of abuse, a hesitancy to answer, and to determine if the account given by his mother matched the story the child told.

With a side trip through McDonald's to get a Happy Meal, we talked a little bit more. I wanted to be Officer Friendly, but I also wanted to if he had an appetite and make some more observations about his demeanor. I became reasonably convinced that he and his mother had, indeed, had a normal little spat that had somehow been the last straw on the little man's day.

At the home, where an officer had stayed to comfort the boy's mother, but also to make those quiet observations and assessments, my little hitchhiker was reunited. Mother and child were both happy. We stayed just a little while to answer any questions, offer help, and again to make those quiet observations about the dynamics of that reunion. Was there fear? Anger? Threats?

That was a happy ending as we cleared the call. It is a cute little story. But in a police officer's mind, there are always questions. Was I right? Is he safe? Is the family ok? That is the price of being a law officer, the specter of bad outcomes and undiscovered evil. I could only pray that the little runaway had a merry Christmas after all.

## The Thin Blue Line is a Rainbow

---

The year isn't over yet as I write this, so the number of law enforcement deaths will increase before 2022 dawns. 2021's list on the Officer Down Memorial Page (ODMP) is already bloated. In addition to the increase in ambushes, the usual murders of officers arresting violent offenders, and the crashes and pedestrian deaths of cops who spend a lot of time on pavement around speeding traffic, this year was haunted by COVID deaths.

Hunkering down and isolating and working remotely worked for a lot of Americans in 2020 and 2021. It does not work in the policing business. ODMP includes corrections officer deaths, and they were particularly hard hit as one can imagine.

Every so often, whether for researching an article or to contemplate the grievous loss of American heroes, I scroll through the list of the fallen. I realize that those whose names are listed represent a fraction of the loss of law enforcement officers. Those whose hearts have been broken by their career and take their own lives are not represented here. Those whose bodies were broken but survived are not represented here. A dozen or more of those officers going back to the early days of my police career are on the roll call of those lost. As a training officer and police academy instructor, I have rubbed shoulders with thousands of police officers, and some have died.

But in some ways, I feel like I know them all. As I contemplated the many insults that individual officers, their agencies, and the profession, in general, have suffered in recent years, one of those criticisms is that law enforcement personnel don't look like their communities. I beg to differ.

At this writing, ODMP records 473 deaths. Scrolling through the photos of the honor roll for 2021 I noted that they were not all white males. For the sake of this article, I began to count the non-white males on the long list. In the process I felt shame that we have become so racially divided and that the concept of melting pot had devolved into everyone being assigned a label with an identity that differentiates rather than unites.

They say there is strength in diversity, and I don't deny the truth in that. I also know there is strength in unity. The thin blue line, so often maligned and misunderstood, represents an identity that transcends race and gender. Over one-third of the dead are of some minority. As I tried to identify those differences, I hated the thought that I was judging each officer by some standard that may be giving no respect to their true sense of identity, and a crude division of one human compared to another.

Was this officer's complexion of African descent? Are these eyes Asian? Is this surname Spanish or Italian? These were officers I could have had coffee with, shared war stories with, and shared how we grew up, what food we ate, what holy days we honored. The Anglo names attached to brown faces, the shades of pigment, the

obvious offspring of “mixed” marriages. It seemed a betrayal to call them anything but blue.

Eighty black men’s faces. Twenty-three black women’s faces. Seventy-four Hispanic men, five Hispanic women. Sixteen women with white faces and nine Asian men. Did I label them correctly? I was sad that I felt compelled to do so. They were all my brothers and sisters. We might have disagreed on a lot of things. We might not have liked each other. Even some dead heroes were jerks. But the bottom line is that how they chose to invest their lives cost them their lives. Had we faced danger together we would have tried to hold the line, cover each other, do our very best to survive for each other’s sake.

Did they all look like me? No, indeed. But when we lost them a part of me was lost, too.



## 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.