

ASSAULT ON OFFICERS



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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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Police are Hurting. We Need to Learn How Many

In my recent interview with Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, he pointed out the inflationary effect that obscures our national statistics on homicide. Current FBI statistic on homicide indicate a general downward trend. Does this mean there is less violent crime? According to Grossman “We have ‘inflation adjusted dollars’ and we need ‘medically adjusted murders’”. Interesting analysis.

With the advance of medical care, particularly emergency and trauma care, more people survive what would have been deadly encounters in violent attacks than ever before. An argument to that theory is that a look at aggravated assault would be a better measure of violence. The weakness of that argument is that assaults are less reliably reported, and the incentive to downgrade to a lesser assault is strong on the law enforcement agencies who decipher the data that generates those statistics.

In the same way, the line of duty deaths that are reported face the same distortions. “Technology, tactics, training, body armor, equipment and (most importantly) medical technology, are doing a better and better job of saving police lives”, says Grossman. When it comes to officer injuries there are no reliable numbers.

The number 50,000 is often cited as the number of officers injured yearly according to FBI statistics. With the number of police officers in the U.S. stands somewhere between 750,00 and one million, that 50,000 number would represent an injury rate of between 5% and 7%. The result is the claim that law enforcement really isn't that dangerous.

In my survey of nearly 200 police officers representing various ranks, agency types, and assignments officers were asked if they had to "seek medical care resulting from an assault or resistance from a suspect within the previous year". Over 20% said yes. Another 63% reported they had been "physically assaulted in a way that caused physical discomfort or pain" but they did not seek medical attention. Whether this is a reflection of the minor nature of the injuries or, more likely, the old high school football coach's command to "walk it off", is hard to say.

Another interesting facet of the job is the unreported success rates in deadly force confrontations. My survey, along with other published research, indicates that 70-80% of officers are faced with the decision whether to lawfully use lethal force on average at least once every two years but are able to make a non-lethal resolution. Another 24% reported being threatened with a deadly weapon. If this poll is correct, we have a tremendous deficit of information on the real risks that police officers face daily.

The perception of death, rather than injury, as the primary risk in the law enforcement culture may also factor into the prevailing lack of care for disabled

officers, including the pernicious and invisible brain injury of PTSD.

Recognizing the risks to our officers to keep them safe, healthy, and productive requires good data in addition to enlightened leadership and public support.

Many Ways to Die

It may sound like a James Bond movie title, but it is a reality faced by every police officer in America. With 360 law enforcement deaths as of this writing in 2021, by year's end, we will have seen a particularly deadly year for our officers.

The average citizen, watcher of TV and movies, may assume that most deaths are from bullets flying in dramatic gunfights. Few of the officers were engaged in protracted gun battles, but the deaths recorded by the Officer Down Memorial Page (ODMP.org), 49 were from gunfire, ranking as the most common type of duty-related death other than COVID-19.

Alarming, ambush murders have been on a steady increase. Of the 49 gunfire deaths, at least ten could be considered ambush murders. According to a fact sheet developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), there are two types of ambush attacks. One is the entrapment ambush that is premeditated and officers are lured into a location to execute an attack. These kinds of killers may also stalk officers to find them at predictable locations such as their homes or police station.

An example is this month's murder of Officer Dylan Harrison of the Alamo, Georgia police department. Although a four-year veteran as a police officer, Harrison was working his first shift at the Alamo Police Department. At 1:00 in the morning, he was outside the

police station when attacked and shot to death. His killer fled and was apprehended the next day.

The second type of ambush described in the IACP document is the spontaneous type. This is an unprovoked attack without any long-term planning. As a crime of opportunity, the offender makes the decision at the approach of the officer, murdering in a surprise and unprovoked attack.

An example is Harris County Deputy Constable Kareem Atkins of Houston. Atkins responded with other officers to a report of a robbery in the parking lot of a business he was watching. As the officers were taking the robbery suspect into custody, another man opened fire from behind them with a rifle. The two other officers with Atkins were also wounded as Atkins was fatally wounded with a bullet to the head.

With a nod to those demanding diversity in law enforcement, the honor roll of the dead includes men and women, officers of all races, and represent a variety of agencies from federal, state, local, and specialty agencies like conservation police.

Four officers were shot and killed while responding to check on persons in well-being checks and suicidal subjects. Nine officers died when shot while performing traffic stops. Three were killed by gunfire on domestic violence calls. Four were murdered during barricaded suspect events. Six were murdered by gunmen while serving arrest or search warrants. Four others were shot to death during the investigation of disturbance or suspicious person calls.

All of these firearms deaths were during what every officer would call a routine matter. Even service calls, in addition to calls to check on a person's well-being, can be deadly. Two officers were shot dead handling a dog call, one while assisting a motorist, and one while investigating a traffic crash.

Bullets are not the only life-ending means for our officers. There was one stabbing death. Five officers were beaten to death during assaults. Three drowned. Two died during training accidents. Vehicles were the mechanism of death for a dozen officers killed by drivers, an additional 16 died when the killer used a vehicle as a weapon, and 21 died during a pursuit or other vehicle crash. In addition to the 231 officers who succumbed to COVID from duty-related exposure, 17 died from duty-related medical emergencies of which 15 were heart attacks.

The ticking time bomb of duty-related injuries led to the delayed deaths of 3 officers whose line of duty sacrifice began years ago and who finally succumbed in 2021.

There is a historical myth about a man named Damocles who desired to be a king. When his wish was granted, he discovered that the throne was beneath a sword that hung above his head by a single thread. His time of privilege and service thus existed beneath the potential imminence of death. So live our police officers, always in the shadow of their final shift.

Attacks on Law Enforcement Continue

Anti-police fervor continues to show up in attacks on police officers. The strident voices of anti-police activists whose false narratives and accusations perpetuated in the media cannot escape blame for literally fanning the flames of hostility.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, a man entered the property just outside of the police headquarters building, set a marked police car on fire, and attacked a police officer. The assailant, identified as 41-year-old Christopher Moore, struck the officer multiple times, put his arms around the officer's neck, and attempted to take the officer's firearm. Nearby officers were able to intervene and shot Moore who died at the scene.

In Plano Texas, Imran Rasheed attacked the police station after killing a Lyft driver, Isabella Lewis, in Garland, Texas, stole Lewis' car and drove it to Plano. Rasheed entered the police department firing shots at two civilians before being felled by 2 officers inside the station who ran into the room after hearing shots. A note in the stolen car Rasheed had driven claimed inspiration from terrorist groups.

In July a Louisville, Colorado police vehicle was set on fire. The loss of the \$70,000.00 vehicle was the result of a targeted attack. The case is still under investigation with two arrests made in the case.

Seattle Police were stunned (but probably not surprised) when a police car was set on fire while two

SPD officers were still inside the vehicle. A San Francisco patrol car was in flames in August in the famed Tenderloin District of the city, leading to the evacuation of nearby buildings. A Broward County Sheriff's cruiser was set on fire by a woman while a deputy was in the vehicle stopped at a traffic light.

Aside from the obvious tragedy of the attempted murders of the officers who are victims of these vicious attacks is the sad reality that the necessary protections of officers and police stations will further distance the thin blue line from its citizens.

The word "ambush" comes from the musket era when an unexpected volley of gunfire came from hidden places like a stand of trees. The attack was called an "ambuscade" from the archaic German word for forest. Ambush attacks have been a leading mode of the murder of police officers over the past several years.

Strategies to offset the dangers from ambush and unexpected, unprovoked attacks are often at odds with staying in positive contact with the citizenry. Places where police officers take breaks, for example, are often informal opportunities for citizens to interact with police officers. But being predictable and informal provides planning opportunities for attackers, such as the 2009 slaughter of four Lakewood, Washington officers at a coffee shop by a man previously granted early release in Arkansas from multiple felony convictions nine years earlier.

The collegial opportunities for officers and citizens have become stifled as officers exercise more caution and

less exposure to these kinds of attacks. Another recommendation from officer safety experts is to keep patrol car windows rolled all the way up to keep incendiary devices from being tossed into the car. This is at odds with most officers' preference to keep the windows down in order to better listen for sounds of trouble and pleas for help as they patrol.

Citizens have complained when they find that an officer had his sidearm unholstered and held as their patrol car was approached by a citizen wanting to talk with them while parked. Officers don't have time to wait for a surprise attack to draw their weapon from an awkward seated position, especially while still wearing their seat belt. Officers may order a citizen approaching their patrol car to stop or step back for their safety, creating resentment by an honest citizen just wanting to ask a question, but the risk of ambush makes the officer's demand reasonable even though likely perceived by the citizen as rude or unnecessary.

When it comes to police station security the public, once again, suffers because of the barriers that police leaders may decide to install. Some stations are very customer-friendly as a citizen has immediate contact with a police officer or representative of the department, like to old-style desk at a New York City police precinct building. Other police facilities require remote access even to get in to talk with someone behind bulletproof glass through a speaker system. The former is best for community relations, the latter a necessary precaution to avoid attacks on police personnel and potential breaching of the facility.

Hopefully, the public understands the need for this distancing and are still able to have fruitful conversations in parking lots, restaurants, and police station lobbies while understanding the obstacles to those simple and meaningful conversations.

Alarming Midyear Officer Fatality Report

The National Law Enforcement Memorial Fund has issued its midyear officer fatality report. “As of June 30, 2021, 155 federal, state, tribal and local law enforcement officers died in the line-of-duty. This is an increase of approximately 10% from the 141 officers killed during the same period last year. The 155 line-of-duty deaths are on a pace to exceed the 295 law enforcement fatalities recorded in 2020, which was the second highest total on record. At this rate, officer line-of-duty deaths could near the 1930 toll of 312 fatalities, which is the most ever recorded by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund in a single year.”

One of the reasons for the high rate of duty-related deaths is COVID-19, the killer of 71 officers so far this year, a slight decrease from last year’s numbers but still poised to be a major killer of officers with little choice but to do a job that exposes them.

When the public thinks of line of duty deaths, they typically envision death by gunfire. Despite panic in some circles about restricting “assault rifles”, the types of weapons in the officer gunfire deaths in the first six months of 2021 were unknown in 11 cases, a handgun in 9 cases, a shotgun in 2 cases, and a rifle in a half dozen cases. So far this year, deaths by firearms have exceeded last year’s numbers. Murder of police officers is accomplished in many ways besides guns. They are beaten to death (remember that when critics cry that a suspect was “unarmed”), stabbed, and assaulted with motor vehicles. Bullets caused 28 death, beatings 3

deaths, and 2 officers were stabbed to death, 3 drowned during rescue attempts.

Traffic related deaths are always a significant percentage of police fatalities. This includes crashes as well as being struck accidentally or intentionally while on the roadside. This kind of death showed an alarming 138% increase over this time last year. Nineteen of the officers, of the 38 traffic related deaths, were killed by being struck while out of their vehicle. Every state has enacted some type of “move over” law requiring motorists to change lanes or slow their speeds for emergency and service vehicles on the edge of a roadway. Studies indicate that fewer than third of drivers are aware of the law.

Officers under stressful conditions can succumb to unexpected health emergencies. Eighteen officers died between January 1 and June 30th from sudden illness including heart attack and stroke.

Although time and date information is not predictive, this year’s shortest month had the most officer deaths with 6 in February. The greatest number of officers who died in the line of duty were employed by either city police agencies or county sheriff’s departments, both with 47 deaths each. University police, federal agents, tribal police, and conservation police are included in the diversity of assignments, defeating the common thought that only big city police face real danger. The length of their service ranges from 2 months to 44 years and ages span from 24 years old to 71. While most officers were male, there were 13 female law officers who gave their all this year.

Completing an arrest remains the most dangerous police activity, regardless of the seriousness of the actual crime. Five of the officers shot and killed were in the process of taking someone into custody, seven if attempts to serve felony warrants is included in that count. The other activities include investigating suspicious circumstances, responding to disturbance calls including family violence, doing traffic enforcement, engaging in a SWAT type call, and responding to a robbery or burglary call. Finally, an officer can die just by being an officer since 15% of firearms related murders are by ambush.

Many will note that there have been 10 K9 deaths this year, half of whom were killed by gunfire or other assault.

These numbers are just the shadow of the risks of serving in law enforcement. Fourteen officers died last year of illness related to the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks. Thousands every year have life changing injuries that result in chronic pain, multiple medical procedures, traumatic brain injury, PTSD, and career loss.

Laws Protecting Police Should Equal Laws Protecting Judges and Prosecutors

A recent, encouraging piece of legislation out of Minnesota has increased penalties for assaults on police officers. Included in the law are corrections officers (an often overlooked group), judges, and prosecutors. The bill, named after injured officer Arik Matson, amended state law to make penalties harsher for offenses of assault on the named government officials. While we celebrate this effort in a state where law enforcement is especially embattled, one must wonder if only police officers had been the subject of this legislation whether it would have seen the light of day.

In Colorado, for example, judges and prosecutors are protected against retaliation and threats which makes such acts a felony. The sweeping law also includes a member of the judge's family, a person in close relationship to the judge, and a person residing in the same household with the judge. Colorado peace officers are offered enhanced penalties for assaults against them, and the threat of a felony charge for attempting to influence a public servant, and a misdemeanor charge for interfering with a police operation. The interfering statute covers k-9s as well as police officers but does not cover friends, family, or live-in lovers that judges and prosecutors enjoy. At least police officers get the same consideration as service animals, if not judges and prosecutors.

As an ironic note to Colorado's recent legislative agenda that judges and prosecutors retain their immunities, while police officers in Colorado have lost qualified immunity, must pay out of their own pockets for judgments against them, can lose their certification based on complaints, and are assumed guilty of misconduct if their body camera didn't get turned on while they are getting shot at.

In the wake of the January 6th assault on the Capitol, federal courts have asked Congress for funds to prevent angry mobs from overrunning courthouses, as well as counter threats to judges and courthouses related to criminal cases from the Jan. 6 insurrection. These requests are not new, and no one claims that prosecutors and judges are in no danger.

In July of 2020, Federal Judge Esther Salas was talking with her 20-year-old son, Daniel in the basement of their home when the doorbell rang and he rushed upstairs to answer. Salas heard what sounded like an explosion and soon found her husband bleeding from three gunshots and her son dead from the attack. New Jersey quickly passed a law prohibiting the revealing of personal information about state judges online or elsewhere. Although Salas was not covered by the state legislation because she is a federal judge, her family tragedy was the inspiration for the law.

Some states provide statutory privacy protections for law enforcement officers, but police reform efforts often erode those protections in the name of transparency and accountability. The practice of "doxing" – dropping documents available either from

public records or from persons hacking into private sources, remains a threat to police officers. In 2015, two Los Angeles police officers who had been involved in a controversial shooting found their names, home addresses, and the location of their children's schools posted on the Internet. St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar was similarly doxxed with the purpose of coercing him to disclose the location of Officer Darren Wilson after the Michael Brown shooting. In 2019, hackers obtained information on thousands of officers who had attended the FBI's National Academy program. As assassination attempts continue to increase, the issue of off-duty privacy and the safety of law enforcement families is of critical importance. Critics of law enforcement deny the impact of anti-police rhetoric on attacks on police officers, but common sense exposes a clear correlation. It is clear that judges and prosecutors fear attacks from criminals and deserve laws that protect them. There should be equity between the protections afforded these lawyers and the police who face these criminal forces in the rawest forms

Officer Survival: Selfish or Noble?

The survival mantra in police training is spoken in several clichés: Your main goal is to go home alive after the shift. You want to take off your own shoes at the end of the day. Be polite to everyone you meet but have a plan to kill them. Better judged by twelve than carried by six.

For critics of police “warrior” training, this kind of indoctrination is said to produce paranoid and unnecessarily aggressive police officers. Trainers simply know that police officers will inevitably face potentially deadly threats and must face the reality that their survival from day to day is not guaranteed.

“On October 26, 2013, Officer Anna Carrizales approached a suspicious vehicle occupied by three males that was stopped at a green light in a moving lane of traffic in Stafford, Texas. As she approached the vehicle and began speaking to the driver, the male in the front passenger seat pulled out a gun and shot her twice—once in the face and once in the chest. The gunshot to her face ricochet off her cheek bone, exited her cheek, and almost severed her ear lobe. The gunshot to her chest was stopped by her bulletproof vest but was fired at such a close range that it punctured a hole in her left breast. The suspects then fled in the vehicle.

Despite the horrific assault and serious wounds, Officer Carrizales had the presence of mind to fire four shots at the fleeing suspects. She then returned to her patrol car and pursued the suspects, all the while giving clear

information to the dispatcher about her condition, the suspect's direction of travel, and situational awareness for responding officers. The pursuit ended at an apartment complex in Houston, where the three suspects abandoned their vehicle. Officer Carrizales was right behind them.

Officer Carrizales' incredible bravery and concern for her community drove her to lead fellow officers to the suspects. She assisted in the arrest of one of the suspects—the shooter—in the apartment complex that morning. The remaining two were arrested within 48 hours." So reads the 2013 citation for the Congressional Badge of Bravery.

Officer Carrizales' desire to stay alive would have been best served by returning to the relative safety of her patrol car and waiting for assisting officers and paramedics. Common sense and self-preservation says that would have been the natural and logical thing to do. But self-preservation is not what officer survival is all about. Carrizales continues to work as a police officer and trainer, sharing her story to encourage others.

In a chilling dash cam video never released to the public, first responders from Jacksonville, Arkansas on the scene of a crash were intentionally mowed down by Bryce Allen, who is now serving a 70-year prison sentence for the death of a firefighter and the critical injury to Officer Daniel DiMatteo in 2012. Audio from the video recorded the cry of pain as DiMatteo was struck to the pavement by Allen's speeding vehicle. As the officer lay in the roadway with severe injuries, he continued to command the scene radioing instructions

for additional responders to secure the roadway and prevent additional injuries. DiMatteo not only survived but stayed in the fray and continued to serve. Although medically retired as a result of the assault he continues to serve by working with injured officers and veterans in service projects and disaster response.

The illustrations of officer survival are endless. When watching news coverage of disasters, there is always the compelling image of people fleeing while police officers head toward the trouble.

That survival mindset is altruistic rather than self-serving. Staying in the fight, and continuing to serve is the central issue. The badge represents all citizens. The weapons and body of the law enforcement officer are in their service. For an officer to allow harm to themselves is to allow harm to their citizens. To do them the most honor and highest service the officer must survive to continue the work. When the police officer defends themselves they defend thousands.

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 Burright 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.

When Police Are Crime Victims

Every state has guidelines or statutory requirements for the treatment of crime victims. Whether the responsibility of implementing these laws is that of police officers, prosecutors, or designated victim advocates the rights of victims typically include notification of dispositions on the case, information on restitution, and the opportunity to make a statement about the case during proceedings.

But what if that victim happens to be a police officer? My research shows that half of the cases involving assaults on officers are dropped or pled away with no notification of the victim officer. In only 25% of cases were officers given the opportunity to comment on sentencing or disposition of the case. In another twist, one out of four officers who are victims of assault or resisting arrest was subsequently investigated as suspects in the case themselves – no surprise to those of us who have to lay hands on resistive subjects who readily claim excessive force. Complicating the officer-as-victim scenario is that in 75% of cases, officers complete the entire investigation of their own victimization in assaults and resisting cases with no other investigating officers involved.

Police officers are not exempted from laws designed to support and serve crime victims. The unique crimes against police officers that arise during the course of their duties should be uniquely handled by the justice system, but to the contrary, they are frequently disregarded.

Officers who have been assaulted, regardless of the severity of the resistance or assault, should be able to feel confident that prosecutors, judges, juries, and their own departments will be supportive of criminal prosecution of offenders. Attention to these cases is tragically insufficient nationwide. Only 7% of officers surveyed had received any victim services, 15% of officers wanted to speak out but feared peer pressure to “suck it up”, and 13% of officers state they rarely ask for assault or resisting charges because of weak prosecution, and a stunning 83% reported being injured and not reporting it or seeking treatment for pain.

Officers are not nameless, faceless victims. Officers are fellow citizens to be served and, importantly for society, each of us represents the collective will of law-abiding persons and an assault on the badge is an affront to every good citizen. It is of great importance that police officers assert their rights as citizens in the prosecution of cases in which they have been assaulted or resisted.

One of the opportunities that should be provided in most jurisdictions is the victim impact statement. Here are some things you might want to say:

- Assaults on officers must be considered not only for the single incident but in the context of cumulative effect. Police officers suffer higher premature mortality rates, can develop PTSD-related symptoms from repeated assaults over a career, and must necessarily develop increased anxiety, suspicion, and caution in every future contact with the public as a result of each assault or resisting.

- Mention any loss of time from work, including sick days; be honest about sleep loss, non-visible injuries (83% of officers suffer injuries for which they seek no treatment), and any costs associated with the event such as a torn uniform, broken watch, dented glasses, etc.

- Relate how the event affected your family - were your partner or children frightened, has their behavior changed, or has anxiety increased?

- Wax philosophical. Comment on the greater issues of law and order, respect for authority, and examples set for the community and other offenders. These are huge issues that need to be pondered by prosecutors and judges. You may be willing to forgive the defendant or write off the experience, but what does that do for our profession and our community if the courts grant undue leniency?

As a profession, law enforcement needs to recognize that the warrior mindset, willingness to sacrifice and daily life of courage need not keep them from demanding civil treatment and justice from the same system we diligently serve. In the end, it is our obligation to demand the best for our finest.

No Gun Doesn't Equal No Threat

With our gunfight-soaked entertainment media and scary assault rifle propaganda, the average citizen thinks “weapon” equals “firearm”. And among many misinformed critics even when a police officer is confronted with a firearm the officer is expected to “de-escalate”. There are some facts relevant to that perception that officers know about the potential lethality of things other than guns.

First, let's review the lethality of firearms in the de-escalation discussion. There usually just isn't time. The brain chemistry that is washing over an agitated person, even one who otherwise has no diagnosable mental illness, takes time on the clock to return the brain to a normal state. Research shows that even an unskilled person can draw a firearm from a concealed position and pull the trigger multiple times before an officer can even unholster their duty weapon. No time for conversation.

Murder by gunfire is the main culprit in violent officer deaths. Reflecting national murder victimization, most of those deaths are by handguns, Research shows that in killings of unarmed suspects by police, the context of the encounter shows that the officer was “facing an imminent threat of death or serious bodily injury to themselves or a third person in nearly 90% of the situations” according to a study published on the Force Science Institute website. “Unarmed subjects shot by intent included those who were attempting to disarm an officer...drown an officer...throw an officer from a

bridge or rooftop...strangle an officer...gesturing as if armed with a real weapon...keeping hands concealed despite commands...and charging toward an officer with apparent intent to assault” according to the research findings.

In the ten-year research period from 2010 to 2019, FBI statistics show that of officers who were injured by either guns or knives, 75% were from firearms. Only 44% of those injuries occurred in incidents where officers had knowledge before arriving on the scene that there was a weapon involved. As every officer is reminded in training, every call is a “person with a gun” call because the officer brings all of their weapons systems with them on their equipment belt. If a suspect gets control of the officer or any item they are carrying, the suspect may end up with a gun, a knife, a chemical spray, an impact weapon, or handcuffs which were used in a number of the assaults documented in the FBI report.

Guns and knives are not the only fatal threats facing officers. Deputy Sheriff John Durm of Marion County Sheriff’s Office, Indiana was murdered in July of this year when an inmate used his handcuffs to strangle the veteran officer to attempt an escape. Corporal Bryant Searcy of the Wayne County Sheriff’s Office, Michigan also suffered death at the hands of an unarmed inmate in 2020, as did Lieutenant Jon David “JD” Anderson of the Spokane, Washington Police Department, and Officer Gene Wade Lee of the Maricopa County, Arizona Sheriff’s Office, and Correctional Officer Pedro Joel Rodríguez-Mateo Puerto Rico Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Puerto Rico who was

disarmed of his baton and murdered with it by an inmate. All of those attacks were in 2019, but many more such fatal assaults are noted on the Officer Down Memorial Page website from past years.

Assaults on officers are very poorly reported nationwide for a variety of reasons. In a 2014 survey, 83% of officers reported that in their career they have been hurt in an assault but they did not seek medical care, over 52% have been to the hospital for injuries from an assault. Nearly 10% had been injured by a deadly weapon and over 20% lost time from work due to an assault-related injury. When asked about the previous year, 63% had been hurt without medical attention, and 21% had gotten medical attention.

Police work is dangerous. Injured officers often do not get the care that they need, or the justice they deserve. When they do have to defend themselves or others using some level of force, the narrative in most media stories does not reflect the fullness of facts and context even though research shows that most witnesses agree with the officers' actions even when confronting an "unarmed" adversary.

Government Officials Assassinated, but They Were Only Police Officers

Ask a citizen which country lost 7 government officials to assassination in the last year. They might be surprised to hear that it is us. The United States of America. Shocking? Newsworthy? Alarming? Not when the dead are police officers.

These officers were not arresting anyone. They were doing the most ordinary things. Florida Trooper Joseph bullock was assisting a motorist. While doing some paperwork and waiting for a tow truck an hour had passed when the driver walked up and killed him. Nevada Trooper Ben Jenkins also stopped to help a stranded motorist. The motorist shot and killed him. McAllen, Texas officers Edelmiro Garza and Ismael Chavez were lured to a call and shot on arrival. Sgt. Ricardo Perez-Ortiz was surrounded and murdered by a gang on his way to work in Puerto Rico. St. Louis Metropolitan Police Officer Tamarris Bohannon was attempting to locate a victim on a call when shot and killed. Fayetteville, Arkansas Officer Stephen Carr was waiting for a fellow officer in the police parking lot when approached and shot dead.

By definition, assassination is the killing of an important person for political purposes. The symbolism of a police officer makes them a target of politically motivated extreme action. Other attacks that appear motivated by nothing other than a person's status as a police officer include the recent shooting into the home of two police

officers in New Jersey, and the shooting of two California deputies in Los Angeles sitting in their patrol car.

Political extremists are fueled not only by internal beliefs but a sense of permission from identifying with a group. When extremists sense validation for their attacks they can act from a sense of collective consent to justify their acts of violence. In the current season of hostility toward the institution of policing, the symbolic presence of law enforcement reflects in the mind of the extremist the rhetoric heard daily on the news and social media.

Blaming the heated language of the anti-police movement may well be criticized as failing to hold the killer accountable for their own decision, or attempting to shame those exercising their 1st amendment rights. The distinction between rioters and protestors is important, but a third category of inciters needs to be added to reflect the nature of recent protests. Hearing shouts of “kill the police”, “f*ck the police”, and other exclamations is far different from hearing “no justice, no peace” or “stop police brutality”. The messages are distinctly different. The message heard by those who choose to attack and kill someone in uniform are distinctly different.

The count of police officers killed by ambush does not include the many other assaults and murder attempts on police officers. Although these may not be covered by most media, there will undoubtedly be new incidents of unprovoked attacks on police officer between the time of this writing and its publication.

Inflammatory and dangerous rhetoric doesn't come from only the brick throwing rioters. The tacit permission to harm police officers to further the cause of police reform, defunding, or abolition comes from people in power. Proposals from elected officials to disband the police – preposterous on its face – work towards making police officers non-persons, non-essential, and self-perpetuating racists. Non-personhood is an essential element of prejudice and violence committed on groups from indigenous Americans, to African-Americans, to Jews in this country and, of course, during the Nazi era of Germany. Academics and some political leaders have endorsed looting as a symbolic and justifiable act of justice. Sweeping generalizations by cultural icons like LeBron James and Trevor Noah speaking of police as universally racist and brutal inflame those who are ready to believe every officer is a threat to freedom and their killings are morally justified. Lawlessness is lauded and law enforcement is branded as hate.

During the height of activism against the war in Vietnam, returning soldiers were reviled, spat upon, and ostracized. This disdain for servicemen lasted for many decades. It manifested itself not only in airports where soldiers were called baby killers, but was reflected in poor veteran services and factored into veteran's PTSD of the era. The national conscience eventually turned to revering our military veterans. Yellow ribbons blossomed for returning troops from more recent military battles, the problems of homeless veterans has garnered attention, and mental health services and suicide prevention are of higher quality and availability.

If police officers can stay alive and in service to their communities, they may see a day of national repentance when their sacrificial service is once again appreciated. The boisterous minority will be a small voice as the majority of Americans will become bold about their support of quality law enforcement. That day must come sooner rather than later or the assassination of our public servants will continue.

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.