Executives Can Take Action to Reduce the Number of Officers Murdered in the Line of Duty

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Abstract

Law enforcement executives can take significant action that would reduce the number of officers killed in the line of duty. This paper makes specific recommendations after an analysis of statistics on the number of officers killed, how they were killed and the location of wounds. Strong evidence is provided to answer the question: "What can law enforcement executives do to reduce the number of officer deaths?" Law enforcement executives committed to providing the safest working conditions for officers will follow the recommendations. In fact, the proposals should be mandated through policy, contract and/or state legislation.

Introduction

One alarming statistic which keeps surfacing in the data reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the number of law enforcement officers killed in the United States and U.S. territories. The National Law Enforcement Memorial in Washington, D.C., is a perpetual reminder of this fact. The memorial was dedicated in

Table 1
Law Enforcement Officers Feloniously Killed1962-1991

Year	Officers Killed	Year	Officers Killed	Year	Officers Killed
1962	48	1972	117	1982	92
1963	55	1973	134	1983	80
1964	57	1974	132	1984	72
1965	53	1975	129	1985	78
1966	57	1976	111	1986	66
1967	76	1977	93	1987	74
1968	64	1978	93	1988	78
1969	86	1979	106	1989	66
1970	100	1980	104	1990	65
1971	126	1981	91	1991	75
Total	722		1110		746

Source: Crime in the United States, (1971); Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, (1972-1990).

Table 2
Number and Percentage of Officers Killed Feloniously, By Region

Region	Number of Deaths	Percentage	States/Territories Comprising Region
Northeast	87	11%	9
Midwest	138	18%	12
West	139	18%	13
South (Includes D.C.)	355	47%	17
Territory	42	6%	5
Foreign	1		
total	762	100%	56

(Note: All figures are rounded to nearest zero)
Source: Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1990.

Table 3
Rank by Number of Law Enforcement Officer Deaths

Ranking	Area	Region	Total
1	Texas	South	71
2	California	West	63
3	Florida	South	58
4	New York	Northeast	44
5	Puerto Rico	U.S. Territory	37
6 (tie)	Illinois	Midwest	29
6 (tie)	Mississippi	South	29
7 (tie)	Michigan	Midwest	26
7 (tie)	Georgia	South	26
8	Virginia	South	23

Source: Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1990.

1991 and at that time 12,561 names were etched upon it.

"Killed in the line of duty" falls into two general categories: Accidental Deaths and Felonious Deaths (death by the hand of another). The purpose of this report is to examine possible causative factors related to felonious deaths of law enforcement officers, and to recommend actions executives may take to reduce the number of felonious deaths.

While the study addressed a number of questions, the key question in this paper is: *What can law enforcement executives do to reduce the number of officer deaths?*

Officers are Being Murdered

The number of officers murdered between 1962 through 1991 totaled 2,578, as shown in Table 1. In the first decade, 1962-1971, there were 722 deaths. During the following decade, 1972-81, the death rate dramatically increased 35% to 1,110. The third decade, 1982-91, there were 746 deaths, which closely mirrored the total deaths recorded during the first decade. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the possible social and political events which may have led to these deaths. The lowest number of deaths in the past 26 years was recorded in 1992, with 59 officers killed in the line of duty. Although this decrease is encouraging news, it will be years before we are able to determine if this is a benchmark and whether there is actually a downward trend in officer deaths. The problem, however, continues to exist regardless of the social and political climate of the nation. Officers are being murdered.

Many of the studies involving officer deaths are compilations of data, providing information on victim profile,
offender profile, situational circumstances, type of weapon,
location of incident, and time of incident. Some studies regarding police murders focus on other areas in an attempt to deduce why these killings occur. These reports contain such information as:

- Correlation of environmental variables with the dynamics of the incident
- Correlation of the officer-assailant variables
- Region specific reports
- Cultural explanation for regional violence
- Climatic and temporal variables which impact on violent crime
- Correlation between general murder rate and police officer murder in cities

Although we have a great deal of information to peruse, there are no prescriptions that offer practical solutions to reduce officer deaths. The Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) Section of the Federal Bureau of Investigation publishes the most comprehensive reports in the area of police murders. A review of these reports will identify variables which must be considered in order to reduce such deaths.

One recent UCR publication, titled "Killed in the Line of Duty," is a compilation of data relating to officers who were feloniously killed from 1981-1990. This UCR publication dissected a sample of incidents during this period. The research examined the police officer, the offender, and the circumstances which brought about the encounter.

This paper will examine the data in this UCR publication and other FBI reports to get a better understanding of the variables which may contribute answers to the question: "Why are law enforcement officers being murdered?"

Geographically, where is the least safe place to work as a law enforcement officer?

The number of law enforcement officers murdered between 1981 and 1990 totaled 762, as shown in Tables 2 and 3. While the data in Tables 2 and 3 suggest that the southern states, and Texas in particular, are more dangerous, consider the following (Killed in the Line of Duty, 1992).

Table 4
Victim Profile

Gender	Male	744
	Female	18
Race	White	666
	Black	93
	Asian	3
Age:	<25	68
	25-30	181
	31-40	298
	>40	215
Years of Service:	<1	39
	1-4	216
	5-10	235
	>10	272
Average Years of Service:		9

Source: Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1990.

Table 5
Types of Weapons Used to Kill Officers

Handgun	536
Rifle	100
Shotgun	60
Total Firearms:	696
Knife	17
Bomb	0
Personal	7
Other	42
Total Non-Firearms:	66
Grand Total:	762

Source: Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1990.

1. The number of states/territories assigned to each region is as follows: South, 17; West, 13; Midwest, 12; Northeast, 9; territories, 5.

2. The number of law enforcement officers employed in the South from 1981-1990 represented 33% of all the officers in the United States. By comparison, the West

Table 6
Enforcement Officers Killed by Firearms Location of Fatal Wounds

Year	Total	Head	Upper Torso	Lower Torso
1981	86	38	45	3
1982	82	24	56	2
1983	74	29	42	3
1984	66	33	32	1
1985	70	27	43	0
1986	62	26	33	3
1987	67	31	32	4
1988	76	37	36	3
1989	57	27	24	6
1990	56	31	22	3
Total	696	303	365	28

Source: Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1990.

employed 19%, the Midwest 23% and the Northeast 25%.
3. The South accounted for 34% of the total U.S. population from 1981-90. By contrast, the West represented 20% of the total population, the Midwest 25% and the Northeast 21%.

4. The South represented 43% of all homicides reported between 1981 and 1990. By contrast, the West accounted for 21%, the Midwest 19% and the Northeast 17%.

Of the 762 deaths, 406 (53%) occurred within 10 areas. Table 3 provides a ranking, high to low, of these 10 areas.

To say that one can unequivocally determine the reason(s) for the disparity in the number of officers slain in the South is purely speculation. We can, however, say there is a strong correlation between the general homicide rate and officer murders in the South.

What profile does the victim officer fit?

The "typical" officer killed in the line of duty is a white male between 31 and 40 years of age with nine years of law enforcement experience as shown in Table 4 below. This table shows that it is not youth or inexperience, but age and experience that are factors to be considered in officers' deaths. Examination into law enforcement demographics would provide facts regarding the victim officer, but such a study goes beyond the breadth of this paper.

What weapon is most frequently used to kill officers?

The most frequently used murder weapon is a firearm, in particular a handgun, as shown in Table 5. The ease of obtaining firearms and the concealment of handguns are factors which must be considered. Controlling the proliferation of firearms is the task

better left to Methuselah. But the knowledge of this proliferation should inspire continued training in the area of "street survival" tactics.

What parts of the body receive fatal firearm wounds?

Table 6 shows that of the 696 officers slain, 365 (52%) received fatal firearm wounds to the upper torso. In table 6, the head is the next frequent are fatally wounded; the lower torso is the third area most likely to be hit when an officer is fatally shot.

Where were the fatal wounds to officers wearing protective body armor?

Reports reveal that 156 (22%) of the 696 slain officers wore protective body armor and 49 of these officers received fatal wounds to their upper torso, as shown in table 7. The protective body armor failed in 49 deaths for several reasons:

* Bullets entered between the panels of the vest or through openings of the vest.

* Wounds were suffered above the vest.

* Bullets from high-powered weapons penetrated the vest.

Unfortunately, the number of reported incidents where vests saved an officer's life were not available for review.

It becomes apparent that protective body armor may have prevented 365 (52%) officer deaths if body armor was worn and if the vests were designed to:

• prevent armhole entry
• eliminate panel spaces
• cover neck openings
• prevent high-powered bullet penetration.

An earlier article published by this paper's author, "Firearms and Law Enforcement Officers Killed: An Alternative," examined semi-automatic handguns (1982). This earlier study revealed that approximately 19% of the officers killed by handguns from 1973-1979 were killed with their own handguns. The study revealed that almost all of the handguns used in these deaths were revolvers.

For that study, it was hypothesized that the time it took to shoot depended on how familiar the gunman/woman was with the weapon. There was a significant time delay required to activate a semi-automatic handgun as opposed to activating a revolver. As children, most people have handled toy guns which resemble a revolver. To activate a toy gun, one simply pulls the trigger and the gun is "fired." The closest most children come to anything which resembles a semi-automatic handgun is either a water pistol or dart gun. The functional dissimilarities between water pistols and dart guns are considerable when they are compared to a genuine semi-automatic handgun.

In order to test the hypothesis, a certified police firearms instructor was enlisted. To control all variables for this study, the following testing procedure was established:

Table 7

Location of Fatal Firearm Wound By Officers Wearing Body Armor

Year	Total	Lower Torso	Head	Upper Torso
1981	10	6	4	0
1982	13	5	7	1
1983	20	9	9	2
1984	17	13	4	0
1985	13	8	5	0
1986	14	6	6	2
1987	16	13	3	0
1988	20	15	3	2
1989	18	9	6	3
1990	15	11	2	2
Total	156	95	49	12

Source: Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1990.

Table 8

Law Enforcement Officers Killed With Their Own Handguns

Year	Slain With Handgun	Slain With Own Handgun	Revolver	Semi-Automatic
1981	69	12	12	0
1982	60	5	5	0
1983	54	11	11	0
1984	46	12	11	1
1985	58	10	10	0
1986	51	15	13	2
1987	49	13	13	0
1988	63	12	11	1
1989	40	10	8	2
1990	48	3	2	1
Total	539	103	96	7

Source: Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1990.

1. The same weapons were used throughout the entire testing process. The weapons used were a standard .45 caliber single action semi-automatic weapon and a standard .38 caliber six-shot police revolver with a 4" barrel. It should be noted that the semi-automatic weapon selected was one of the least complicated semi-automatic handguns available and was a model used extensively by the U.S. military forces.

2. Each weapon was placed on a table, lying on its side. The semi-automatic handgun was in the locked and cocked carrying mode. To activate the weapon, one had to disengage the thumb-lock safety and pull the trigger. The subjects tested were viewing the right side of the weapon from the rear of the grips.

3. The subjects were instructed that the weapons were not loaded; however, subjects were to handle them as if they were being carried in an officer's holster. The subjects were instructed to pick the weapons up one at a time and to attempt to discharge them, as if they had just removed the weapon from an officer's holster and they were going to shoot him. No instructions were given with regard to the status of the weapon's firing system or mode of operation.

4. A stop watch was used for timing all subjects. The watch was started when the subject made contact with an individual weapon and stopped when the hammer fell.

5. Two random test groups were studied: One group consisted of 20 sworn law enforcement officers. The second group consisted of 17 civilians.

6. The maximum time allotted for each weapon was 30 seconds.

In this study, the average time it took for civilians to pull the revolver and shoot was 1.77 seconds, compared to 16.2 seconds for the semi-automatic weapon. The statistical results of this test are quite impressive and are quite meaningful for the officer on the street.

Based on the civilian population tested, an officer would have an average of 16.2 seconds to take action after losing control of his semi-automatic compared to 1.77 seconds if he were equipped with a revolver. If the officer was unable to regain control of his weapon or incapacitate the assailant, the officer would have 16 seconds on the average to escape or retreat.

In the years since this study, a number of agencies have gravitated towards semi-automatic weapons or, at the very least, permitted officers the option of carrying semi-automatic weapons. It is important to note the locked and cocked carrying mode must be utilized to produce similar test results. Unfortunately, not enough changes have been made. Table 8 reveals statistics which indicate that the problem of officers killed with their own handguns is still a significant one.

<u>How many and what percentage of officers are killed with their own handguns?</u>

Table 8 reveals that 103 or 19 percent of the 536 officers killed between 1981 and 1990 were killed with their own handguns. Furthermore, revolvers accounted for 96 deaths, while semi-automatic handguns accounted for the remaining 7 or 1 percent of the total.

<u>Are line of duty benefits enough?</u>

Line-of-duty death benefits vary from agency to agency. The Federal Government, through the Public Safety Officers Benefit Act, provides a $50,000 line-of-duty death benefit. State, county, and municipalities may also provide additional benefits. In

addition, private foundations may provide such help as college or vocational training for dependent children.

The financial impact on an agency resulting from a line-of-duty death generally is not significant when compared to litigation which may be brought against an agency by the victim's survivors. Litigation should not be the driving force behind action to reduce officer deaths, but law suits often are costly for agencies. Law enforcement executives should examine the current line-of-duty death benefits and determine if these benefits are suitable or need revision based on the current economic conditions in our country.

Although this paper has focused only on officer deaths, we should be cognizant of the tremendous emotional and financial impact whenever an officer is seriously injured. The medical expenses incurred from a debilitating injury can far exceed the dollar amount paid out in a line-of-duty death benefit.

Felonious officer deaths rarely are encountered with any degree of frequency by any one agency. Because of the infrequency of these incidents, executives are seldom forced to concentrate on the goal of preventing officer murders.

However, procedural and training matters normally are addressed during debriefings following an officer's death. Changes may occur within the affected or neighboring agencies to insure that similar incidents do not occur.

Following the death of an officer, publicity inundates the community for a few days and then vanishes. The pain and suffering for the families, friends and relatives of the deceased officer continue long after the media blitz.

Conclusion

Executive officers from every agency need to evaluate their commitment to providing the best working conditions for their officers. It should be the responsibility of the state standards and training agency to examine conditions relative to officer safety and encourage compliance with any state standards.

The law enforcement community as a whole must take a critical look at reducing officer murders. This critical look should include, but not be limited to, mandating through policy, contract and/or state legislation the following remedies:

1. Provide and require that at least all uniform officers wear protective body armor.

2. Require that protective body armor meet state specifications and pass a yearly quality control inspection.

3. Provide for exceptions to the rule based on medical, environmental or situational events.

4. Reduce Workers Compensation for failure to wear protective body armor which could have prevented death or injury.

5. Provide mandatory training and retraining in weapon retention, handcuff use, defensive tactics, survival tactics.

6. Permit officers the option to carry semi-automatic handguns and carry the weapon

with the safety on.

In closing, this paper has presented strong evidence that there are, in fact, executive remedies to the question: "What can law enforcement executives do to reduce the number of officer deaths?" The Law Enforcement Officers Memorial can hold 29,233 names. Unless specific measures are taken to reduce the current rate of 153 deaths per year, the monument will be filled to capacity by the year 2100. It is hoped that proper training, technological advances, education and research will mean another memorial need never be erected to provide additional space for names.

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