

“On Duty” Traffic Crashes: Causation and Prevention

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Abstract

Traffic crashes are currently the number one cause of “line of duty” deaths for law enforcement officers. Fatalities, injuries and insurance rates are soaring, and vicarious liability issues for officers and their agencies are always in the foreground. Falling victim to a traffic crash affects every member of an agency and every aspect of the profession, including loss of work time, increased workman’s compensation claims, and loss of vehicles in the fleet - factors which also affect patrol coverage. This paper explores possible causations of the crashes, to include shift work, officer fatigue, the lack of recurring driver’s training, and the number of distracters in the vehicle. When the causes can be identified, prevention methods can be identified. If prevention methods are identified, the number of crashes can be reduced.

Introduction

Traffic crashes are currently the number one cause of “line of duty” deaths for law enforcement officers. More and more officers are involved in traffic crashes. Fatalities and injuries are increasing. Insurance rates are soaring and vicarious liability continues to be an issue for both individual officers and their agencies.

The modern police patrol vehicle bears only slight resemblance to its civilian counterpart. Technology has inundated the passenger compartment and officers are expected to operate information and communication systems, as well as the vehicle itself. These technology advancements often include a police radio which scans multiple channels and is normally a constant chattering distracter; the ever popular cellular telephone; a laptop computer or mobile communications terminal; in-car video systems; siren box with controls that require a near-genius IQ to operate, and the most recent addition, Global Positioning Systems.

Additionally there are often human forms of distraction present in a police vehicle. One would be the Officer Trainee who is trying to complete the Field Training and Evaluation Program, is unfamiliar with the world of law enforcement or how a police vehicle operates, and more often than not, is overwhelmed by all of the “technological distracters” within the vehicle. This new officer is learning a new career and often suffers from information overload, which will obviously affect his or her ability to safely operate a vehicle.

Another distracter is the arrestee who is being transported to the station or to the jail. Often uncooperative, belligerent, or even combative, he or she may be impaired by alcohol, drugs, or may be mentally unstable, ill, or suffering from some sort of contagious ailment. This distracter will affect even the veteran officers' ability to safely operate a vehicle.

Many agencies have elected to use twelve-hour shifts as their primary schedule for their patrol divisions. This change to twelve-hour shifts has obviously increased the number of hours worked by each officer. These longer hours equal more time spent in their vehicles. More hours spent in their vehicles also equal a greater number of miles driven during a given twelve-hour shift. More hours and more miles would serve to increase driver fatigue.

Added together, all of these factors would seem to create a greater risk of being involved in a traffic crash. If this is the case, why are agencies spending less and less time on one of the identified High Liability areas, driver training?

Law enforcement officers receive training in vehicle operations, pursuit driving, and crash avoidance during their short time in the police academy. However, this training is all that many officers receive because agencies are spending less and less time re-training their "drivers" who have a greater potential to bring about a high liability civil suit than those brought about by weapons discharges.

Experts indicate that recurring training in vehicle operations is of utmost importance. Recurring training should include time in the classroom covering items such as policy issues concerning the appropriateness of emergency response (i.e., when to respond with emergency lights and siren and when the use of lights and sirens would be detrimental), pursuit driving, to include when to pursue and when not to pursue, and policies covering pursuit intervention techniques. Recurring training must also include driving time on the driving range, operating the officer's own vehicle if possible, which improves driver skills in crash avoidance, skid recovery, and pursuit intervention techniques.

Research Methods

Conducting a literature review on police related traffic crashes was completed as part of the initial research on this subject. There are many articles in publication in reference to police related crashes. Most are broken down into pursuit driving issues and/or emergency response issues. There is limited information on the actual causation of crashes during normal day-to-day vehicle operations.

I was able to locate a study conducted by Kathy Wilson, a Criminal Analyst with the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office. Ms. Wilson completed the study in 2004 while enrolled in the FDLE Criminal Analyst Academy.

Ms. Wilson's study concentrated on two major areas, distracters within the vehicle and fatigue as contributing causes of traffic crashes and, secondly,

whether driver's training had any significant bearing on the reduction of traffic crashes involving police officers.

Since the information was limited, a survey was developed in order to ascertain specific information surrounding crashes during 2005 and the first five months of 2006.

Information about crashes involving law enforcement vehicles during 2005 and the first five months of 2006 was compiled from surveys of Florida Sheriff's agencies. The survey was conducted in an attempt to obtain specific information from each agency. Survey questions included the number of crashes for the year 2005 and the first five months of 2006, how many of those crashes were pursuit related, and in how many of those crashes was the officer found to be the at fault driver. In addition, questions were asked to determine what, if any, types of driver distractions were located within the patrol vehicle and if the distracter was listed as a contributing factor in the crash. I was also interested in ascertaining whether the agency had a policy restricting the use of cellular phones while operating a police vehicle and whether the agency required officers to attend driver's training on a recurring basis.

As an attachment to the survey sent to the Sheriff's Offices, I included a survey for each individual officer who was involved in the crash. The survey requested specific information concerning the consecutive number of hours the officer had been on duty prior to the crash. I was interested in how much sleep the officer had during the previous 24 hours prior to the crash as well as how much off duty work had been accomplished during the week prior to the crash. Additionally, the survey asked whether their specific agency conducts recurring driver's training; if so, when the last training was attended by the involved driver prior to the crash.

Results

The survey netted responses from only 20 percent of the agencies who received the questionnaire. Interesting enough, two of the agencies sent replies indicating they could not, or would not participate in the survey because of possible liability reasons.

The remainder of the surveys indicated there were 554 reported traffic crashes during 2005, of which only 7 were pursuit related crashes. Of the remaining 547 crashes, the officer was found at fault in 156 of those crashes, which equates to only 28%. During the first five months of 2006 there were 343 reported crashes, of which only 6 were pursuit related. Of the remaining 337 crashes, the officer was found at fault in 57 of those crashes, which equates to only 16%.

The fleet managers who received the original survey were asked to forward a personal survey to each of the officers involved in the crashes. Since fatigue and/or drowsy driving has been identified as being a factor in civilian traffic crashes, and Ms. Wilson touched on fatigue as a possible causation factor,

I was curious to see if there was a relationship between the consecutive number of hours on duty prior to the crash, the number of hours of sleep the officer had in the 24 hours prior to the crash, and the number of hours of off duty work performed by the officer.

Understandably, the results of this survey were somewhat subjective based on the officers who were answering them. As a preamble to the survey, recipients were advised that the information would be used strictly for empirical data and would not be used against them in any way. As stated earlier, two different agencies (both large agencies) could not or would not participate in the agency survey because of possible liability reasons. It is understood then that those agencies did not forward the individual officer surveys because of the same reasons. I was contacted by several different officers who expressed their regrets for not being able to participate based on union directives or citing the Public Information statute and fears of retribution as their reason for not participating.

Understanding this, I was happy to receive 69 replies to the survey. I must say that I was surprised by the results as there was no noted correlation between the fatigue factor and traffic crashes. The survey results were entered into an Excel database on several worksheets for manipulation of data.

Discussion

Another possible causation factor is the number of distracters within the police vehicle. In the 69 replies, officers indicated there were 11 crashes, or 15%, where distracters within the vehicle were considered a contributing cause to the crash. In 14 of the crashes, or 20%, outside distracters were identified as contributing to the crash. In 44 crashes, or 65%, distracters within the vehicle or outside of the vehicle had no bearing on the crash.

According to a Study of Technological Devices in Sheriff Vehicles And Their Impact on Driver Performance,

“the majority of deputies do not believe that technological devices contributed to Sheriff ‘s vehicle accidents. Fatigue was considered the greatest factor that contributes to vehicle accidents. The deputies acknowledged that twelve-hour shifts contribute to fatigue and the lack of concentration. The next factor was proactive policing which requires constant scanning of traffic, inspection of buildings, scrutiny of side streets, and assessment of people for anything that looks out of the ordinary or suspicious in nature.

The only technological devices that received any comment as a possible distraction was the 800 radios, cell phones, and the

mobile data computers. One deputy stated that the mobile data computer had contributed to his crash and three deputies stated that the cell phone had contributed to their crashes. (Wilson, 2004)

Because of the way fatigue affects people, it is logical to expect that higher levels of fatigue will increase the likelihood of an officer being involved in accidents, being injured on the job, and/or becoming ill. Recent research by scientists at the University of South Australia's Centre for Sleep Research compared the effects of sustained wakefulness with impairment from alcohol consumption. Using carefully controlled experiments, they found that cognitive psychomotor performance – a subjects' ability to follow a randomly moving target on the computer – was as impaired after 17 hours of sustained wakefulness as when they had a blood alcohol concentration of 0.05 percent. Impairment from 24 hours of sustained wakefulness was equivalent to that of a blood alcohol concentration of 0.10. (Vila, pp. 59-83)

Of the officers surveyed, one officer admitted to getting less than 2 hours of sleep in the 24 hours prior to his crash. That officer also admitted to falling asleep at the wheel, ½ mile from his home, after completing a twelve-hour shift. 25 of the officers surveyed indicated they had between 3 and 6 hours of sleep in the 24 hours prior to the crash, while the other 43 officers indicated they had 7 or more hours of sleep.

Off duty work, or overtime, is another contributor to fatigue. However, in the surveys returned, 56 of the 69 officers surveyed worked less than 12 hours of off duty work during the week prior to the crash. Of those 56, 10 worked less than eight hours and 38 worked less than 4 hours of off duty work during the work prior to the crash.

Since the surveys indicated in the majority of the crashes distracters were not a contributing factor to the crash, the question arises, "Are the drivers of these police vehicles properly trained to operate the vehicles, trained to recognize hazardous conditions, and possess the skills needed to avoid collisions?"

According to a study completed by Sgt Fred Yono of the Township of Van Buren Department of Public Safety,

"most officers receive extensive training in the use of firearms and defensive tactics and are required to qualify annually with both their duty and off-duty weapon, and take and pass at least one defensive tactics class in order to be certified to work as a patrolman. These same officers are only given a week long drivers training course in the academy and if they receive refresher drivers training, it is usually minimal. These officers may never draw their weapon, but the majority of their duties involve driving in all kinds of weather and traffic conditions, with

the added distractions of the police radio, radar unit, as well as watching everything that is going on around him/her.” (Yono, 4)

According to The Officer Down Memorial Page, more officers nationwide die in vehicle accidents than from shooting incidents. As a matter of fact, during 2006, already 50 officers have died as a result of traffic crashes. 26 of those have died in car crashes, 15 have died as a result of motorcycle crashes, 5 died as a result of being struck by vehicles, and 3 died as a direct result of vehicle pursuits.

Although crashes cause more injuries than firearms, police officers typically qualify once or twice a year with their firearms but rarely receive additional driver training after they graduate from the basic police academy. (Anonymous)

When this question was posed to officers in my survey, their answers seem to correlate with and confirm Sgt Yono’s findings. 2 officers indicated they had **NEVER** received any drivers training. 20 of the officers indicated it had been over 2 years since they had received drivers training. 36 of the officers indicated it had been more than 1 year since they had received any drivers training.

Although drivers training should include classroom time where policies and procedures concerning pursuit driving, including when to pursue and when a pursuit is inappropriate, emergency response driving (and when emergency response is appropriate), training should also focus on driving techniques used in day-to-day driving. Crash avoidance techniques should be discussed. Then, those same procedures should be PRACTICED on a driving range. Many agencies that offer the training on a recurring basis, or require their officers to attend after they have been involved in a crash, do not reinforce the training with practice and evaluation. Another factor that should be taken into consideration is the practice sessions should be performed in the same type of vehicle the officer operates on the street. In reality, the best results would be gained if the officer participates in the practice sessions utilizing his/her own vehicle – especially if it is the same one they operate on a daily basis.

When the question is asked, “Why don’t we spend more on training our officers into superior drivers?” the usual answer is “It costs too much.” Most departments ignore the toll in mangled police vehicles and officers injured or killed – not to mention the damage inflicted upon the public – and simply accept it as the unavoidable byproduct of police work. (Peterson, 2006)

Those agencies that have decided to change their training procedures and have developed recurring drivers training programs have discovered these results: fewer lawsuits and settlement payments, a sharp reduction in accidents, reduced vehicular repair costs, and,

most importantly, fewer offices – and civilians – injured and killed in accidents. (Peterson, 2006)

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