



## **Threats to Surviving this Job**

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Law enforcement is one of the most difficult, stressful, and dangerous careers an individual can pursue. The threats to your life, however, come from more sources than the knives and guns of evil doers. In fact, less than 20% of the law enforcement officers who died over the last three years died as a result of an assault. Even after you leave the job, the things you were exposed to as a law enforcement officer can still shorten your life. Recent research has revealed that law enforcement officers still only live an average of 6 years beyond retirement.<sup>1</sup> While the average life expectancy in the U.S. is about 78 years, it is only 66 years for law enforcement officers.<sup>2</sup>

Just as it is important in officer safety training to identify and analyze the threats posed by criminals, we should also be doing the same for threats posed by sources other than an attacker. Just as we pass along intelligence updates about the latest concealed weapon or BOLO memos about dangerous persons in our jurisdictions, we should be passing along information about the other lethal risks law enforcement officers face. The information below will remind you of the many health dangers you face in a law enforcement career, and will conclude with a brief overview of ways to protect yourself against these many dangers.

### **Law Enforcement Officer Mortality**

According to the *Officer-Down Memorial Page* website, over the last three years 398 law enforcement officers died while on duty or in the line of duty.<sup>3</sup> When one adds the estimated number of active law enforcement officers who committed suicide, the total number of officer deaths over the last three years rises to 806 deaths, or an average of 269 officer deaths each year.<sup>4</sup> As there are approximately 809,000 full and part-time law enforcement officers at the local, state, and federal level in the U.S., this means 1 out of every 3,000 officers dies at work or because of work each year.<sup>5</sup>

### **Deaths Due to Violence**

Over the last three years, 157 law enforcement officers have died from a violent attack. Of these deaths, 119 involved a firearm, 23 a vehicle used as a weapon, 7 bombs, 6 clubs or fists, and 2 involved an edged weapon. Together, these deaths only made up 19.5% of all the officer deaths from 2013 through 2015.

## Deaths Due to Accidents

Over the last three years, 148 law enforcement officers died in an accident. Of these deaths, 126 involved a vehicle, such as cars, motorcycles, aircraft, and watercraft. They involved incidents such as normal driving, emergency driving, and being hit by a vehicle as a pedestrian. The remaining 22 deaths resulted from accidental causes such as drowning, electrocution, firearms accidents, and falls.

## Deaths Due to Health or Exposures

Over the last three years, 93 law enforcement officers died at work due to health issues, or died due to health problems from things they were exposed to at work. Of these deaths, 46 were due to exposures at work to such things as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, tuberculosis, or toxic substances. The remaining 47 died at work due to a heart attack, stroke, or brain aneurism. In addition to these numbers, it is unknown how many officers died in retirement over the last three years due to health problems they developed from this career. Retired law enforcement officers die of heart disease, cancer (esophageal, colon, kidney, and lymphatic), and cirrhosis of the liver at much higher rates than the average U.S. retired population.<sup>6</sup>

## Deaths Due to Suicide

Suicide is the leading cause of death among active law enforcement officers. All of the causes of death discussed above, when combined, only account for half of the officer deaths in the U.S. over the last three years. While firm numbers are hard to get, it is estimated that at least 408 law enforcement officers took their own lives from 2013 through 2015.<sup>7</sup>



## Training to Survive

The odds are that you already participate in officer safety training to combat threats of violence. You train with your firearm and other weapons. You practice your defensive tactics techniques. You are constantly on guard mentally, observing for possible physical threats. You likely read and discuss books and articles regarding officer safety techniques, but do you do the same to defend against the other (more prevalent) dangers from your job? Do you go to training on officer wellness? Do you read books and articles about how to survive this career and live a healthy retirement? Do you utilize the techniques that can help alleviate stress from the job in a safe and healthy way? Do you practice the techniques that can improve your overall physical and psychological well-being? Do you even know what these techniques are?

There are a number of techniques that have been proven to help law enforcement officers reduce stress, prevent suicide, and reduce the risk of physical and psychological health issues. First, just as in training against violent attacks, mental conditioning helps officers prepare for non-violent situations that still pose career dangers or stressors. Visualizing potential situations and thinking through in advance how you would handle them improves performance and reduces stress. Second, just as is the case on the firing range, breathing techniques can help lower an officer's hyperarousal to stressful circumstances, reducing tunnel vision and giving the officer clearer thoughts. Third, physical conditioning, in the form of exercise, proper diet, sufficient sleep, and avoiding substances harmful to your body, can have an enormous impact on fighting off illnesses and reducing stress. Finally, hobbies, interests, and relationships outside of public safety work are crucial to an officer's physical and mental health.<sup>8</sup>

We at the Dolan Consulting Group hope that you take as much interest in your total safety and well-being as you do in your safety from violent attack. Below are resources we highly recommend that you utilize to improve your health, safety, and well-being. Stay safe!

### **Books:**

Gilmartin, K. M. (2002). *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement: A Guide for Officers and their Families*. Tucson, AZ: E-S Press.

Blum, L. N. (2000). *Force Under Pressure: How Cops Live and Why They Die*. New York, NY: Lantern Books.

Barker, J. C. (1999). *Danger, Duty, and Disillusion: The Worldview of Los Angeles Police Officers*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

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## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Brandl, S. G., & Smith, B. W. (2013). An empirical examination of retired police officers' length of retirement and age at death. *Police Quarterly*, *16*(1), 113-123.
- <sup>2</sup> Ruiz, J., & Morrow, E. (2005). Retiring the old centurion: life after a career in policing. *International Journal of Public Administration*, *28*, 1151-1186.
- <sup>3</sup> Officer Down Memorial Page: <https://www.odmp.org/>
- <sup>4</sup> O'Hara, A. F., Violanti, J. M., Levenson, R. L., & Clark, R. G. (2013). National police suicide estimates: web surveillance study III. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health*, *15*(1), 31-38.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics: <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=7>
- <sup>6</sup> Ruiz, J., & Morrow, E. (2005). Retiring the old centurion: life after a career in policing. *International Journal of Public Administration*, *28*, 1151-1186; Violanti, J. M., Vena, J. E., & Petrolia, S. (1998). Mortality of a police cohort: 1950-1990. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, *33*, 366-373.
- <sup>7</sup> O'Hara, Violanti, Levenson, & Clark (2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Blum, L. N. (2000). *Force Under Pressure: How Cops Live and Why They Die*. New York, NY: Lantern Books.