



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 criminals. 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.**¹ While the average life expectancy in the U.S. is about 78 years, it is only 66 years for law enforcement officers.²

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 be-on-the-lookout (BOLO) memos about dangerous persons in our jurisdictions, we should be passing along information about the other lethal risks that 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

¹ 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.

² Ruiz, J., & Morrow, E. (2005). Retiring the old centurion: life after a career in policing. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 28, 1151-1186.

According to the *Officer-Down Memorial Page* website, from 2014 through 2018 a total of 836 law enforcement officers died while on duty or in the line of duty.³ When one adds the estimated number of active law enforcement officers who committed suicide during that same span of time, the total number of officer deaths rises to 1,516 deaths. This equates to an average of 303 officer deaths each year, **approximately 45% of which were officer suicides.**⁴ 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 that every year 1 out of every 2,670 law enforcement officers dies at work, or because of their work.⁵

Deaths Due to Violence

Over the years 2014 through 2018, a total of 335 law enforcement officers died from a violent attack. Of these deaths, 251 involved a firearm, 58 a vehicle used as a weapon, 6 bombs, 18 clubs or fists, and 2 involved an edged weapon. **Together, these deaths only made up 22.1% of all the officer deaths from 2014 through 2018.**

Deaths Due to Accidents

Over this same five-year span, 250 law enforcement officers died in an accident. Of these deaths, 216 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 34 deaths resulted from accidental causes such as drowning, electrocution, firearms accidents, poisonous animal bites, lightning strikes, and falls. **Accidents accounted for 16.5% of officer deaths from 2015 through 2018.**

Deaths Due to Health or Exposures

During this time span, 259 law enforcement officers died at work due to personal health issues, or died due to health problems attributable to things they were exposed to at work. Of these deaths, 161 were due to exposures at work to such things as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, tuberculosis, or toxic substances, including the toxins encountered by officers at the World Trade Center attack site. The remaining 98 died at work due to a heart attack, stroke, or brain aneurism. **Death due to health conditions and exposures accounted for 17.1% of all officer deaths.** 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 their career. Retired law enforcement**

³ *Officer Down Memorial Page*: <https://www.odmp.org/>

⁴ 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.

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics: <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=7>

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.⁶

Deaths Due to Suicide

Suicide appears to be the leading single cause of death among active law enforcement officers. All of the causes of death discussed above, when combined, only account for approximately 55% of the officer deaths in the U.S. over five years. While firm numbers are hard to get, it is estimated that at least 680 law enforcement officers took their own lives from 2014 through 2018.⁷ In 2018 alone, it has been reported that 167 law enforcement officers within the U.S. committed suicide.⁸ As law enforcement officers continue to experience ever-increasing public scrutiny and persistently negative media coverage, it appears that police officer suicides are increasing.

Both the New York City Police Department and the Chicago Police Department, for example, have noted sizeable increases in employee suicides over the last two years.⁹ Since 2010, the NYPD had averaged five officer suicide deaths every year – a shocking and terrible annual suicide rate for any single police department.¹⁰ As of September 2019, however, the NYPD had already experienced eleven officer suicides for the year – more than twice the average since 2010.¹¹ Similarly, in previous decades the Chicago Police Department, a third the size of the NYPD experienced less than one suicide a year. As of September, the Chicago PD had already experienced five officer suicides in 2019.¹² Other communities across the nation have also reported recent increases in law enforcement officer suicides. Suicide has already been a serious threat to law enforcement officers for years, and this threat appears to be dramatically increasing further.

⁶ 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.

⁷ O'Hara, Violanti, Levenson, & Clark (2013).

⁸ Heyman, M., Dill, J., & Douglas, R. (2018). *Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders*. Boston, MA: Ruderman Family Foundation.

⁹ Sandoval, E., & Southall, A. (2019, August 13). *Two more N.Y. police officers die by suicide, bringing total to 9 this year*. New York Times (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/13/nyregion/nypd-officer-suicide.html>)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Moore, T., McCarthy, C., & Musumeci, N. (2019, September 12). Retired NYPD cop kills himself at Orange County home. *New York Post* (<https://nypost.com/2019/09/12/retired-nypd-cop-killed-himself-at-orange-county-home/>)

¹² Struett, D. (2019, September 17). Off-duty Chicago cop found dead in what police say was a suicide on the Northwest Side. *Chicago Sun-Times* (<https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/9/16/20869927/chicago-police-suicide-bunker-hill-forest-serve>)



Average Annual Law Enforcement Officer Deaths (2014-2018)

67



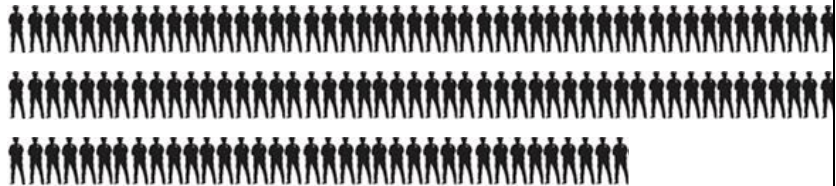
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Training Yourself to Survive

Odds are that you already participate in officer safety training to combat the threats posed by 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 the likelihood of 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 life 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.¹³

We at the Dolan Consulting Group (DCG) recognize that working in law enforcement can be both the most stressful job, and the most rewarding noble job, a person can hold. **We hope that you take as much interest in your total safety and well-being as you do in your safety from violent attack. We hope that you beat the odds and complete your career physically and psychologically healthy.** Below are resources we highly recommend that you utilize to improve your health, safety, and well-being.

Stay safe!

Recommended 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.

Recommended Training Courses:

[*Peer Support and Mentoring in Law Enforcement: Enhancing Health, Performance and Accountability*](#)

[*Navigating the Officer Involved Shooting and Critical Incidents*](#)

[*Officer and Agency Wellness—Hiring and Retiring Healthy®*](#)

¹³ Blum, L. N. (2000). *Force Under Pressure: How Cops Live and Why They Die*. New York, NY: Lantern Books.