

Behind the Badge

By Jon Blum

Everyone talks about how dangerous it is to be a police officer. Is the work really that dangerous?

Dave B.

Dear Dave:

Some readers might glance over your question and believe it was.....well... a little 'silly' given the obvious and inherent dangers found in police work. I think it is superb and quite apropos, especially following National Law Enforcement Memorial week.

According to the FBI's annual Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA; or 'Lee-O-Ka') publication, fifty-six (56) officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty during 2002. The FBI has been tracking the number of officer deaths and assaults since 1993. There have been 681 intentionally killed during this nine year period. This does not include accidental deaths from traffic crashes, training accidents or other non-intentional acts.

The police profession's 'danger level' can be calculated using several factors. They include, but are not limited to, region, agency type, jurisdiction population, duty assignments and activities.

Region – The South

In 2002, the south had the highest number of officer deaths with 25, or 44% of all line of duty deaths. North Carolina had two in 2002. Since 1993, the south has lost 278 of its finest as compared to the West (130), Midwest (116) and Northeast (63).

The south also had the highest ratio of officer assaults - or 13.9 per every 100 officers employed. There were 58,066 assaults on police in 2002. North Carolina posted 2092 with the FBI.

Agency Type

The majority of officers killed were employed by municipal or city agencies (58%) followed by Sheriff Departments (24%), State Police / Highway Patrols (9%), County organizations (4%) and Federal agencies (3%).

Municipal officers, by far, answer the widest range of calls for service. Their duties also are the most diverse of all agency types. Many municipal agencies officer SWAT, Canine, vice & drug units and Dignitary Protection services. Sheriff Departments and State Police agencies provide the same level of protection, but are fewer in number. Highway Patrols are mostly one dimensional service delivery agencies by design with traffic being the primary theme. Many state and federal 'special agent' positions entail plain clothed assignments. Interviewing, evidence analysis and detailed leg work are primary duties. Federal and state agents are not first responders. They rarely, if ever, work alone when making arrests. In fact, they frequently call upon uniformed officers for assistance when serving warrants. Statistically speaking, the National Park Service Ranger is assaulted more often than any other federal law enforcement officer.

Jurisdiction Population

Contrary to popular opinion, suburban and rural areas are some of the most dangerous places to protect and serve. In 2002, thirty-three percent (33%) of the officers killed were working inside jurisdictions with populations of less than 10,000. Twenty-six percent (26%) were serving locales with 25,000 residents or

more. Officer assault statistics for less populated communities show a similar pattern. Of the 58,066 officer assaults, 15,533 (or 26%) were committed in rural jurisdictions. Cities with 250,000 and up registered 16,111 (or 27%) of all assaults on police in 2002.

Work Assignments & Activity

Thirty-eight of the 56 police officers killed in 2002 were working uniformed patrol. The majority were killed while attempting to make an arrest (32%) followed by the investigation of suspicious activities (16.5%), disturbance calls (15.3%) and traffic enforcement (15.1%).

From an assault perspective, the most dangerous activity for police was responding to disturbance calls (31.1%) followed by transporting arrestees (13.4%), traffic stops (11%) and suspicious circumstances (10%).

Miscellaneous

In 2002, officers were killed most often between the hours of 8:00pm and 10:00pm. Dating back to 1993, the most dangerous time frame for police remains from 6pm to midnight. Historically, August is the most deadly month for police officers. More cops are killed on Friday than any other day of the week. Sunday is safest day of all.

The primary suspect is male and 25-40 years of age. They are usually under the influence of a controlled substance, preferably alcohol. Their primary method of choice for killing a police officer in 2002 was a 9mm or .40 caliber gun at a distance of less than 10 feet.

Since 1993, the average age of officers killed is 37. The majority had ten or more years of experience and were working alone at the time of their death.

Complacency Equals Danger

Most police officer deaths and assaults occur while performing what many label as ***routine*** duties. ***'Routine'*** is a dirty word in this business. There is absolutely nothing ***'routine'*** about police work, but it can be repetitive if not down right mundane at times. Answering the same call or task hundreds, if not thousands of times without the slightest glitch can breed complacency. Human nature tells us so. During a career, some officers stop noticing the subtle, but obvious signs of danger. Police officers know this to be true. The topic of complacency and its negative impact on officer safety has been an on-going discussion for decades. Periodic training, the tragic death of a fellow colleague or personal 'close call' generate brief, and sometimes intense periods of attention. But sooner or later, the monotony takes hold again and complacency returns.

Police work is very dangerous. It is especially treacherous for a complacent municipal officer with 10 years of dedicated service, who patrols a rural town with 10,000 or less, in August, on a Friday between the hours of 6pm and midnight. Welcome to the south.

To learn more information about specific officers killed in line of duty, go to: www.odmp.org

To read the entire LEOKA 2002 publication, go to: <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel03/leoka02press.htm>

Sources: (1) "Law Enforcement Officers Killed & Assaulted"; 2002; US Department of Justice, FBI; (2) "Killed in the Line of Duty"; 1992; US Department of Justice; FBI.