

NATIONAL SURVEY ON OFFICER SAFETY TRAINING

Executive Brief



NATIONAL POLICE
FOUNDATION
Advancing Policing Through Innovation and Science



Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

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The modern law enforcement officer is tasked with providing effective police services, achieving mission goals, reducing crime, developing lasting community relationships, and maintaining safe environments. To function effectively, officers must possess specialized skill sets to cope with the demands and pressures of the profession. Agencies are responsible for providing relevant and current training to assist officers in developing these specialized skills and to meet department needs and community expectations. It is important to understand the perceived and actual threats officers are facing in the communities they serve, to identify officer safety training needs, and to acknowledge challenges facing law enforcement agencies. A strategic vision to address these challenges must be a law enforcement executive's priority.

In 2017, the National Police Foundation was tasked by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), under the BJA VALOR Officer Safety and Wellness Initiative with conducting a comprehensive survey of law enforcement executive perception of threats and training challenges experienced by police agencies throughout the United States. The effort provides data from which executives can make more informed evidence-based decisions. A survey was developed and sent to a stratified random sample of 1,514 state and local law enforcement agencies, which represents approximately 10% of the law enforcement agencies in the United States. A total of 652 law enforcement executives (43% response rate), or their designee, completed and returned the survey. The response to the survey captured diversity in agency size, region, and type. While not a fully representative sample, these responses provide an interesting snapshot of what agencies are currently experiencing and expecting regarding officer safety and wellness. The goal of this Executive Summary is to present notable findings from the survey, provide an analysis of the notable findings, and offer considerations for law enforcement executives to increase officer safety and resilience, and strengthen officer wellness within their departments. More in-depth information is provided within the full report.

Survey Questions

Four general questions were examined to obtain some understanding of the landscape of Law Enforcement Training in the country:

- What are the relative impacts of different officer safety threats facing officers?
- What types of officer safety and related training are agencies providing officers?
- What types of officer safety and related training do agencies view as a critical need in the near future?
- What do agencies currently view as constraints to providing officer safety and related training to their officers?

In the full report, the presentation of survey results is divided into three sections: officer safety threats, current training and future needs, and training formats. The responses for the full sample of executives are presented across these sections, along with the selective presentation of responses broken down by agency characteristics (agency size, agency region, agency type) where unique patterns emerge across these categories.

¹ This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-VI-BX-K001 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking (SMART). Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Key Findings

Officer Safety Threats

Executives were asked to identify critical officer safety risks and the alignment of those risks with training needs. Executives perceived officers being killed or seriously injured in a motor vehicle collision as the highest risk to officers. In contrast, officers being shot or assaulted with an edged weapon had the lowest perceived risk. Law enforcement executives were also asked if any officers in their agencies had been killed or seriously injured in the past three years.

Slightly more than half of the executives reported no officers had been seriously injured or killed in the past three years. Nearly 27% of executives reported that one or more officers had been killed or seriously injured from an assault that did not involve a firearm or edged weapon, and 25% reported that an officer had been seriously injured or killed from a motor vehicle collision.

An important finding was that executives from larger agencies were more likely to report that officers experienced a serious injury or were killed in the line of duty compared to executives from smaller agencies. Officers in agencies of various sizes and locations may face different risks, call volumes, and challenges depending on the uniqueness of the communities they serve. This information has implications regarding the focus of messaging and training for officer safety and wellness in agencies of various sizes. Implementing a culture of safety in an organization will need some level of adaptation to address the unique, real, and perceived challenges of the department and the community.

Executives' perception of officer risk of being seriously injured or killed in a motor vehicle collision as 'high risk' is supported by survey findings. According to survey results, executives report that motor vehicle collisions constitute the second highest reported event causing serious injury or death, next to assault (excluding gunshot wound or edged weapon). **Results confirm the significant reality that law enforcement officers, regardless of agency size, operate a motor vehicle and conduct traffic-related activity every day; it is one of the most common tasks performed. Therefore, risk exposure is rated as high, and actual injuries associated with motor vehicle operation and traffic enforcement should be a high level of concern for executives.**

Given the unique and diverse communities law enforcement agencies serve, executives should seek to understand the perceived and actual threats their officers face to identify officer training needs. This understanding can also mitigate the discrepancies between perceived risks to officer safety so that agencies can train for actual risks their officers face within the unique communities they protect.

Current Officer Training

Basic Law Enforcement Academy Training

32% of executives did not know if the academy their officers attend provides training on recognizing and countering ambush attacks.

In many cases, responding agencies do not operate their own academy, but rather send officers to regional or state academies. As a result, survey findings show that executives may not have detailed knowledge on each training component their officers receive at the academy. Reflecting acknowledgement, this “do not know” pattern was also observed in the other low response training areas. It is important for agencies to have representatives serving on academy advisory boards to provide input or receive updates when training curricula change or do not address topics important to their community. Law enforcement executives can utilize information gained from serving on academy advisory boards to design and implement appropriate complimentary or supplemental training for officers upon completion of the academy.

Officer In-Service Training

Executives identified that the most common types of training provided to their officers were active shooter, case law related to use of force, and contacts with the mentally ill.

Next, law enforcement executives were asked about their agencies’ current training priorities and offerings relating to officer safety training efforts within their agencies. They were asked to identify different types of in-service training currently provided that are directly oriented toward officer safety, or use-of-force and citizen-interaction topics that are tangentially related to officer safety.

Law enforcement agencies recognize the importance of providing officers with specific training to increase skill sets related to areas of public concern, such as how to handle encounters with the mentally ill, practicing de-escalation techniques, effectively handling police/citizen encounters, and understanding implicit bias. These skills are central to practice effective policing and to build trust within communities. Although motor vehicle collision was reported as having the greatest perceived risk of seriously harming or killing officers, driver skills training related to decision making, high speed pursuit, and low speed driving/parking rated lower among training provided to officers. This phenomenon is consistent in actual training delivered and perceived training needs. Even though driving is one of the most used police skills, training related to driving and traffic safety is often eclipsed by tactical, relational, and procedural training because of training priorities, time, and budgets.

The likelihood that officers receive safety training increases with agency size, except for the largest agencies captured in the survey. Police training budgets vary in size and priority which influences how agencies schedule mandatory and optional training. Law enforcement executives must balance training opportunities with budgetary and staffing realities when setting priorities. They realize that officers must be trained to be prepared for any incident, even if a situation is unlikely to occur. Although a relatively low number of agencies reported that officers had been seriously injured or killed in the last three years, constant training must be conducted, as response skills are perishable if not consistently practiced. Executives should constantly review departmental priorities to ensure officers are receiving current, relevant, and evidence-based training to increase and enhance skillsets to effectively perform their duties.

Future Training Needs

Executives placed their highest priority for future training needs on areas related to the use of force and physical threats that officers associate with force events, including trends in threats to officer safety, officer survival training, situational indicators of potential assaults on officers, de-escalation, scenario training on lethal and non-lethal force, and active shooter training.

Law enforcement executives were asked to rate department training needs for the next three years. Executives identified the need to prioritize more general training on lethal and non-lethal force that goes beyond active shooter. Interestingly, executives reported a high perceived threat to officer safety from motor vehicle collisions, and the percentage of executives reporting their officers had been killed or seriously injured from collisions would suggest driving training would be a high priority area for officer safety training. However, the executives did not place the same future training priority in this area as they did assault-based threats.

A possible explanation is that agencies are only able to provide a limited number of training hours for officers each year, most of which are delegated for mandated trainings and are subject to the ability to pull officers from regularly assigned duties. Although motor vehicle collisions may be a high priority area for some agencies, other training obligations and priorities often take precedence, taking into consideration community demographics and expectations.

Executives should consider prioritizing traffic safety training and safety awareness campaigns, evaluating perceived and actual threats to officer safety and reflecting the results in training offered to officers. Agencies also have the opportunity to take advantage of free training, services, and resources available through the VALOR Initiative.²

Challenges and Constraints to In-Service Officer Training

Survey results confirmed that law enforcement executives nationwide are struggling with the balance of providing current and relevant officer safety training to officers with meeting the service demands of the communities they serve.

Executives were also asked to identify the level of challenge posed by potential inhibitors and logistical issues to providing department-wide officer safety training. Executives reported that the greatest challenge to delivering officer training within an agency is the inability to pull officers off the streets and away from assigned duties. An alternative to pulling officers off the street for training is to pay officers overtime to participate in training before or after shifts or on a day off. However, having limited resources to pay for such overtime was identified by the executives as the second largest challenge.

Smaller agencies may find value in utilizing online training formats that can be delivered while officers work their shifts, reducing the need to pull officers from their regularly assigned duties. Additionally, departments may consider partnering

² <https://www.bja.gov/programs/valor.html>

with neighboring jurisdictions to provide training for multiple agencies and to share training costs. More research is needed to identify creative ways to address these challenges. In contrast, officer resistance to training, identifying quality training programs, and having facilities or equipment were, on average, not viewed as significant challenges to training.

A suggestion for creative training is through the use of decision-making exercises. These exercises help fill an officer's mental slides which creates artificial experience. These can be done in short periods of time during briefings. When situations are analyzed, it is always the decisions that are noticeable.

Training Formats

Scenario-based training was identified as the most popular type of training.

When asked to rate training delivery formats for providing officer safety training, the executives cited scenario-based training as the most preferred. Yet, this type of training requires the most manpower and pulls officers from the field. One way to address this is through train-the-trainer formats that only requires pulling a small number of individuals out of the field. This model is currently incorporated in several BJA sponsored law enforcement training initiatives. However, these "trained" trainers must still be pulled out of their regular duties for training, suggesting a need for innovative training formats that are shorter in duration. A potential option for agencies struggling with manpower issues is to develop training blocks that have multiple short components in which officers can participate in an hour per shift over multiple shifts. Despite executives reporting a low preference for online training,³ this can be used to mitigate some of the challenges associated with training that requires officers to be pulled out of the field.

Conclusion

The goal of the VALOR Initiative is to increase officer safety and resilience and strengthen officer wellness. This national survey provides data that helps us to better understand future officer safety and wellness training needs. Although the survey did uncover several key findings that will inform the law enforcement community, additional research is needed, as is additional translation of scientific research into practical application for the field.

In the academic field, not enough effort has been given to identifying the effective means for communicating research and data to practitioners (i.e., research translation). We hope that this survey begins to bridge that gap. The potential value of this VALOR Initiative work to the law enforcement community is enormous, and communication between the research community and practitioners on this important effort is paramount to its success.

To view the full report for a more in-depth analysis of the survey results, please visit:

<https://www.policefoundation.org/publication/valor-national-survey-report>

3 It should be noted that a definition of "online training" was not provided.