National LAW ENFORCEMENT ROADWAY SAFETY Program
BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

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OFFICER SAFETY AND WELLNESS INITIATIVE
BUREAU OF JUSTICE ASSISTANCE

The Role of Law Enforcement Culture in Officer Safety During Driving and Roadway Operations

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Institute for Intergovernmental Research

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The National Law Enforcement Roadway Safety Program (NLERSP) provides a suite of no-cost training, technical assistance, and resources to local, state, and tribal law enforcement agencies with the goal of preventing officer injuries and fatalities on the nation's roadways from officer-involved collisions and struck-by incidents. Learn more at LEOroadwaysafety.org.

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The Officer Robert Wilson III Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement Officers and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR) Initiative is an effort to improve the immediate and long-term safety, wellness, and resilience of our nation's law enforcement officers through no-cost training (professional education), technical assistance, and resources. Learn more at bja.ojp.gov/program/valor/overview.

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Executive Summary

Law enforcement culture, particularly the normalization and acceptance of voluntary risk-taking, can result in officers taking unnecessary risks when driving and working on or near a roadway. These dangerous behaviors—including not wearing a seat belt, reflective vest, or body armor, driving at excessive speeds, and driving while fatigued or distracted—are major risk factors for officer-involved motor vehicle collisions and struck-by incidents. Given the significant number of officers who are injured or killed in these types of roadway-related incidents each year, the National Law Enforcement Roadway Safety Program (NLERSP) team sought to examine how law enforcement culture may be contributing to these behaviors and provide law enforcement leaders with guidance on how to shift organizational culture to improve roadway safety.

Through a review of the available literature on law enforcement culture and roadway-related incidents and the findings from a focus group comprised of law enforcement executives, supervisors, trainers, and officers, the NLERSP team identified several actionable steps agencies can take to address roadway-related safety risks. In addressing these risks, law enforcement leaders must strive to create a culture of safety within their agency—one that emphasizes and values "safety first" in law enforcement operations. While changing culture in law enforcement is not easy, the highly successful crash prevention program implemented by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, whose case study is featured in this brief, demonstrates that it is possible. As focus group participants explained, establishing a culture of safety for roadway operations can be accomplished by setting expectations through policy and training, communicating these expectations, providing unyielding support, and emphasizing accountability at all levels of the agency.

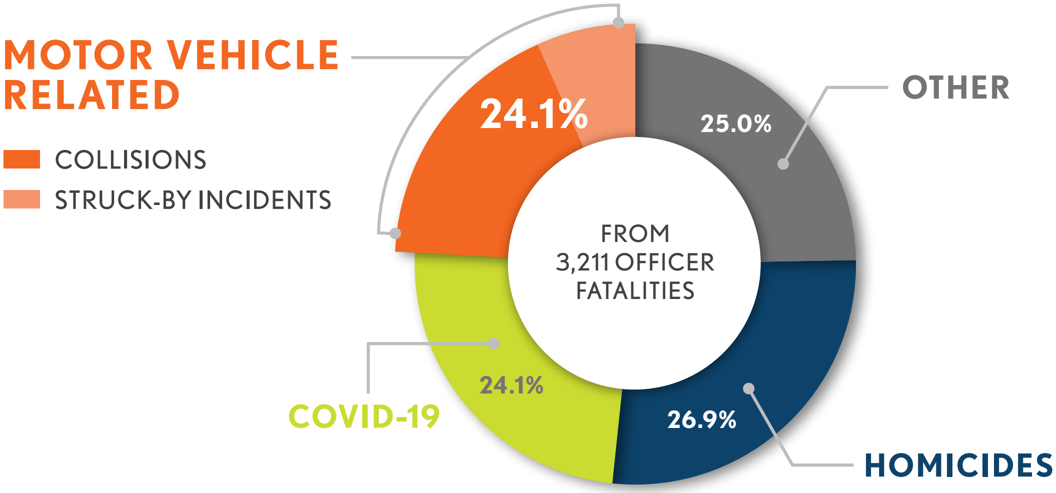
Introduction

Law enforcement is a dangerous profession. Fatality and injury rates for law enforcement officers are more than three times higher than those for other occupational groups.[1] From 2009 to 2023, **3,211** law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty, and approximately a quarter of these deaths resulted from roadway-related incidents. Of the **773** officers killed in a roadway-related incident, **562** died as the result of a motor vehicle collision, and **211** died as the result of a struck-by incident (where a pedestrian officer was struck while outside of the patrol vehicle).[2,3]

Moreover, thousands of officers are also injured each year from transportation-related incidents.[4,5] In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the average rate of non-fatal transportation-related incidents resulting in injuries and necessitating days off work to be **11** times higher for law enforcement officers compared to all other occupational groups.[6] From 2012 to 2017, approximately **34,700** officers sustained injuries severe enough to require a hospital visit.[7] This translates to roughly **5,783** officers injured in transportation-related incidents per year, or **111** per week, on average.

While the law enforcement profession will always involve danger, these roadway-related injuries and fatalities must not be accepted as "part of the job." The reason for this is that many, if not most, of these fatalities and injuries are preventable. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), wearing a seat belt cuts the risk of a fatal injury in a crash nearly in half.[8] Recognizing the widespread lack of seat belt use in law enforcement, in 2010, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, NHTSA, and the Federal Highway Administration collectively encouraged agency leaders to adopt policies requiring officers to wear seat belts.[9] Yet, from 2014 to 2023, **48 percent** of officers killed

FIGURE 1: LINE-OF-DUTY FATALITIES FROM 2009 TO 2023



> **Approximately 34,700 officers sustained injuries severe enough to require a hospital visit. This translates to roughly 5,783 officers injured in motor vehicle-related incidents per year or 111 per week, on average.**

in crashes were not wearing their seat belts.[10] Furthermore, a NHTSA study of the characteristics of fatal officer-involved collisions from 1991 to 2008 found that **37 percent** of the officers killed in collisions did not attempt any maneuver (braking or steering) to avoid the crash. The top cited driver-related factors in these incidents were "failure to keep in proper lane or running off road" and "driving too fast for conditions or in excess of posted speed limit."[11]

Given the preventable nature of many officer-involved roadway-related incidents, the Bureau of Justice Assistance's (BJA) National Law Enforcement Roadway Safety Program (NLERSP) team set out to examine how law enforcement culture may be contributing to these incidents.[12] This brief provides an overview of law enforcement culture and its effects on officer decision making related to roadway safety compliance and gives law enforcement leaders guidance on how to systematically approach related cultural issues within their respective agencies.

This brief draws on two sources of information. The first is a review of the available literature on law enforcement culture with a focus on how it influences risky behaviors such as seat belt noncompliance, speeding, and fatigued and distracted driving.[13] The second is the findings of a focus group convening of law enforcement executives, supervisors, trainers, and officers, which sought to identify the actions law enforcement agencies and officers can take to positively affect law enforcement culture as it relates to roadway safety.

Law Enforcement Culture

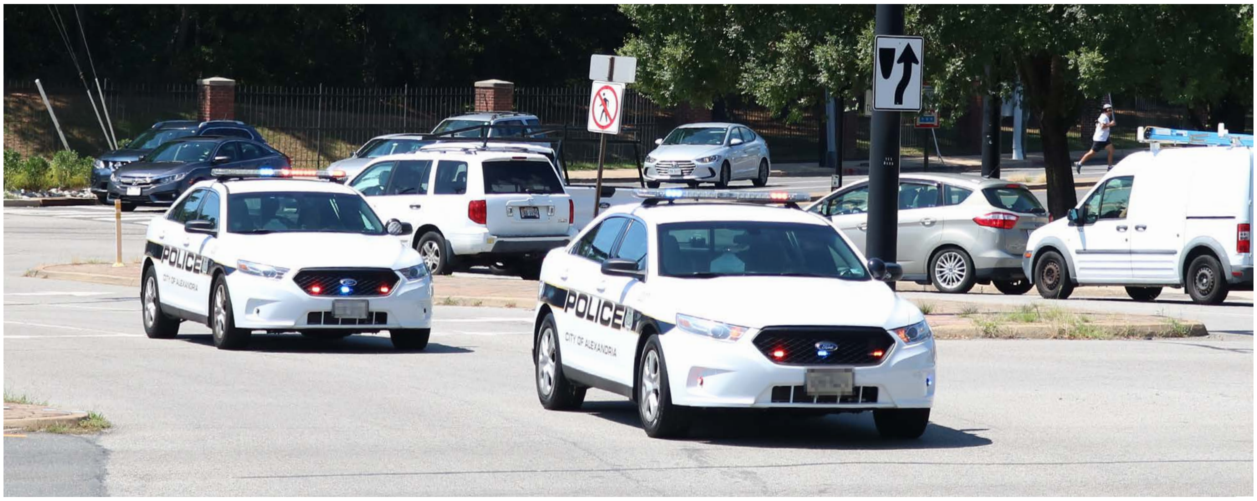
OCCUPATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

In the broadest sense, and for the purposes of this brief, law enforcement culture is defined as "the occupational beliefs and values that are shared by [police] officers across the country."[14] Law enforcement culture, however, is notoriously difficult to describe. Early studies tend to paint an unflattering picture.[15] Words that have been used to describe police culture include authoritarian, cynical, insular, socially isolated, and highly resistant to change.[16] This singular or "monolithic" understanding of law enforcement culture assumes a universal agreement between *occupational culture,* or the attitudes, values, and norms that officers share to navigate their work with the public,[17] and *organizational culture,* or the formal and informal values, norms, and ideas that characterize each individual law enforcement organization.[18] However, more recent research has found that law enforcement culture is, in fact, much more variable, especially as it concerns the law enforcement organization.[19] Nevertheless, law enforcement culture has certain "universal, stable, and lasting features."[20]

Within American policing, the dangerous nature of the profession is a particularly dominant cultural framework that influences how officers understand their environment and respond to it.[21] The **danger imperative** describes the widely shared understanding that policing is profoundly risky.[22] As a result, officer safety is always in jeopardy. Preparing to encounter this danger, which could present itself at any moment, shapes law enforcement socialization, culture, and practice.[23]

Cadets and new officers are exposed to the dangers, uncertainties, and strains of their new work environments during a compressed and

> **"The culture in the field isn't the same as the culture we teach [in the academy]. Young officers want to fit in, so they do what everyone else does."**



intense period of socialization, both at the training academy and in their field training program.[24] During this time, they learn to adopt a range of attitudes, behaviors, and practices intended to help them cope with the dangerous nature of the job and the obligations, expectations, rights, and demands of the law enforcement officer role. These include the obligation to ensure the safety of the public and fellow officers, the expectation to discern suspicious individuals and activities and respond to danger immediately, the right to exercise authority and use force to protect oneself and others, and the demand to produce results.[25]

This occupational reality generates what has been referred to as **"the banality of risk."** In other words, risk-taking is normalized and readily accepted as part of the job.[26] Because of this risk acceptance, dangerous roadway behaviors such as speeding, distracted and fatigued driving, and failure to wear a seat belt, reflective vest, or body armor can become culturally accepted behaviors. Ironically, these behaviors also put officer safety in jeopardy.

Importantly, however, culture is also shaped by the law enforcement organization. Each law enforcement organization has its own leadership and command structure, history, traditions, and external environment, which includes the community.[27] During their early years on the job, officers learn how to be officers and how to function as members of their respective law enforcement organizations.[28] Officers observe the culture throughout their training and carry it with them as they build relationships with their colleagues. Within larger agencies, officers are usually embedded within squads assigned to different shifts in various precincts.[29] Patrol groups often take on similar attitudes and adopt similar behaviors,[30] and new recruits are likely to adapt to the existing culture through their assigned roles,[31] even if this culture is contrary to how they were trained in the academy. As one focus group participant noted, "The culture in the field isn't the same as the culture we teach [in the academy]. Young officers want to fit in, so they do what everyone else does." Indeed, at multiple levels within any one law enforcement agency, the organizational culture of that agency plays a substantial role in shaping the attitudes and conduct of its officers.[32] However, the fact that research has shown there is substantial variability within the law enforcement organization makes organizational culture a powerful instrument for challenging those aspects of law enforcement occupational culture that impact roadway safety behaviors.

Cultural Impacts on Roadway Safety Behaviors & Risk Factors for Roadway-Related Incidents

Among the numerous occupational hazards officers face is the motor vehicle collision. Officer-involved collisions are one of the leading causes of injury and death for law enforcement officers,[33] and they are also one of the most preventable. In this section, the cultural context around the primary risk factors for officer-involved collisions and struck-by incidents (e.g., choosing not to wear a seat belt or reflective vest, speeding, distracted driving, and fatigued driving) is explored.

SPEEDING AND THE "CULTURE OF GO"

During an urgent call for service, officers are expected to get to the scene as fast as possible. Unfortunately, the adrenaline rush associated with "hot calls" can cloud an officer's judgment and potentially lead to reckless driving.[34] As previously noted, driving too fast for the conditions is one of the leading contributing risk factors in fatal law enforcement motor vehicle collisions.[35]

When discussing speeding, focus group participants framed the practice of speeding as the result of a broader "culture of go" in the profession; one focus group participant described this culture as a widespread mentality that officers need to "get there, go fast, go now," which affects officers' decision-making process. This "culture of go" is deeply embedded in law enforcement practice and may be so strongly engrained in officers that it can permeate into the performance of all their job duties, regardless of the urgency of the task. Responding to a call quickly can often be the default response, even

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if the speed used is not reasonable or justifiable based on the circumstances. Any changes to the status quo, including those related to safety and speeding, may be challenged or mocked. For example, focus group participants recounted how attempts to teach safe driving were often interpreted by officers as “teaching cops not to be cops.” One participant even shared that their officers made fun of them for driving more safely than their counterparts.

In other words, some officers perceived driving at a safe speed while responding to a priority call as running counter to their professional mandate to get to the scene as fast as possible. The feeling of needing to respond to a call quickly routinely supersedes warnings and rules about driving too fast. For example, one focus group participant discussed a time when they had warned two officers about the dangers of speeding, only for those officers to later be involved in fatal collisions. Unfortunately, when a crash happens, law enforcement agencies often consider it an isolated incident rather than evidence of a pervasive problem.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Use of vehicle telematics (to report on officers’ speeds)**
- **Policy changes (e.g., speed caps)**
- **Policy enforcement and discipline for non-compliance**
- **Safety messaging**
- **Issuing citations to officers when speeds are not reasonable and justifiable given the circumstances**
- **Inviting community members to report officers driving at excessive speeds**

To address the “culture of go” with respect to driving at excessive speeds, focus group participants suggested a variety of strategies and interventions agencies can employ, including the use of vehicle telematics (to report on officers’ speeds), policy changes (e.g., speed caps), policy enforcement and discipline for non-compliance (such as issuing traffic citations to officers when speeds are not reasonable or justifiable given the circumstances), safety messaging (e.g., at roll call and through poster campaigns), and inviting community members to report officers driving at excessive speeds.

THE DILEMMA OF SEAT BELTS AND SAFETY EQUIPMENT

Failure to wear a seat belt can be the difference between life and death in a motor vehicle crash.[36] Despite departmental policy typically mandating their use, many officers report not wearing their seat belts or wearing them only occasionally.[37]

While several reported reasons exist for not wearing a seat belt,[38] one incredibly persistent explanation is the fear of being restricted or slowed down during a moment of imminent danger. This seat belt dilemma underscores a direct conflict between operational and driving safety.[39] Specifically, operational safety necessitates the ability to respond to a threat quickly and effectively. An often-cited scenario is that of the ambush or unprovoked attack, which is defined by four characteristics: an element of surprise; concealment of the assailant, their intentions, or weapon; the suddenness of the attack; and a lack of provocation.[40] As one of the focus group participants recounted from their early years on the job, "My [field training officer] said [to me], 'Take that damn thing [seat belt] off or the ninja's gonna get you.'"

This "fear of the ninja assassin" persists among officers despite ambushes being a rare occurrence,[41] particularly ones in which an officer is ambushed while still seated inside the patrol vehicle. In comparison, roadway-related incidents are a leading cause of officer fatalities, second only to felonious assaults.[42] Despite the lack of data to support this fear, one possible explanation for its persistence is that when ambush attacks do happen, they impart significant trauma, perhaps more so than fatal motor vehicle collisions.[43]

Whether an officer ultimately wears a seat belt can also depend on other factors, such as the travel context, crime context, confidence in seat belt design, speed and distance of travel, and seat belt ergonomics.[44] During the focus group discussion on this topic, participants described rationalizations for not wearing seat belts, such as only being a few minutes away from arrival at a scene. Other participants noted the issues associated with trying to wear a seat belt over an external ballistic vest or duty belt full of equipment while acknowledging that seat belt extenders can greatly alleviate these issues.

Even when there is a policy or directive in place mandating the use of seat belts, seat belt use in law enforcement is not universal, and actual use appears to be highly contextual. Focus group participants commented that while they were sure their officers wore their seat belts because it was mandated by policy, they also cited incidents where officers were severely or even fatally injured because they had not been wearing seat belts. When discussing whether officers wore seat belts in their respective agencies, one participant said, "As far as we know, they do [wear them]," to which a second participant posed the question, "[But] how do we *know* they're wearing them?"

One interesting insight the focus group participants offered was how the use of vehicle telematics, which enables supervisors to remotely monitor whether an officer is wearing a seat belt, influenced officer behavior. Specifically, it appears that the use of this technology has proven beneficial in more ways than one. As one of the participants shared, "The telematics told us we had more of a problem than we thought we had, but they also increased seat belt wear."

> **"My [field training officer] said [to me], 'Take that damn thing [seat belt] off or the ninja's gonna get you.'"**

Compared to seat belts, the use of ballistic and reflective vests did not appear to encounter as much resistance from officers, though their use is still far from universal. One focus group participant noted that the expectation to wear reflective vests while working on or near a roadway can be downplayed in agencies with strong uniform traditions where reflective vests are viewed as diminishing the look of the uniform. Another focus group member noted, "Being tactical or incognito is way more part of [law enforcement] culture than being seen." For the most part, though, participants attributed the failure to wear reflective vests while on the roadway to officers simply exiting their cars too quickly when responding to a scene and forgetting to put them on.

Focus group participants listed a variety of actions agencies can take to address the lack of seat belt, ballistic vest, and reflective vest use among officers. Similar to the options suggested to address speeding, this list included the use of vehicle telematics (which can provide data on seat belt usage), policy enforcement and discipline for non-compliance (including issuing traffic citations to officers for not wearing their seat belts in some cases), safety messaging (e.g., at roll call and through poster campaigns), training (i.e., training officers on how to get out of their seat belts quickly and effectively to build confidence), and conducting periodic compliance audits (either with in-car cameras, body cameras, and/or observers) to verify officers are wearing their seat belts in accordance with agency policy or state statute.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Use of vehicle telematics**
- **Policy enforcement and discipline for non-compliance (including issuing traffic citations to officers for not wearing their seat belts in some cases)**
- **Safety messaging (e.g., at roll call and through poster campaigns)**
- **Training (i.e., training officers on how to get out of their seat belts quickly and effectively to build confidence)**
- **Conducting periodic compliance audits (either with in-car cameras, body cameras, and/or observers) to verify officers are wearing their seat belts in accordance with agency policy or state statute**

DISTRACTED DRIVING

Driving is a complex task, and considerable research has established that distractions are detrimental to driving performance.[45] In particular, using communication devices while driving is a significant source of driving distraction.[46] In 2021, **3,522** people lost their lives as a result of distracted driving, with texting being the most dangerous form of distraction.[47] In fact, talking on a cell phone while driving has been found to produce the same level of impairment as being intoxicated at a blood alcohol content (BAC) level of 0.08 in simulated studies.[48] Diverting attention to a laptop while driving, such as looking at the mobile data terminal (MDT) in a patrol vehicle, results in an impairment similar to the use of a cell phone.[49]

In law enforcement, officers have more technology in their vehicles than the average driver. In addition to having cell phones, law enforcement vehicles are equipped with laptops (MDTs), police radios, microphones, cameras, sirens, and countless gauges, trackers, switches, and buttons.[50] The expectation to multitask can lead to overconfidence and a belief on the part of officers that they can manage the distractions without their driving being affected.[51] The reality is that while officers' attention is diverted to another task, they have reduced situational awareness, which negatively affects their operational and tactical driving behaviors.[52] Officers' distracted driving performances have shown significantly greater lane deviation (measured from the centerline of the lane), more instances of unintentionally leaving assigned driving lanes, and increased braking latency compared to their non-distracted drives.[53]

During the focus group, participants discussed the challenge of balancing the competing driving and policing tasks that divide officers' attention while driving. As one focus group participant noted,

> **“That’s all we keep doing to our officers, adding more tasks they have to do [in order] to accommodate the technology that’s in the car.”**

“The distraction, the multitasking is kind of almost a requirement.” Scanning for suspicious or criminal activity, listening for calls on the radio, and managing the technology in the vehicle pull an officer’s attention in multiple directions, making it challenging for them to give their full focus to the road when driving. Another participant affirmed how agencies may be contributing to the problem, stating, “That’s all we keep doing to our officers, adding more tasks they have to do [in order] to accommodate the technology that’s in the car.” This expectation that officers can multitask and safely attend to other, legitimate policing tasks while driving is detrimental to officer safety.

By definition, multitasking is only possible when the tasks are highly practiced, processed, and solidified in long-term memory through learning and repetition.[54] In contrast, non-automatic tasks require conscious, deliberate attention and are limited by the capacity of a person’s working memory. Because of this, simultaneous performance of multiple non-automatic tasks is not possible.[55] When an officer is engaged in other tasks while driving, such as reading or typing a message on their MDT, they are task-switching, not multitasking. This lapse in attention due to switching between tasks can cause an officer to miss critical information in the driving environment, leading to a collision.

To mitigate officer distractions while driving, focus group participants suggested that agencies enact and enforce policies to restrict texting and phone use while driving, implement screen-locking technology on MDTs (or otherwise prohibit their use) above certain speeds, deliver more information to officers via the police radio

versus expecting officers to view and send critical information via their MDTs, and, more generally, consider how the placement of technology in police vehicles may negatively impact officers' ability to drive safely.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Enact and enforce policies to restrict texting and phone use while driving**
- **Implement screen-locking technology on MDTs above certain speeds**
- **Deliver more information to officers via the police radio versus their MDTs**
- **Consider the placement of technology in police vehicles**

FATIGUED DRIVING

Drowsy driving is a serious problem in the United States.[56] A recent study of the general population by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety estimated that **17.6 percent** of fatal motor vehicle crashes involved drowsy driving, resulting in the deaths of almost **30,000** people in the United States from 2017–2021.[57]

Within law enforcement, the issue of drowsy driving is exacerbated due to the pervasiveness of officer fatigue.[58] Fatigue is more than just being tired. It is a severe form of physical and/or mental tiredness that reflects constant exhaustion, burnout, or lack of energy. In a 2011 study of sleep disorders among police officers, an alarming **50 percent** of surveyed officers reported having fallen asleep while driving their patrol vehicle at least once per month.[59] Comparatively, in an assessment of fatigued driving across 19 states and the District of Columbia, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that just over **four percent** of respondents reported falling asleep while driving in the past **30** days.[60]

Lapses in attention to the roadway caused by fatigue can affect driving performance, increasing the risk of collisions, injuries, and errors on the job. Being awake for 17-19 hours results in performance degradation equivalent to being impaired with a BAC of 0.05; at 24 hours awake, the impairment is comparable to a BAC of 0.10.[61] This fatigue-related impairment makes officers significantly more likely to be involved in a motor vehicle collision, up to **63** times more likely for those who have been awake for more than 20 hours.[62] Fatigue also affects mood, cognitive ability, and risk-taking propensity, which can contribute to poor decision making by officers.[63]

FIGURE 2: IMPACTS OF FATIGUE

FATIGUE	17-19 HRS AWAKE	24 HRS AWAKE
Reaction Time Speed	↓ 9%	↓ 16%
Reaction Time Accuracy	↓ 225%	↓ 680%
Dual Task Speed	↓ 10%	↓ 20%
Hand Eye Coordination	↓ 10%	↓ 53%
Object Tracking	↓ 7%	↓ 57%
Vigilance Speed	↓ 14%	↓ 42%
Vigilance Accuracy	↓ 14%	↓ 40%
Vigilance False Alarms	↑ 55%	↑ 326%
Spatial Memory	↓ 13%	↓ 30%
Tiredness	↑ 77%	↑ 150%
ALCOHOL	0.05 BAC	0.10 BAC

In a 2011 study of sleep disorders among police officers, an alarming 50 percent of surveyed officers reported having fallen asleep while driving their patrol vehicle at least once per month.

Focus group participants attributed the fatigue problem to excessively long work hours resulting from insufficient staffing to meet operational demands. For example, as one focus group participant noted, “We’re mandating 18-hour shifts all the time. We’re putting ridiculous expectations on these deputies…you can only push human beings so far.” To address understaffing issues, many departments have moved from the traditional 8-hour shift to 10- or 12-hour shifts, which does not include possible overtime hours. Compressed working schedules that do not allow for sufficient rest time between shifts can result in chronic fatigue. In addition to shift length, shift time is an equally important contributor to sleep-related performance impairment. As a 24/7 operation, officers who work the overnight shift are working against the body’s natural sleep-wake cycle and circadian rhythms, which can affect driving performance. In a simulation test of critical operational tasks among law enforcement officers, researchers found that night-shift officers had significantly more collisions and greater lane deviation while driving than day-shift officers.[64] Still, as one focus group participant expressed, “[Some] officers think they can make it through the shift by just drinking energy drinks.”

The focus group conversation about fatigued driving was noteworthy because officers felt this type of risky behavior resulted from factors not entirely within their control. Organizational changes that focus group participants believe can help alleviate this issue include restorative rest policies (i.e., allowing officers to have a nap while on duty, subject to limitations); doubling up officers in patrol vehicles during the evening hours (although staffing might not allow for this); limiting the number of hours officers can work in a 24-hour period, including overtime and secondary employment; and mandating officers have at least 8 hours off in between work assignments. One focus group participant noted that having a place where officers can sleep, shower, and recuperate in between shifts, rather than driving home and returning six hours later, can make a huge difference in officer fatigue.

Given the associated dangers, excessive fatigue and drowsy driving should not be accepted as inevitable due to limited staffing. It results in unsafe and unwell officers, who are then unable to serve their community to the best of their abilities. As the focus group participants pointed out, law enforcement leaders must find strategies, even innovative and non-traditional ones, to address this issue.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- **Restorative rest policies**
- **Doubling up officers in patrol vehicles during the evening hours**
- **Limiting the number of hours officers can work in a 24-hour period, including overtime and secondary employment**
- **Mandating officers have at least 8 hours off in between work assignments**

Creating a Strong Culture of Safety to Mitigate Risk

WHAT IS A CULTURE OF SAFETY?

Since law enforcement culture has the potential to increase rather than mitigate roadway safety risk, agencies must intentionally develop and promote a culture of safety. But what is a culture of safety? It can be defined as one where safety is given special *priority* by those who work for the organization.

A culture of safety is characterized by having:[65]

- **Members who stay informed on what constitutes a safe working environment and understand potential hazards.**
- **A willingness to report errors or unsafe factors (i.e., near-miss reporting).**
- **An atmosphere in which there is trust and encouragement to act safely.**
- **Flexibility in shifting from conventional hierarchies, as necessary, for safety. In other words, there is flexibility to engage in communication outside the normal chain of command with respect to a perceived safety issue.**
- **Members who can and are willing to apply safety information and adjust as necessary.**

Focus group participants recognized that a culture of safety is a complex concept in law enforcement. As one participant bluntly put it, "We say safety first, but we don't [actually] put safety first, and that's why we don't [actually] have a culture of safety...Safety can't be your number one priority because priorities change. Safety has to be your number one value." For the focus group participants, a true culture of safety is one that communicates that "you care about your employees, not one that is solely about policies that aren't backed up by action."

HOW DO LEADERS AND OFFICERS ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF SAFETY IN ROADWAY OPERATIONS?

While motor vehicle collisions resulting in fatalities and injuries are a universal risk for law enforcement, the degree to which this risk is prioritized and mitigated differs from agency to agency. Implementing organizational cultural change in general is not easy, and doing so in law enforcement is especially challenging. As one focus group participant noted, "We're stuck in our ways a lot. Law enforcement can be very hard to change, very hard to adapt," to which a second focus group participant added that often, "there is no clear path, or clear training, or roadmap for administrators to change things."

For agency leaders embarking on this process, it is important to consider:[66]

1. What they routinely prioritize, take an interest in, or collect data on.
2. How they respond to critical incidents and crises.
3. What factors drive the distribution and prioritization of resources.
4. How they instruct and mentor other employees.
5. What behaviors are rewarded.
6. The organization's recruitment, hiring, promotion, and retention practices.

> **“Culture eats policy for breakfast.”**

It can be all too easy for a law enforcement organization to merely focus on changes to policy and procedure instead of cultivating a true shift from a risk-taking culture to one that prioritizes safety. While formalizing expectations within policy, training, and procedures is certainly necessary, success will likely require a multi-faceted approach that focuses on setting, communicating, and supporting the expectations, and emphasizing accountability at all levels of the agency.

Edgar Schein, a noted expert in organizational culture and behavior, proposes that to achieve this type of cultural change, an agency’s leaders must first communicate a strong vision for change and then invite others from the organization to help them develop a roadmap for achieving it.[67] Focus group participants agreed with this guidance, with one participant stating, “Executive leadership sets the expectations and provides a path, and middle management executes (to include sergeants, field training officers, and instructors). [The] relentless support of those expectations is needed by all levels.”

CULTURE CHANGE REQUIRES

- **Setting expectations through policy and training**
- **Communicating expectations**
- **Continuously supporting the expectations throughout the chain of command**
- **Emphasizing accountability at all levels of the agency**

Although law enforcement leaders often initiate organizational cultural change by communicating a vision, cultivating the support of other agency members is paramount. While behavioral change, such as seat belt wear or limits on speed, distraction, and work hours, can be mandated, it is more likely to be sustainable if employees buy into it—or at least understand why it is being implemented—and those groups tasked with carrying out the change are supported by leadership.

Within law enforcement, the ability to formally communicate expectations through policy, training, and mentorship is important but may not be enough. As one focus group participant noted, “Is the chief saying so enough? No, it’s not. [Agencies] need to paint with a broad brush on this issue [of changing culture as it relates to roadway safety]…A policy won’t do it alone.” Another focus group participant echoed this statement, emphasizing, “Culture eats policy for breakfast.”

The importance of messaging the expectations cannot be overstated. Focus group participants stressed the need for agency leaders to clearly articulate the “why” behind the expectations to gain officers' buy-in. One participant explained, “The reasoning for safety can’t be ‘because policy says so.’ The reasoning needs to be ‘because I care for you and want to see you be safe.’” This messaging can and should come in the form of leaders speaking directly with officers (e.g., during roll call briefings), but it can also come in the form of posters, decals, or even video testimonials from

> **“The reasoning for safety can’t be ‘because policy says so.’ The reasoning needs to be ‘because I care for you and want to see you be safe.’”**

officers and/or family members who have lived through a roadway safety incident.

While focus group participants agreed that everyone in the organization can affect culture by setting a personal example, they acknowledged that in policing, some groups carry more influence than others and need to be prioritized. Three critical groups that need to be on board are the academy trainers, the field training officers, and the first-line supervisors. As one focus group participant explained, academy trainers introduce the safety concepts, field training officers reinforce the basics taught in the academy, and patrol sergeants reinforce the safety culture on a day-to-day basis. In particular, the patrol sergeant plays a critical role because, as one focus group participant commented, “They [the patrol sergeant] can choose to belittle the guidance of the leadership, which can negatively impact the culture you want to have, or they can choose to reinforce it and make it happen.”

> **“Accepted behavior is condoned behavior.”**

After the expectations have been established in policy and training and communicated to all agency personnel, the last critical piece is ensuring accountability at all levels of the organization. This starts with executives, supervisors, and trainers leading by example and extends to all members. Not holding people accountable to the organization’s expectations at all levels of rank can all too easily undermine organizational cultural change. Unfortunately, lack of accountability is a widespread issue in many law enforcement organizations.

Focus group participants agreed that officers are not sufficiently held accountable for behaviors such as driving too fast or not wearing their seat belts, and this sets the tone for others. As one focus group participant succinctly said, “Accepted behavior is condoned behavior.” It is also important to note that accountability does not have to focus solely on discipline. Rewarding officers for safe actions can also effectively support culture change.[68] Consider, for example, the positive impact it can have on an agency’s safety culture to incorporate officers’ safety records—particularly how they have demonstrated the agency’s “safety first” value—into the agency’s promotional process.

Law enforcement leaders desiring to establish or enhance a culture of safety within their agencies will need to recognize that such a change requires the embodiment of values, careful and diligent planning, incremental changes, diffusion of safety messaging throughout the entire agency at all levels of rank, and consistent and accountable actions from those in positions of authority.[69] Even so, there is bound to be trial and error. The important thing is not to give up and to stay the course.

While research on effective strategies to create cultural change related to roadway safety within law enforcement organizations is limited, there are notable examples. One especially successful effort is the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's (LVMPD) implementation of a motor vehicle crash prevention program. The case study below highlights how the agency incorporated safety messaging into policy changes, increased training requirements, and carried out a progressive marketing campaign to make the program successful.[70]

CASE STUDY:

Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's Motor Vehicle Crash Prevention Program[71]

After three motor vehicle-related officer fatalities within a year, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) initiated the Motor Vehicle Crash (MVC) Prevention Program aimed to reduce on-duty MVC fatalities and motor vehicle injuries (MVI) among officers. It involved three main components: **policy changes, increased training requirements, and a progressive marketing campaign**. Policy changes included speed limit restrictions, supervisory check rides, and revisions to seat belt and texting policies. The marketing campaign, titled "Belt Up," featured posters, decals, videos, and driving safety messages. Training content was enhanced to include annual emergency vehicle operations training for the first three years of service and biennially after that, covering topics like seat belt use, defensive driving, and visual horizon concepts. The program was implemented on a rolling basis, beginning with policy changes in 2009 and the introduction of the marketing campaign in early 2010.

The study analyzed trends in MVC and MVI over time within the agency and compared them to two similarly sized control agencies to examine the impact of the MVC prevention program. The results showed a significant reduction in MVC and MVI rates for the LVMPD after launching the program. The MVC rate decreased **13.6 percent from 2.2 to 1.9 per 100,000 miles**, and the MVI rate dropped **38 percent from 3.4 to 2.1 per 100 officers**. These trends were not seen in the two control agencies; one of the control agencies even experienced a slight increase in MVI over the same timeframe. The program's positive impact was particularly pronounced when analyzing LVMPD patrol officers separately, who demonstrated even sharper reductions.

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Among LVMPD patrol officers, there was a **21 percent** decrease in MVC rates and a **48 percent** decrease in MVI rates. The program also resulted in cost savings of **$1.1 million** from collision injuries in the three years following program implementation.

The positive impact of the LVMPD crash prevention program in reducing MVCs and MVIs among law enforcement officers highlights the potential effectiveness of evidence-based prevention programs in the field. The program's marketing campaign, which included slogans like "Belt Up," posters, and videos featuring officers and surviving family members sharing their experiences, played a crucial role in promoting a culture of safety. The increased seat belt use after the program was implemented suggests a positive shift in officers' behavior and attitudes toward roadway safety measures. While the LVMPD is a large law enforcement agency, the program's success suggests potential scalability and provides a valuable framework for other law enforcement agencies to develop evidence-based MVC prevention programs. The emphasis on a holistic approach that focuses on policy changes, accountability, and a culture of safety can be adapted to suit diverse organizational contexts and underscores the importance of addressing MVC prevention as a critical component of officer safety and wellness initiatives.

> **“Policing has not historically put a lot of time and effort into developing their leaders. It’s sort of learn as you go.”**

CHALLENGES TO CULTURE CHANGE

In the focus group discussion, participants noted a few major challenges that can hinder culture change.

Possibly unique to the law enforcement profession, focus group participants acknowledged that officers typically think of officer safety and roadway safety as two separate things, even though they should be one and the same. This distinction is seemingly due to officers typically equating officer safety to tactical safety rather than holding a more holistic view of occupational safety that incorporates roadway safety practices. All participants agreed that officers rarely question tactics and procedures meant to increase an officer’s physical safety from assaults on the job.

The challenge in building a culture of safety in roadway operations is to find a way to incorporate driving safety concepts into the existing culture of officer safety. One way to accomplish this is to integrate roadway safety into the officer safety conversation early in the academy and carry it through the life of the academy and officers' careers. As one focus group participant summed it up, “Driver’s training can’t just be a box check.” By increasing the time officers are exposed to roadway safety topics, agencies will “have more time to make inroads with respect to safety messaging.”

Secondly, focus group participants acknowledged that law enforcement leaders sometimes lack the skills needed to take on a cultural challenge. Participants noted how agencies that invest significant time and resources into leadership development have a better chance of overcoming the culture challenge. However, as one focus group participant commented, “Policing has not historically put a lot of time and effort into developing their leaders. It’s sort of learn as you go.”

> **“Risks should only be taken when needed to address priorities of life. And even in those instances, it should be the minimum amount of risk that is necessary.”**

One specific area where focus group participants noted deficiencies in leadership development is strategic planning. One seasoned focus group participant explained the need for a specific set of skills when attempting to change organizational culture in law enforcement and the challenges around cultivating those skills:

> *“Strategic planning tends to be a dirty word in policing, but it is [the] way that you build consensus around the changes that need to be made. Strategic planning is the part of leadership development where you learn how to be a facilitator, run focus groups, run meetings, engage with your people, get their input, etc.”*

The end goal of such an approach is to achieve consensus and secure buy-in from the workforce. For those with positional authority in law enforcement, having these skills is paramount to successfully lead culture change.

Lastly, focus group participants noted a perceived conflict in law enforcement between prioritizing “safety first” in roadway operations and abiding by the traditional priorities of life when responding to emergency incidents—victim(s), innocent civilian(s), officer(s), and suspect(s), in that order. Participants discussed how telling officers to drive at safe speeds when responding can be interpreted by officers to mean the agency is prioritizing officer safety above the safety and well-being of victims or innocent civilians. When trying to teach roadway safety concepts, one participant noted, “There’s no middle ground. We’re either go, full 100 percent to the wall, or you have people saying we’re teaching officers to be wimps and not do the job they're supposed to. There’s no middle ground. You either have to go all or none.”

However, the group collectively agreed that while this can be the perception, it is not true, which again underscores the importance of proper messaging throughout the organization. Another participant succinctly summarized how the dangers inherent in law enforcement, including the need to sometimes take risks to protect others, can be reconciled with a “safety first” culture, saying, “Risks should only be taken when needed to address priorities of life. And even in those instances, it should be the minimum amount of risk that is necessary.”

Opportunities for Additional Insight

The law enforcement focus group represented a wide range of perspectives and expertise from the field, including diversity in ranks, duty assignments, agency size and type, and geographic location. Future focus groups could include perspectives that provide additional insight into the actions and mentalities of line officers and young officers, including the motivations behind their safety habits and decision making. These additional perspectives can also tap into potential generational differences in viewpoints toward these specific safety issues. Additionally, as experts and proponents of safety in their respective agencies, the focus group participants were substantially more roadway safety conscious than may be typical in the general law enforcement workforce. While this could be seen as a limitation in terms of capturing diverse perspectives, these are precisely the viewpoints law enforcement leaders should cultivate among their personnel if they are truly committed to creating and strengthening a culture of roadway safety.

Conclusion

Officer-involved collisions and struck-by incidents are a leading cause of injuries and fatalities in law enforcement. Many of these incidents are preventable through strategies and practices that are within the control of agencies and officers to implement. The research clearly identifies how failing to wear a seat belt, driving at excessive speeds, and driving while fatigued or distracted significantly increase the risk to officers. Unfortunately, law enforcement culture often fuels rather than mitigates these risks. To address this issue, law enforcement leaders must intentionally develop and sustain a culture of safety within their respective agencies that promotes "safety first" in roadway operations.

One focus group member challenged law enforcement leaders, emphasizing, "You have the ability to make your people safer, and if you choose not to, shame on you." A culture of safety is not incompatible with the requirement for risk-taking in emergency circumstances; rather, a culture of safety emphasizes that agencies should mitigate all safety risks to the greatest extent possible and only take risks that are reasonably necessary to complete the mission at hand.

> **"[Law enforcement leaders] have the ability to make [their] people safer."**

Changing culture in law enforcement is not easy, but it is possible, as demonstrated by the highly successful crash prevention program implemented by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. To change culture, leaders should first focus on establishing the agency's expectations for roadway safety. This process should involve strategic planning, where leaders gather feedback from members at all levels of the organization. Once the expectations are established and formalized in policy and training, they must be continuously supported and communicated at all levels within the chain of command. This can and should involve leaders constantly reminding officers of the "safety first" mindset, but it should also include regular safety messaging through resources like posters and testimonial videos. Lastly, leaders must ensure there is accountability at all levels of the organization. This starts with leading by example, but it extends to holding subordinates and peers accountable for their actions. Accountability does not only include discipline; a healthy culture of safety also rewards officers for actions that demonstrate due regard for safety.

This brief is intended to provide law enforcement leaders with guidance on how to address organizational culture that may currently run counter to roadway safety practices. As agencies seek to mitigate the risk factors for officer-involved collisions and struck-by incidents and work to develop a culture of roadway safety, leaders and officers should look to the National Law Enforcement Roadway Safety Program (NLERSP) for support and guidance on actionable steps that can be taken.

Funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the NLERSP team provides no-cost training, technical assistance, and resources to agencies interested in addressing the safety issues discussed in this brief. The NLERSP cadre of subject matter experts and instructors can partner with your agency to provide guidance every step of the way through the culture change process. For more information and to request assistance, visit LEOroadwaysafety.org.

Endnotes

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