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Death on Patrol

Killings of American Law Enforcement Officers

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In the early afternoon of June 14, 1990, a Big Horn County (Montana) deputy sheriff was dispatched to respond to a bank alarm. Upon arrival, the deputy was given a description of the perpetrator's vehicle and gave chase. She was joined in the pursuit by another officer in a backup vehicle. The first officer's vehicle collided with the suspect's vehicle, causing both cars to stop. Gunfire ensued, leaving the female deputy dead from a gunshot wound from a .357 magnum in the abdomen below her body armor. The assailant was killed by the backup officer, the husband of the slain deputy.

According to research conducted by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, more than 12,500 law enforcement officers have been killed on duty in the history of the United States (Clark, 1992). As indicated in reports submitted to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, 3,280 law enforcement officers were killed between 1973 and 1994, including 1,945 (or 60 percent) who were killed feloniously, like the deputy described above, and 1,335 (40 percent) who were killed in accidents (FBI, 1976–1991). Thus, a police officer is killed about once every three days in this country.

In fact, American police officers are significantly more likely to be the victims of criminal homicide than Americans in general (Guralnick, 1963; Peterson and Bailey, 1988), and with regard to the vulnerability of Americans specifically at work, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 1996) places the occupations of "safety/labor" and "police and detective—public service" as second and third, after "taxicab driver/chauffeur," in terms of rates of workplace homicides. Lester (1980) found that U.S. officers have a much higher rate of criminal homicide than officers in sixteen selected industrial nations.

In this chapter we explore what is known about police killings, paying particular attention to the duty-related/ felonious deaths of law enforcement officers in the United States and its territories. That is, our focus is on those officers who are the victims of criminal homicide while acting in a law enforcement capacity. We shall discuss the extent of the problem; the trends over the last two decades; the characteristics of agencies and jurisdictions which are associated with high rates of these deaths; and the characteristics of the incidents, the victim officers, and the offenders. Toward the end of the chapter, we provide information about the accidental deaths of on-duty officers—a subject about which much less is known than felonious killings.

Most of the studies on police killings have relied upon the data compiled by the Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The UCR collects information concerning all these deaths nationally and within the U.S. territories and publishes annually the Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA). These data were first collected by the FBI in the early 1960s; general compliance with the voluntary system was achieved in the early 1970s. The amount and quality of data regarding these incidents have improved progressively since that time and are considered the most reliable of all data collected in the UCR (Vaughn and Kappeler, 1986). Nevertheless, these data are based on police records and therefore represent a law enforcement interpretation of events.

The incidents included in the FBI data involve persons who were sworn law enforcement officers with full arrest powers. The deaths occurred while these law enforcement officers were acting in a duty-related capacity. (This includes officers who were officially "off duty" when they intervened in an incident in their law enforcement capacity.) In all instances, the offenders intended to harm the officers and/or resist the officers' interventions.

Extent of the Problem

According to the data collected by the Uniform Crime Reporting Program, as shown in figure 1, the number of law enforcement officers who were feloniously killed fell from a high of 134 in 1973 to below 100 per year in the early 1980s, then fell again in the late 1980s. Officer slayings have fluctuated between 66 (1990) and 76 (1994) in the early 1990s. This represents a decline of about 50 percent since the 1970s.

Because the number of officers has actually increased significantly in the last two decades, the rate at which officers have been killed has declined quite significantly, as well. The rate of police killings (per 10,000 officers) fell from approximately 3.4 in 1973 to about 1.6 in 1983 to approximately 1.1 per 10,000 in 1993. The reasons for this decline cannot be precisely determined, although a number of contributing factors can be identified. For example, it is clear that the introduction of soft body armor in the 1970s led to a notable decrease in the chances of officers being killed as a result of wounds to the torso (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1992a). In addition, many police departments have adopted...
sophisticated training procedures during the last two decades aimed at enhancing police officers' safety (Fyfe, 1987; Alpert and Fridell, 1992). Further, many agencies have revised their policies and procedures to ensure that officers are less likely to put themselves in dangerous circumstances (see e.g., Alpert and Fridell, 1992). It is also interesting to note that, according to NIOSH, overall workplace homicide declined between 1980 and 1993.

Although we have experienced a decrease in the felonious killings of law enforcement officers since the mid-1970s, we still are losing to criminal homicide 60 to 75 law enforcement officers each year. As part of our attempt to understand who is killed and under what circumstances, we describe below the agency and jurisdictional context of police shootings, followed by descriptions of the circumstances of the events, characteristics of the victims, and characteristics of the offenders.

**Agency and Jurisdiction Characteristics**

A number of researchers have looked at the relationship between police killings/assaults and crime rates, poverty, income inequality, population ethnicity, and other social/cultural features of cities or states. Two of the early studies found that rates of police killings were positively correlated with city size, the "political climate," and violent crime rates (Cardarelli, 1968; Lester, 1978a).

Lester (1982) attempted to identify the city characteristics associated with high rates of police murders. He found that high rates of police murders were positively associated with gun ownership, southern locations, percent black population, percent of the population below the pov-
For instance, Fridell and Pate determined the way in which each encounter was initiated, because Scharf and Binder (1983) argue that the mode of initiation may have ramifications for subsequent developments within a police-citizen encounter. Of the 713 officers killed during the years 1983 through 1992, one-third (34 percent) of them were dispatched to the incident in which they were killed. Another one-third (31 percent) of the officers proactively initiated the contact with the opponent as a result of observations.

Twenty percent of the officers were on assignment at the time of the incident. They were, for instance, serving a warrant, questioning a witness, or conducting surveillance. Some of the officers who were working security jobs were "on assignment" at a bank security desk. (Patrol was not defined as an assignment.) In 6 percent of the incidents, police action was "unanticipated." This category included the situations in which the officers "walked in" on crimes that they were unaware were taking place, or had the crimes "walk in" on them. For instance, one slain officer was on break conducting a transaction at his bank when a robbery took place. Similarly, some situations involved on-duty or off-duty officers walking into establishments, unaware that crimes were taking place within. Finally, 51 of the incidents, or 8 percent, involved ambushes of the officer. That is, the assailant sought out a particular officer to kill, usually as a result of some previous police action involving the assailant, or an assailant killed an officer only because of his/her status as an officer.

In 4 of every 10 incidents, the first interaction of the officer with the assailant was the fatal attack. That is they were "killed at entry." The remaining 60 percent of the officers had some sort of interaction (such as pursuit, communication) with the suspect prior to their attacks.

The coding scheme documented both the officer action and crime type for each incident to assess the nature of the incident to which the officer’s attention was directed at the time of his/her death. The largest group of officers (33 percent) was intervening in an ongoing crime (or the immediate escape from a crime) when slain. In another 16 percent of the incidents, officers were making or attempting to make arrests in situations other than those in which the crime was ongoing (such as on warrants). In 13 percent of the incidents, officers were issuing citations and in another 13 percent they were investigating suspicious persons or circumstances.

Officers slain while intervening in ongoing crimes were most frequently intervening in domestic disturbances (24 percent) or robberies (22 percent). A plurality (47 percent) of the officers slain while investigating a completed crime were investigating a nonviolent crime other than burglary or drugs. Ninety-four percent of the situations involving citations, were traffic related. Four out of five officers (83 percent) slain while executing a search were searching for people or evidence related to drug offenses. Nine of every ten of the slain undercover officers were working on drug cases.

Many officers classified by the FBI as being feloniously killed in the line of duty during incidents involving the crime of robbery, were in situations where they themselves were being victimized (such as while off duty or on assignment in plainclothes) or found themselves inside commercial establishments when robberies took place. In fact, of the 81 incidents in which an officer was feloniously killed in the course of a robbery, 42 of these, or 52 percent were the type of victimizations described above. Two-thirds of those 42 incidents involved personal victimizations of the officers. The remaining one-third involved victimizations of establishments where the officers happened to be. Nearly three-fourths of these officers were off duty and 17 percent were working undercover. One was working as a detective and two were on special assignment.

The degree of danger associated with domestic disturbance calls has been a subject of debate in the police killings/assaults literature. Garner and Clemmer (1986) reviewed the history of this debate and noted that early misperceptions of the dangerousness of domestic violence were the result of misunderstandings regarding the types of incidents included under the FBI heading of “disturbance” in the LEOKA reports. Until the FBI split the “disturbance” category into two subgroups (“family quarrels” and “bar fights, man with gun, etc.”), many criminal justice practitioners and researchers believed that the single category was mainly comprised of domestic disturbances. This led to overestimates of the proportion of officers who were killed responding to domestic violence situations.

Also leading to misconceptions regarding the danger associated with domestic disturbances was that conclusions were being drawn on the basis of raw numbers and percentages instead of rates. As Garner and Clemmer (1986) point out, to assess the relative danger of types of calls requires base rate information on the frequency of the types of calls. For instance, to assess the relative dangerousness of police responding to domestic violence versus robbery calls we would need to know not only how many officers in a particular jurisdiction died responding to each type of call, but also, how many times officers in that jurisdiction responded to each type of crime. Using hypothetical data, if over a fifteen-year period, five officers in a city were killed responding to domestic violence calls and three officers were killed responding to robberies, we could not conclude that police were in more danger responding to domestic violence than to robbery. To draw conclusions, we would need to know how many times police in the city responded to domestic violence calls and how many times they responded to robbery calls during that 15-year period in order to calculate rates. If this city responded to 60,000 domestic violence calls and 7,500 robbery calls over the 15-year period, the rates would be .83 officers killed per 10,000 domestic violence calls and 4 officers killed per 10,000 robbery kills. Clearly, the likelihood of being killed is greater for a robbery call.
Garner and Clemmer (1986) relied on two earlier studies which measured police activity to estimate the relative risks (in terms of deaths and assaults) of types of police activity. Consistently, robbery calls ranked as the most dangerous in terms of risk per incident. Other researchers have also found that robbery-related calls, instead of domestic disturbance calls, are the most dangerous (for example, see Margarita, 1980; Konstanzin, 1984; and Little, 1984). Just one published study (Uchida, Brooks, and Kopers, 1987) has found a higher “danger rate” (relative probability of assault) for police responding to domestic violence calls than for any other category of activity.

Time and Distance

Various researchers examining other factors related to police killing incidents have looked at the time of the incident (for example, see Moorman and Wemmer, 1983; and Boylen and Little, 1990) and the distance between victims and perpetrators (see, for example Margarita, 1980).

According to the FBI data, approximately half of the felonious killings of police took place during the 8-hour period between 8 P.M. and 4 A.M. The period between 8 P.M. and midnight accounted itself for almost one-third of the killings. The fewest killings occurred between 4 A.M. and noon (FBI, 1994).

Over half (56 percent) of the slain officers were within 5 feet of their assailants; another 20 percent were between 6 and 10 feet from their assailants. Slightly more than 13 percent of the officers were between 11 to 20 feet of their opponents and the remaining 1 percent were over 21 feet from their opponents (FBI, 1980–1994).

Location

Just under one-half of the officers killed during 1983 to 1992 were roadside when they were killed, another one-fourth were outside, but not roadside. Most of the officers who were inside structures when attacked were in residences, as opposed to commercial establishments (Fridell and Pate, 1995).

Number of Suspects and Fellow Officers

Two-thirds of the slain officers faced a single threatening opponent at the time of their deaths. Another 20 percent faced two opponents. Just under 2 percent faced 5 or more suspects (Fridell and Pate, 1995).

Two-thirds of the officers slain during 1983 through 1992 had no law enforcement support in their immediate vicinity at the time of their deaths (Fridell and Pate, 1995). That is, though there may have been other officers on the scene, in two-thirds of the incidents no other officer was close enough to the victim officer to be in immediate danger him/herself or in a position to provide live-saving assistance.

Weapons Used

According to the information reported to the FBI concerning officers killed during the period from 1975 through 1994, 92 percent of the police killings were committed with firearms, including 70 percent with handguns, 14 percent with rifles, and 8 percent with shotguns. The remaining killings involved officers being knifed, struck by cars, beaten to death, pushed to their deaths, killed by explosives, or killed by the use of “personal weapons,” such as hands and feet (FBI, 1975–1994).

During the period 1980 through 1994, 141 officers were feloniously killed with their own firearms (FBI, 1980–1994). This accounts for 12 percent of all officers feloniously killed during that period. The proportion of officers feloniously slain with their own firearms has not declined significantly since the early 1970s despite increased emphasis in training on weapon-retention techniques and the widespread adoption of holsters designed to prevent offenders from disarming the officers.

Characteristics of Incidents by Officer Assignment

It is not unreasonable to assume that the characteristics of incidents in which officers are feloniously killed differ across various categories of law enforcement roles. For instance, it is likely that the particular dangers faced by municipal officers are different than those faced by state officers because of the differing activities and responsibilities of each type of officer. Similarly, it is likely that an officer working undercover faces different potentially lethal situations than those faced by foot patrol officers. It is also possible that the characteristics of incidents which lead to officers’ deaths vary by the type and location of the jurisdictions for which the officers work. As part of the overall study, Fridell and Pate (1995) assessed the characteristics of the fatal incidents in terms of the officers’ assignments, the type of agencies for which the officer worked, the region of the country in which the agency was situated, and the size and type of the jurisdiction for which the officer worked.

In this chapter, we describe selected findings for the analyses by assignment type. Of the 713 slain officers studied by Fridell and Pate (1995) over the ten year period (1983–1992), 360 (or 50 percent) were one-officer vehicle patrol officers, 84 (or 12 percent) were two-officer vehicle patrol officers, 31 (or 4 percent) were detectives, 105 (or 15 percent) were officers on special assignment, 30 (or 4 percent) were undercover officers, 96 (or 14 percent) were off-duty officers, and 7 (or 1 percent) were foot patrol officers. (See figure 4.)
One-Officer Vehicle Patrol Officers

In the early hours of February 4, 1991, a patrolman with the Philadelphia Police Department stopped a vehicle he suspected was stolen. The driver of the stopped vehicle exited his car and jumped onto the hood of the patrolman’s vehicle, pointing a semiautomatic handgun at the officer. The patrolman attempted to dislodge the man by throwing the car into reverse. His opponent jumped off the car, ran alongside the cruiser, and fired into the cruiser. The 21-year-old officer, with 1 year of law enforcement experience, died as a result of a shot to the head. (FBI, 1991)

Approximately one-half of the officers slain during 1983 through 1992 were, like the officer described above, one-officer vehicle patrol officers. Along with the two-officer vehicle patrol officers, more of these officers than officers on other assignments were dispatched to the incidents which led to their deaths. Just under half of the one-officer patrol officers were dispatched to the incidents compared to less than 20 percent of the officers on non-patrol assignments. A relatively small proportion (37 percent), compared to other assignments, were “killed at entry,” that is, for officers “killed at entry” their first interaction with the opponent was the fatal attack. A plurality of the incidents (45 percent) occurred in residential areas and a relatively large proportion of the killings of these officers (57 percent), compared to the other assignments, occurred—like the incident described above—outside at the side of roads. As with two-officer vehicle patrol officers and off-duty officers, a relatively large proportion of one-officer vehicle patrol officers (33 percent) were intervening in ongoing crimes at the time of their deaths. The proportion of this officer group which was issuing citations (21 percent) at the time of their deaths exceeds the corresponding proportions in the other assignment groups. Consistent with this, more of this category of officers (25 percent) than the other groupings were attending to traffic-related incidents. A relatively large proportion (15 percent) of patrol officers (both one-officer and two-officer patrol), compared to other officer assignments, were killed while responding to domestic disturbance incidents. A small proportion (5 percent) of patrol officers were ambushed compared to undercover and off-duty officers. Similar proportions of one-officer patrol (73 percent), two-officer patrol (71 percent), detectives (80 percent) and special assignment (73 percent) officers faced only one opponent at the time of the attacks. As with other categories, the one-officer vehicle patrol officers were most often killed with handguns (69 percent). Relatively large proportions of these officers, compared to officers on other assignments, were disarmed (23 percent) and killed with their own weapons (19 percent). One-officer vehicle patrol officers were second only to off-duty officers in terms of their likelihood of being without immediate assistance at the incidents which led to their deaths (78 percent).

### One-Officer Vehicle Patrol Officers

- Relatively small proportion ambushed
- More likely than other assignments to be dispatched
- Plurality occurred in residential areas
- Majority occurred outside at the side of roads
- Relatively small proportion “killed at entry”
- Plurality intervening in ongoing crimes
- Primarily one opponent
- Relatively large proportion disarmed and killed with their own weapons
- Likely to be without immediate assistance

### Two-Officer Vehicle Patrol

On the afternoon of September 12, 1991, a two-officer vehicle patrol team of the New York City Police Department responded to a man-with-a-gun call. The two officers interviewed a witness and obtained a description of the suspect as well as information regarding which direction he had headed on his bicycle. While searching the area, the officers observed the suspect who dumped the bicycle and attempted to escape on foot. Both officers chased the suspect into the courtyard of a building where the suspect turned and fired a revolver at them. While attempting to take cover behind a staircase, one of the officers, who was only wearing the front panel of his protective vest was shot six times. The 26-year-old officer who had five years of experience died 4 hours later at the hospital. (FBI, 1991)

The circumstances of the killings of the 84 two-person vehicle patrol officers were similar to the circumstances of the one-person vehicle patrol
officer killings except that the two-officer vehicles were more likely to be dispatched (55 percent)—as in the case described above, more likely to be killed indoors (24 percent), more likely to be intervening in ongoing crimes (42 percent) (and less likely to be issuing citations, 10 percent), more likely to be killed with handguns (81 percent), less likely to be disarmed (15 percent) and killed with their own weapons (12 percent), and, of course, much less likely to be without immediate assistance (11 percent).

### Two-officer Vehicle Patrol Officers

Similar to one-officer vehicle patrol except:
- Even more likely to be dispatched
- More likely to be killed indoors
- More likely to be intervening in ongoing crimes
- More likely to be killed with handguns
- Less likely to be disarmed
- Much less likely to be without immediate assistance

### Detectives

In the early evening of August 28, 1985, a 14-year veteran of the New Jersey State Police joined other state and local officers in a raid of an apartment house where drugs were allegedly being manufactured. The veteran officer and others were admitted into the apartment by a male. As this male was being placed under arrest, another male emerged from a closet and fired a shotgun at the police, killing the 36-year-old State Police Officer. (FBI, 1985)

As in this case, killings of detectives were most likely to occur in residential neighborhoods (60 percent) and equal proportions were killed inside structures (37 percent) or by the sides of roads (37 percent). Compared to the other assignment categories, more detectives—like the one above—were killed while attempting arrests (32 percent) or while executing search warrants (25 percent). As with undercover officers and special assignment officers, a relatively large proportion of the detectives (30 percent) were killed while conducting law enforcement activities related to drug offenses.

More detectives (63 percent) than any other group were killed at entry. (In just under one-half of these incidents, the detective was executing either a search warrant or an arrest warrant.) More of the attacks against detectives (39 percent) than the other assignment groups occurred during the hours of 9 A.M. and 3 P.M.

A larger proportion of detectives (80 percent), than any other group, faced a single opponent at the time of attack. Along with special assignment officers, detectives were more likely than the other categories of officers to be shot with rifles (16 percent) or shotguns (13 percent). Relatively few of the detectives (3 percent) were disarmed and shot with their own weapons (3 percent). Except for the undercover and off-duty officers, detectives were the least likely (13 percent) to be wearing soft body armor when slain. Just over half (55 percent) had law enforcement assistance in the immediate vicinity at the time of the attacks. Consistent with the finding that a large proportion of detectives were shot at entry is the finding that the final actions of many of these officers were to approach suspects (21 percent) or enter buildings or rooms (24 percent). These percentages were larger for detectives than for any other assignment group.

### Detectives

- Most likely to be killed in residential environments
- Most likely to be "killed at entry"
- Relatively large proportion were attempting arrests or executing search warrants
- Relatively large proportion were killed enforcing drug laws
- Most likely to face a single opponent
- Least likely to be wearing soft body armor
- Over half had assistance

### Special Assignment Officers

The Critical Incident Management Team of the San Joaquin County (California) Sheriff's Department was attempting to serve a narcotics search warrant on the morning of October 20, 1989. While most of the team were attempting to gain entry into the trailer they were to search, one deputy went to the rear of the trailer and crawled into the basement with his flashlight to create a diversion. A rifle was fired from within the trailer and Missy, the deputy with a shot to the forehead. The 10-year veteran of the department was 35 years old. (FBI, 1989)

The 105 officers on special assignment included officers working in jails, working on special teams (like the deputy above), assigned to execute arrest and/or search warrants, and so forth. This group had the highest percentage of unarmed officers, 9 percent. They were primarily inside structures and primarily in residential areas. One-fifth (21 percent) were making an arrest at the time of the attack and another one-fifth (20 percent) were executing search warrants. They were second only to detectives in terms of the proportion of officers who were killed at entry (45 percent). As with detectives and undercover officers, a plurality of the slain special assignment officers (21 percent) were involved in incidents related to drug offenses. A relatively large proportion of these officers (73 percent) were facing a single opponent. Compared to the other groups, officers on special assignment were least likely to be killed with shotguns (57 percent) and most likely to be killed with rifles (19 percent). A relatively large proportion (12 percent) were killed with shotguns. They were not more or less likely
than the other groups to be disarmed (18 percent), killed with their own weapons (15 percent), or wearing body armor (32 percent). Two-thirds of the officers on special assignment had immediate assistance at hand when they were attacked. This proportion was second only to two-officer vehicle patrol officers, 90 percent of which had immediate assistance. The final action of one-fifth of the officers on special assignment was to enter a building or room. No other final action accounted for a larger proportion of these officers’ final actions.

### Special Assignment Officers

- Primarily inside structures and primarily in residential areas
- Relatively large proportion “killed at entry”
- A plurality were enforcing drug laws
- Relatively large proportion facing a single opponent
- Least likely to be killed with handguns; most likely of the officer groups to be killed with rifles
- High proportion had assistance

### Undercover Officers

A detective with the Baltimore Police Department was negotiating an undercover drug transaction in a third-floor apartment the evening of December 3, 1984. As planned, other detectives and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents entered the building to execute both arrest and search warrants. As they entered, they heard gunshots from the upstairs apartment. The 36-year-old, 13-year department veteran was killed by shots with a handgun to his upper body. (FBI, 1984)

All of the 30 slain undercover officers studied by Fridell and Pate (1995) were armed and none were physically identifiable as law enforcement officers when attacked. A plurality (35 percent) of these officers were, like the one above, killed while inside structures and one-third (31 percent) were killed while roadside. Most were in residential areas and most were working drug-related assignments. These officers were relatively unlikely to be killed at entry. As with off-duty officers, a relatively large proportion (17 percent) of this group compared to the other assignment types was ambushed. The proportion of undercover officers killed during their own robbery victimizations (26 percent) exceeded that even of off-duty officers (20 percent); and a very large proportion of the undercover officers, relative to the other groups, faced more than one opponent when attacked. In only one-half of the incidents did it appear as if the opponent knew that his/her victim was a law enforcement officer. None of the slain undercover officers were disarmed and killed with their own weapons. Relatively few (7 percent) were wearing body armor and relatively few (35 percent) had the immediate assistance of other officers when attacked. The final action of one-fifth (20 percent) of the undercover officers, for whom there were data, was talking; another one-fifth (20 percent) were killed immediately upon entering a building or room.

### Undercover Officers

- Relatively large proportion ambushed
- Plurality killed inside structures
- Most killed in residential areas
- Relatively unlikely to be “killed at entry”
- Most enforcing drug laws
- Highest proportion killed during their own robbery victimizations
- Relatively large proportion faced more than one opponent

### Off-Duty Officers

In the evening of March 2, 1990, an off-duty sergeant with the Police of Puerto Rico entered a store, unaware that a robbery was taking place. Two armed suspects approached the officer and demanded the keys to his car. The 51-year-old resisted and, unable to access his ankle holstered weapon, was shot in the face. (FBI, 1990)

As in the above scenario, the 96 incidents involving off-duty officers were more likely than the incidents involving officers of other assignments types to involve situations where police action was unanticipated. That is, a situation “walked in” on the officer or the officer “walked in” on it. One-third of the incidents (32 percent) were initiated in this manner, and another one-third (36 percent) were officer initiated. All but three (96 percent) of the off-duty officers were armed during the incidents which led to their deaths. One-fourth were identifiable as police officers. (For the most part, these identifiable officers were going to work, returning from work, or working off duty as security in uniform.) A plurality (48 percent) were killed during the hours of 9 P.M. and 3 A.M. This percentage is higher than any other group. The off-duty killings were not distinctive in terms of occurring inside or outside, but a relatively large proportion (56 percent) of these killings occurred in commercial environments.

Two-thirds of the off-duty officers intervened in ongoing crimes and in half (48 percent) of the incidents, the crimes being attended to were robberies. A full 91 percent of the robberies in which off-duty officers “intervened” involved personal victimizations of the officers or victimizations of the establishments the officers were visiting. Thus, in a full one-third of all of the incidents during which off-duty officers were slain, these officers were “intervening” either in their own personal robbery victimizations (20 percent) or in the robberies of the establishments they were visiting (13 percent).
As with undercover officers, a relatively large percentage (19 percent) of the off-duty officers were ambushed, compared to other officer assignments. In a vast majority of these situations, the assailants set out to kill the particular officers as a result of some previous interaction with those officers. Half (44 percent) of the off-duty officers faced more than one opponent, and yet very few (less than 10 percent) had immediate assistance at the scene. Not surprisingly, just 4 (4 percent) of the 96 officers slain off duty were wearing body armor.

**Off-Duty Officers**
- Relatively large proportion ambushed
- Police action was unanticipated
- Relatively large proportion occurred in commercial environments
- Most intervening in ongoing crimes
- Many intervening in their own robbery victimizations
- Half faced more than one opponent
- Few had immediate assistance

**Table 2**

<table>
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<th>Sex</th>
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**Age**
- Average age 29
- Under 25 years of age 8
- 25 through 30 years of age 25
- 31 through 40 years of age 38
- Over 40 years of age 29

**Years of Service**
- Average years of service 9
- Less than 1 year 5
- From 1 through 4 years 29
- From 5 through 10 years 31
- Over 10 years 35

**Uniform**
- In uniform 70
- Out of uniform 30

**Body Armor**
- Wearing protective body armor 26
- Not wearing, unknown 74

As indicated in table 2, most of the officers killed between the years of 1980 and 1994 were male (97 percent) and white (87 percent). One-third (33 percent) of the officers were 30 years of age or younger. Their average age was 29 and their average number of years of service was 9. Seventy percent were in an official police uniform at the time of the killing and one-fourth of the slain officers were wearing protective body armor at the time of their deaths (FBI, 1980–1994).

The disproportionate representation of young, less experienced officers in the group of officers feloniously killed is a function, at least in part, of the greater proportion of younger police officers working patrol. That is, because younger officers compared to older officers are more likely to be working patrol, they are, of course, more likely to be attacked by citizens.

Konstantin (1984), using the FBI data and data on law enforcement personnel, found that black officers were disproportionately the victims of police killings relative to their representation nationally as law enforcement officers. Specifically, Konstantin found that, whereas approximately 6 percent of the law enforcement officers in the United States in 1978 though 1980 were black, they comprised 10.7 percent of the law enforcement officers feloniously killed in the line of duty. Fully one-third of the black officers killed were off duty at the time of the incident, compared to only 10.4 percent of the white officers. Geller and Karales (1981), who studied incidents in which shots hit Chicago officers between 1974 and 1978, also found that black officers were disproportionately represented among those who were shot both on duty and off duty.

These findings are consistent with research on police use of deadly force that indicates that black officers are disproportionately more likely to use deadly force (Fyfe, 1978, 1981; Geller and Karales, 1981). In both areas—killings of police officers and killings by police officers—authors have suggested that these findings might be due to the nature of the assignments of the on-duty black officers and the location of the residences of the black officers. Assignments and residences of black officers, compared to those of white officers, are more frequently in high crime areas (see, for example, Fyfe, 1978; Geller and Karales, 1981).

**Soft Body Armor**

Soft body armor, designed to protect the torso from shotguns and small-caliber handguns while being comfortable enough for routine wear.
under a uniform, was first patented in 1972 (U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment, 1992a:2). Since that time, the wearing of such armor has become widespread, even mandated in some agencies. Fridell and Pate (1995) surveyed 1,111 county sheriffs’ departments, county police departments, municipal police departments, and state law enforcement agencies and determined that over two-thirds of the agencies of each type provided their officers with body armor. Another 3 to 7 percent provided officers with a cash allowance to cover the purchase of body armor. Most departments of all types made the wearing of body armor optional, not mandatory, for their officers (Fridell and Pate, 1995).

In a recent survey, conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice for the Allied Signal Corporation, a body armor manufacturer, over 72 percent of “front-line” officers indicated that they wore body armor “all of the time” (John Jay College, 1991). An additional 19 percent of these officers said that they wore protective vests “some of the time.” Five percent said they never wore such armor. Since the data were collected by means of self-administered questionnaires, rather than by observations, the wear rate reported in the survey may be higher than it actually is.

The need for soft body armor is indicated by the fact that 562 (53 percent) of the 1,054 officers who were killed with firearms between 1980 and 1994 were killed as a result of wounds in the torso area (FBI, 1989, 1990). Of these 562, over 450 were not wearing soft body armor when they were killed; it seems reasonable to expect that a significant number of these officers’ lives might have been saved had they been wearing body armor. However, estimating the actual number of officers whose lives have been saved because they were wearing soft body armor is extremely difficult. Despite the limitations, the Office of Technology Assessment, using evidence from the military indicating that approximately 43 percent of shots to the torso are fatal, estimates that about 10 officers per year are saved from death by gunfire because they were wearing vests (U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment, 1992b:29).

Fridell and Pate (1995) had the departments responding to their survey provide information regarding the outcome of firearms assaults to the torso against officers who were wearing and officers who were not wearing body armor for the period 1987 through 1992. As indicated in figure 5, among sheriffs’ departments, one-fourth of the deputies who were not wearing body armor when shot in the upper torso died from their wounds. In contrast, less than 1 percent of the deputies who were wearing body armor when they were shot in the upper torso area—the area that soft body armor is designed to protect—were killed. This reflects a death ratio of 25 to 1 for officers not wearing body armor to officers wearing body armor. The ratio of deaths among persons shot in the torso for officers not wearing and wearing body armor was 5 to 2 among municipal agencies and 2 to 1 among state agencies. A similar FBI study (FBI, 1994) combining all types of officers, found that an officer shot in the torso while not wearing body armor was 14 times more likely to die, than an officer shot in the torso who was wearing body armor.

It is worth noting that body armor is divided into two general categories, that suitable for routine full-time wear and that suitable for terrorist threat and tactical use when weight and bulk are less important relative to the probability of danger. The former type can be made concealable and is designed for protection from handgun bullets but not from the higher velocity bullets or edged or pointed weapons such as knives or ice picks. The latter type is not concealable and is designed for protection from high velocity rifle bullets, as well as those fired from pistols. Although both types are commonly called “bulletproof vests,” there is no guarantee that even a bullet which a type of garment is designed to stop will not kill the wearer since much of the body is not covered by the protective panels of a particular type of armor.

Thus, although no police officer has been documented to have been killed by a bullet that pierced armor designed to stop it, the data collected by the FBI indicate that, as shown in table 2, for the period between 1980 and 1994, 26 percent of the officers feloniously killed were wearing protective body armor at the time of the attack (FBI, 1980–1994). Of the officers feloniously killed while wearing body armor between 1985 and 1994, 60 percent suffered gunshot wounds to the head, one-fourth (61 officers) suffered gunshot wounds to the upper torso, just under 10 percent received

![Figure 5 Percent of Firearms Hits Which Were Fatal for Sheriffs Deputies Wearing and Not Wearing Body Armor by Location of Hits](source: FBI, Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1973–1994.)
gunshot wounds below the waist. Eight were intentionally struck by vehicles, 3 were stabbed, 1 was beaten, and 1 was struck on the head. Of the 61 instances wherein officers wearing body armor died from their wounds to the upper torso, in 51 instances the bullets entered areas outside the coverage of the vest (for example, at the side panels, armholes, or neck area) and in 11 instances the bullet penetrated the armor (FBI, 1994). In all of those 11 incidents, the vest was not designed to stop the particular ammunition involved.

Characteristics of the Offender and Their Perspectives of the Incidents

As indicated in table 3, most of the persons identified as the perpetrator of a police killing during the years 1980 through 1994 were between 18 and 29 years of age (53 percent), male (96 percent) and white (54 percent) (FBI, 1980–1994).

Of offenders who perpetrated their killings between 1980 and 1994, almost three-fourths (72 percent) had a prior criminal arrest, just over half had a prior criminal conviction (53 percent), and one-third (38 percent) had a prior arrest for a crime of violence. One-fourth (24 percent) were on parole or probation at the time of the killing.

In 1992, the FBI-UCR published the results of an in-depth study of felonious killings of law enforcement officers to supplement the data collected on an annual basis (FBI, 1992b). The researchers selected 51 incidents of officer deaths, which involved 54 law enforcement officers and 50 offenders, most of which occurred during the period 1975 through 1985. One aspect of this in-depth study consisted of interviews with the offenders regarding their backgrounds and the slayings. From these interviews, the FBI learned that, on average, these offenders committed their first criminal offenses at the age of 12. Just under half indicated they had murdered or attempted to murder someone prior to the slayings of the officers and just under 20 percent indicated that they had previously assaulted an officer or resisted arrest.

Three-fourths of the offenders reported that they carried handguns regularly. The average age at which these persons started carrying guns was 18. One-third of the killers had been shot at some time in their lives. Several who mentioned this, also indicated that they had vowed never to be shot again, and instead, that they would shoot first.

The researchers conducted or accessed files from previously conducted psychological evaluations of the killers. Most of the killers studied were found to have some sort of personality disorder. Encountered most frequently were the antisocial personality and the dependent personality.

In the in-depth FBI interviews, three-fourths of the offenders reported that they were “engaged in drug or alcohol activities” at the time the officers were killed (FBI, 1992b:12). That is, they were either using, buying, or selling drugs or alcohol. Over half of the offenders indicated that the officers they killed were unprepared or surprised during the encounters. However, about half of the killers said that there was nothing that their victim officers could have done to prevent their own deaths. Just under 10 percent indicated that the officers might have acted more “professional” and been prepared, though the researchers point out that “none of these offenders was able to articulate what was meant by being ‘professional’” (FBI, 1992b:13).

Even when specifically asked, none of the offenders indicated that the face of the officer had any effect on his/her decision to kill. Interestingly, however, 7 of the offenders, all males, indicated that they would not have killed the law enforcement officers if the officers had been female.

Accidental Killings

As mentioned earlier, during the period 1980–1994, 1,335 law enforcement officers were killed accidentally while acting in the line of duty, accounting for 40 percent of all law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty during that period. Figure 6 provides information about the number
of officers who were killed accidentally and feloniously between 1973 and 1994. The dotted line in that figure indicates that the number of accidental killings reported to the FBI rose between 1973 and 1975, dropped in 1976, rose consistently and dramatically between 1976 and 1989, and fell back to the level of the late 1970s during the period 1990–1994.

What figure 6 makes clear is the strikingly different trends reported for the two types of killings. While the number of accidental killings increased during the 1970s, reported felonious killings fell. As a result, although there were two to three times as many felonious, as compared to accidental, killings reported in the 1970s, there have been approximately equal numbers of both types since the mid-1980s. The reasons for these differences require further attention before they can be understood. It may simply be, for example, that police departments began systematically reporting felonious killings earlier than they did accidental killings. Or, there may have been systemic changes occurring in the policing world that account for these differences.

As indicated in figure 7, almost one-half of these accidental deaths were due to automobile accidents. Other circumstances included being struck by vehicles (22 percent), aircraft accidents (13 percent), accidental shootings (7 percent), motorcycle accidents (7 percent), and "other" (6 percent), such as deaths from falls or drownings.

Geller and Karales (1981) found that one-fifth (21 percent) of all of the police shootings (on and off duty) in Chicago during the five-year period they studied were accidentally self-inflicted. These incidents involved accidental discharges during "non-combat" handling of weapons and accidental firings during the course of arrest attempts. Eleven percent of all the officers shot in Chicago between 1974 and 1978 were accidentally shot by other officers. Specifically, of these 20 shootings, 16 were accidental gun discharges, two were stray bullets, and two involved mistaking officers for suspects. Fye (1978) found a similar situation in New York City during 1971 through 1975. He states that police in New York "are at least as likely to be killed by themselves, their acquaintances or their colleagues as by their professional clientele" (1978,476).

**Summary**

Policing is a dangerous occupation. Law enforcement officers are feloniously killed while on the job at a rate second only to taxi drivers. The Federal Bureau of Investigation reports that 3,280 law enforcement officers were killed between 1973 and 1994, including 1,945 who were killed feloniously and 1,335 who were killed accidentally. There has been a general decrease, however, in the number of officers feloniously killed, dropping from a high of 134 in 1973 to fewer than 80 per year in the 1990s. There has been an even greater decline in the rate at which officers are feloniously killed.

The rate at which police officers are killed has consistently been highest in the southern states. There is also evidence that police killings are more likely in large cities and in jurisdictions with high levels of violent crime, high rates of gun ownership, and high levels of poverty. The Police of Puerto Rico have consistently had the highest rate of felonious killings compared to other agency types (municipal, county, and state).

From an in-depth analysis of incidents, we learned that most of the slain officers were on vehicle patrol and that half of the officers were slain while intervening in an ongoing crime or otherwise making an arrest, for instance, pursuant to a warrant. Many officers classified by the FBI as being feloniously killed in the line of duty during incidents involving the
crime of robbery, were in situations where they themselves were being victimized. For 4 of every 10 slain officers, their first interaction with the opponent was the lethal attack itself. Two-thirds of the officers were without immediate assistance when they were slain.

Incident characteristics varied by assignment type. For instance, more detectives than any other group were killed at entry, special assignment officers were most likely to be killed indoors, and off-duty officers were more likely than any other group to be killed in commercial establishments. At least one of every five undercover and off-duty officers were slain while intervening in their own robbery victimizations.

Most of the officers killed were white males, with an average of nine years of law enforcement experience. Three-fourths were not wearing body armor. Most of the persons identified as having killed police officers were between 18 and 29 years of age, male, white, and had at least one prior criminal arrest.

Since 1973, according to the FBI, approximately 40 percent of all officers killed in the line of duty were killed accidentally. By far the largest number of these deaths were due to automobile accidents. In the early 1970s, the number of such accidental killings was only about one-third that of felonious killings. While the reported felonious killings decreased, however, the number of reported accidental killings rose. By the mid-1980s, there were approximately as many accidental as felonious killings.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have reported on the research which has been conducted on the deaths of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. Our focus has been primarily on those officers killed feloniously. The purpose of this research is to provide policy makers with the information they need to produce a safer working environment for our law enforcement professionals. In fact, over the years many of the researchers have suggested policy modifications and/or training improvements based on their findings and many of the suggestions have been implemented to some extent within police departments. It is possible that these recommendations have contributed to the decline in the number of officers feloniously killed each year.

One suggestion was to implement special procedures and training as they relate to traffic stops, effective use of "cover," dealing with hostages, searching suspects after arrest, and so forth. Many of the more recent suggestions also advocated enhancing training to promote officer safety. Konstantin (1984), for instance, suggested improved training of police with regard to officer-initiated encounters. He claimed, "officers caught in such situations are inadequately prepared to plan their approaches to the scene, and are instead plunged into the middle of ongoing and very dangerous events" (p. 42). Sherman et al. (1989) suggested that rehearsing each drug raid could reduce the danger to police in drug-related circumstances.

The FBI, too, made a number of training and policy recommendations following their in-depth study of 51 incidents where officers were feloniously killed. The researchers noted that in a significant number of the incidents studied, officers made tactical errors such as approaching improperly a suspect or vehicle, or failing to conduct a thorough search of the suspect for weapons. Increased training was recommended in those areas as well as in the general handling of traffic stops, weapon retention, handcuff use, and teamwork. The FBI also recommended the development of procedures to guide officers who become victims of robbery while off duty and, not surprisingly, recommended the use of body armor by all uniformed field officers.

Continued research and analysis, such as that described in this chapter, are required to enhance the safety of the persons in this country who put their lives on the line each day in their efforts to enforce the law.

Notes

1 The varying quality and consistency of data within categories of information over time explains the use of various reference periods in this article. We attempt, for each category of data, to provide the longest meaningful reference period for which there were quality data reported in consistent categories.

2 It is important to note, in interpreting these rates, that a change in definitions by the UCR in 1983 led to a 123 percent increase in the reported number of officers employed in sheriffs' rural agencies between 1982 and 1983. Part of the reduction in rates must be attributed to this increase.

3 As discussed above, this change must be interpreted in light of the fact that a change in the definition by the UCR of sheriffs' rural agencies occurred between 1982 and 1983.

4 A recent study conducted by Handgun Control, Inc. (1995) claims that "assault weapons and guns sold with high capacity magazines" are involved in 15 percent of the incidents in which officers are killed, though these weapons apparently account for less than 1 percent of the firearms owned by persons in the U.S.

5 We exclude the seven foot-patrol officers from the coverage in this section, as there are too few to allow for meaningful comparisons with the other groups.

References


