This Training Key® highlights some of the actions and activities in which officers are most often feloniously killed or assaulted and provides best practices and procedures for preventing or mitigating these deaths and injuries.

Officer Safety and Violence Against the Police

This Training Key® is organized into brief examinations of individual law enforcement functions and situations that are most often correlated with officer felonious deaths and assaults. Each section provides an overview of the topic and a synopsis of best practices and procedures for preventing or mitigating the risk of death and injury of officers. While these recommended practices and procedures are not new, the increased threat environment over the past several years suggests that these and related professional practices need reinforcement.

This document limits the scope of topics examined to those most frequently resulting in violent death or injury to officers. While death and serious injury occur in nearly every type of law enforcement activity and function, the scope and intent of this document is to highlight the more common situations that can lead to officer injuries and deaths. As a result, topics such as response to civil disturbances, transportation of prisoners, foot pursuits, traffic control, vehicle searches, building searches, and other activities, are not examined, nor are incidents in which specially-trained tactical teams are the typical responders.

Statistical Overview

The FBI reported more than 50,000 officers were feloniously assaulted in 2015, with nearly one-third sustaining injuries. On average, that equates to more than 100 officers assaulted each day in the United States.

A composite of offenders who feloniously killed law enforcement officers over the 10-year period ending in 2015 indicates that these individuals overwhelmingly possessed criminal records, often for violent offenses.

- 49 percent had received probation or parole on a prior criminal charge
- nearly half were known for prior drug possession, sale, or use
- 36 percent were known to be under the influence of drugs, alcohol, or both at the time of the killing
- 80 percent of all offenders had a prior criminal arrest

Ambushes

Ambushes and surprise attacks can occur in a wide variety of situations and circumstances—domestic violence calls, traffic stops, burglaries, robberies, foot pursuits, arrests—even when officers are not actively engaged in responding to calls or self-initiated enforcement actions. In 2016, 21 officers were killed in ambush-style attacks, the highest number in two decades.²

Preventing and protecting against ambushes and surprise attacks. In an effort to increase officer safety and protect against ambushes and surprise attacks, officers should practice and implement the following:

- Maintain vigilance and be aware of people in their surroundings at all times.
- Survey the environment and maintain a state of relaxed alertness with a 360-degree peripheral awareness of potential ambush locations and environmental danger spots, such as secluded doorways, entries, alleys, vehicles, areas behind large objects, dark areas, etc.
• Exercise handgun retention safety—particularly in crowded locations and during foot pursuits, arrests, or physical altercations. Avoid unnecessarily exposing their strong side and ensure that their holster provides an adequate level of security.
• Avoid the tendency to rush toward a danger zone without a plan for defensive and offensive action.
• Assume a defensive position until circumstances can be properly assessed.
• Beware of the “killing zone”—the 10-foot perimeter around the suspect or offender in which many fatal attacks and assaults take place. Many of these occur during foot pursuits, arrests, prisoner transportation, and vehicle stops.
• Engage in “if-then” contingency planning prior to and upon arrival at calls for service and maintain an appropriate level of situational awareness. Pay particular attention to the type, location, or nature of calls that seem unusual or that have the potential for exposure to an enhanced level of danger, such as single officer dispatches or responses involving remote, out-of-the-way, or hard-to-find locations.

Officers and their police vehicles are symbols of authority, which can also make them targets. In traffic, officers should remain alert and should
• not draw up window-to-window with others in traffic, particularly vehicles with dark tinted windows;
• not allow themselves to become boxed in by traffic and curb lanes, but should always allow room for a quick escape;
• be particularly cautious when exiting their vehicles at a domestic call or any other potential crime in progress;
• not lose situational awareness when completing reports, using smartphones and electronic devices, eating, or meeting with other officers;
• park where they and their vehicles are less observable or conspicuous when responding to calls, when possible; and
• be alert to objects and positions that can provide cover when approaching call locations.

In addition, officers should
• ensure that circumstances appear routine before entering convenience stores and related businesses;
• sit with their backs against the wall or in a similar position in restaurants and other establishments where they can see the other customers and the main entrance; and
• practice thinking through potential dangerous or deadly scenarios and determine what they can do to flee, defend, or attack if it becomes necessary.

Motor Vehicle Stops

Motor vehicle stops are one of the most frequently performed activities for many law enforcement officers. As such, there is a tendency among some officers to regard these encounters as routine and, in some cases, to approach them without sufficient caution or regard for the inherent dangers.

Most stops involve police contact with individuals whose identities, background, mental state, and motivations are unknown. Therefore, each vehicle stop should be assessed for potential danger, and officers should err on the side of caution when approaching any motor vehicle. Officers should never hesitate to wait for backup assistance when confronting even a routine traffic stop that appears suspicious or unnecessarily hazardous.

Arrests

Officers must approach every arrest situation with the knowledge that any arrest, regardless of the offense involved, can present an element of danger. In most cases, officers are unaware of the arrestee’s physical capabilities; mental state; or criminal history, if any, during initial contact with a subject. Therefore, officers making arrests must take all reasonable precautions to ensure their own safety.

Officers, particularly those working alone, should not automatically attempt to apply restraints following pursuits or under other dangerous circumstances, but should instead assess the situation and determine whether to contain the suspect until backup arrives. Arrests should be made at a time and place and in a manner that maximizes the probability of success and minimizes the danger to officers and innocent bystanders.

Restraints. All persons taken into custody shall be placed in handcuffs with their hands behind their back and palms facing outward, except as otherwise provided by departmental policy. Other lawful forms of restraint may be used when necessary and reasonably available for the safety of officers, prisoners, and others. Officers should not place arrestees in the four-point restraint unless they are uncontrollable by other means readily available.

Searches. A thorough search of the person arrested must be conducted. A search incident to arrest should include not only the person of the arrestee, but also the areas within his or her reach and control. Protective sweeps of the premises or area where the arrest occurs should also be performed to ensure that no other persons or weapons are present that might represent a danger to the officers or the arrestee.

Managing the arrestee. Officers should not allow victims into close proximity with the arrestee and should prevent bystanders from approaching the arrestee. Arrestees should not be permitted to leave the immediate area of the arrest to acquire personal items or to perform other tasks prior to being transported. In unusual circumstances where such requests are granted, the arrestee should first be searched for
weapons and then be accompanied and closely monitored by the arresting or other officers.

**Executing Warrants**

The service of arrest and search warrants is a hazardous assignment for law enforcement personnel. As such, some departments have come to rely almost exclusively on the use of tactical teams for these operations, while others continue to utilize other available personnel. In either case, planning, preparation, and the use of sound tactics is crucial to ensure officer safety.

Tasks included in preparation for service of a warrant include but are not limited to the following:
- Gathering intelligence on the target site is to include the structure, immediate area around the structure, and surrounding neighborhood.
- Deconflicting with the primary agency that has jurisdiction over the warrant location is to avoid police-on-police incidents.
- Serving high-risk warrants—no-knock entries, nighttime service, or both should be conducted by a tactical team or be supervised by a tactical commander.

In preparation for executing the warrant, all team members must be briefed on such matters as the following:
- The specific items subject to the search and their anticipated location
- Information concerning the structure to be searched and surroundings, to include floor plans where available, mockups, photos, and diagrams of the location
- Suspects and other occupants who might be present at the location—incorporating photos or sketches whenever possible—with emphasis on suspect threat potential, as well as the presence of children, the elderly, animals and pets, or others who might be present
- A complete review of the tactical plan to include the staging area; route of approach; individual assignments for entry, search, management of evidence, custody and handling of seized vehicles; custody of prisoners; and post-execution duties such as securing the location and conducting surveillance on the site for additional suspects
- Personnel, resources, or equipment necessary for gaining entry, for ensuring the safety and security of officers, or for conducting the search
- Contingency plans for encountering hazardous materials, canines, booby traps, fortifications, or related hazards and measures to take in case of injury or accident, to include the nearest location of trauma or emergency care facilities
- Procedures for exiting the location under emergency conditions

**Domestic Violence Calls**

Calls for domestic violence are among the most potentially dangerous for law enforcement, involving dynamic, emotionally charged situations, often compounded by substance or alcohol abuse. Officers should approach all domestic violence calls with caution. Although past knowledge or experience with an offender or specific location should be considered, repeat calls to the same address involving the same individuals may indicate an increase in violence. Each call must be taken seriously to ensure officer, victim, and witness safety. Officers should approach the scene with an understanding that there might be a history of violence in this relationship; this might not be an acute event. Officers should anticipate that any tactic a domestic violence offender uses against an intimate partner might be used against a responding officer, including but not limited to isolation, assault, coercion, threats, manipulation, and intimidation. If strangulation, often referred to as “choking,” is reported, officers should be aware that this lethal level of force is a high indicator of potential violence toward responding law enforcement. Communications and dispatch should gather as many details as possible from the caller to relay to responding officers. The administration of a lethality or danger assessment tool should be considered to gain further insight and deeper understanding of the context of the situation in order to increase the safety of all the individuals involved.

**Know before you go.** Officers should seek to obtain as much information as possible before arriving on scene such as, but not limited to the following:
- Call history at the given address and suspect information
- Weapons on scene and access to weapons
- Previous arrests at a given address and of the suspect
- Whether any party is under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Other persons involved or witnesses at the scene, including children
- Existing or past protection orders or order violations
- Extent of injuries of individuals on scene
- Previous threats or violence toward responding officers and law enforcement
- Information from previous lethality or danger assessments, if known
- Any active warrants for individuals involved
**Call response and investigation.** When responding to calls for domestic violence the following should occur:

- A minimum of two officers should be dispatched whenever possible and the call should be assigned a priority response.
- Officers should routinely assess for evidence of other crimes including sexual assault, strangulation, stalking, and when appropriate, child, elder, and animal abuse as these crimes often co-occur within the context of domestic violence. Additionally, crimes such as but not limited to, weapons violations, witness intimidation, threats, property crimes, violations of court orders, and gang violence often go undetected.
- Officers should make an arrest when probable cause exists and when arrest is authorized by law, instead of using dispute mediation, separation, or other law enforcement intervention techniques.

**Responding to Persons Affected by Mental Illness or in Emotional Crisis**

Law enforcement agencies are increasingly required to respond to and intervene on behalf of people who are affected by mental illness or in emotional crisis. Officers who face these complex situations must be as fully prepared as possible so that they can respond in ways that ensure their safety, the public’s safety, and the safety of the person in crisis. Most response calls involving persons affected by mental illness are not the result of criminal behavior, but of behavior associated with emotional crisis. Officers who understand the symptomatic behavior of persons who are affected by some form of mental illness or emotional crisis are in a better position to formulate appropriate strategies for gaining the individual’s compliance, determining whether medical or other assistance is required, assessing whether detention is appropriate, or whether the suspect is in a suitable state to be questioned.9

De-escalation techniques are often used by officers responding to many types of calls, particularly those involving a person affected by mental illness, individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, or those under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Common de-escalation strategies and considerations follow."10

**Speak calmly.** Using a stern, loud command tone to gain compliance will often have either no effect or a negative effect on a person, particularly those affected by mental illness or intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Responders should speak in low, or nonthreatening tones, and use positive statements such as “I want to help you” intended to aid in the process of calming the subject.

**Use nonthreatening body language, soft gestures, and avoid abrupt movement or actions.** In addition, officers should attempt to keep their hands at their sides and visible to the person.

**When reasonable and practical, avoid touching the person.** Some individuals might react to touch by pulling away or slapping the officer’s hand. Officers should recognize that the reaction is not a form of resisting arrest, but a reaction to the sensation of being touched.

**Maintain a safe distance.** Standing too close to an angry or agitated person might cause them to feel threatened. Officers should provide the person with a zone of comfort that will also serve as a buffer for officer safety.

**Be prepared for a potentially long encounter.** Dealings with such individuals should not be rushed unless there is an emergency situation. De-escalation of the situation using calming communication techniques can take time, and officers should inform their communications personnel or supervisor or both that this might be the case if circumstances dictate.

While these tactics are recommended steps, officers must continually reassess each situation with the understanding that force may be necessary if de-escalation techniques are not effective. It should be stressed that de-escalation is not appropriate in every situation and officers are not required to use these techniques in every instance.

**Endnotes**

1 FBI, Criminal Justice Information Services Division, Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 2015, table 121: Law Enforcement Officers Assaulted and Injured with Firearms or Knives/Other Cutting Instruments: Status of Known Offender at Time of Incident, 2011–2015; and table 122: Law Enforcement Officers Assaulted and Injured with Firearms or Knives/Other Cutting Instruments: Criminal History of Known Offender, 2011–2015.


7 The IACP offers a host of Violence Against Women resources, including Model Policy and Concepts and Issues Paper on Domestic Violence, National Law Enforcement Leadership Initiative on Violence Against Women, Trauma Informed Sexual Assault Investigation Training, and more.


9 IACP Concepts and Issues Paper on Responding to Persons Affected by Mental Illness or In Crisis, 2014, 2.

questions

The following questions are based on material in this Training Key®. Select the one best answer for each question.

1. In regard to ambushes and surprise attacks, which of the following is false?
   (a) Only SWAT and other specialized teams should be concerned about ambushes and surprise attacks.
   (b) The time of arrival and the first minute or two thereafter are particularly lethal periods for law enforcement, regardless of the category of call to which an officer responds.
   (c) Ambushes and surprise attacks can take place in a wide variety of situations and circumstances, even when officers are not actively engaged in response to calls.
   (d) Vehicle stops and domestic violence calls for service are considered especially high-risk situations for ambush attacks.

2. Which of the following is true?
   (a) Officers should be prepared on all types of calls for the possibility that an unprovoked attack might occur.
   (b) Calls of domestic violence are among the most potentially dangerous for law enforcement.
   (c) The majority of offenders who feloniously kill law enforcement officers have prior criminal records.
   (d) All of the above.

3. Which of the following is not an example of a procedure that should be followed to increase officer safety?
   (a) Prior to executing a warrant, assess the capabilities and backgrounds of suspects to include criminal records, history of weapons usage, and potential for violence.
   (b) Wait for backup assistance when confronting even a routine traffic stop that appears suspicious or unnecessarily hazardous.
   (c) To de-escalate a potentially volatile situation, speak calmly and use nonthreatening body language, soft gestures, and avoid abrupt movement or actions.
   (d) Routinely respond to domestic violence calls using only one uniformed officer.

answers

1. (a) Ambushes and surprise attacks can occur at any time or place.
2. (d) All of the above.
3. (d) Unless exigent circumstances exist, response to domestic violence calls should be conducted by at least two officers.