Between 1996 and 2009, 771 law enforcement officers were murdered in the line of duty.\(^1\) Law enforcement is a profession fraught with danger. The perils of policing are a day-to-day reality for officers and a topic that deeply concerns law enforcement executives. Reducing the risk faced by officers was a primary focus during the recent tenure of the IACP Immediate Past President Michael J. Carroll and is an issue that remains a priority for the IACP. While all policing activities involve a degree of risk, particular attention has been paid to the dangers of domestic violence calls for service.

**Domestic Violence Danger: Myth or Reality?**

Even with ongoing attention to the dangers of policing, there is some confusion regarding precisely what factors are associated with risk to officers. This lack of clarity has extended to domestic violence calls for service and has resulted in the “DV Danger” myth. For example, it is widely believed that domestic violence calls pose the greatest threat to police officers’ safety and that law enforcement officers are most likely to be injured or killed responding to this category of call. While the fact remains that officers are seriously injured and killed responding to domestic violence calls, the bulk of research does not actually support this perspective. Rather, findings typically indicate that robberies and burglaries are the most dangerous calls for law enforcement officers and that these calls pose a far greater risk for assault and death than do domestic violence calls for service.\(^2\)

One factor that contributes to the DV Danger myth has been the misinterpretation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI’s) Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) data. While LEOKA remains the primary source for information related to the assault and murder of law enforcement officers, the “disturbance category” has often been misunderstood. For example, many researchers and practitioners believed that this category referred to domestic disturbances only. While domestic violence disturbances are captured in these data, this category was intended to reflect a wide variety of disturbances. As such, DV disturbances are combined with many other types of disturbances, including bar fights, gang matters, and persons brandishing weapons. Given these misunderstandings, it is not surprising that there has been
some confusion regarding the rate of officer fatalities during domestic violence calls for service.\(^3\) In addition to misunderstandings related to LEOKA, data related to domestic violence calls for service typically say nothing about the degree of danger or risk associated with these calls. Determining the level of risk in particular calls for service requires establishing the overall rate of occurrence for that category. This allows for an examination of the proportion of calls that result in injury or death to officers. For example, discovering that 25 calls out of 75 calls for service result in officer injury paints a starkly different picture than knowing that 25 of 75,000 calls for service result in injury.

**Characteristics of Deadly Domestic Violence Calls for Service**

Given this general lack of clarity, and in an effort to better understand lethal domestic violence calls for service, all available cases of law enforcement officers murdered between 1996 and 2009 were reviewed (n=685).\(^4\) Published LEOKA narratives detailing the circumstances of police killings were coded for content, and incidents in which officers were slain on domestic violence calls for service were identified. Incidents classified as domestic violence calls for service were restricted to only those events that involved violence between current or former intimate partners. While this definition is more restrictive than that found in most criminal codes and in much of the policing literature, it provides for a more homogeneous category of incidents. Additionally, because domestic violence risk assessment is typically focused on risk for reassault and lethality between current or former intimate partners, this classification was considered to have the greatest relevance to existing risk assessment efforts.\(^5\)

During the 14-year time period under review, 771 law enforcement officers were murdered in the line of duty, with an average of about 54 officers slain each year. Of the officers feloniously killed during this period, 14 percent (n=106) were murdered responding to a domestic violence call for service. The overwhelming majority (97 percent) of those officers killed on domestic violence calls were murdered with firearms, and 7 percent were disarmed and killed with their own weapons. Clearly, domestic violence calls for service can pose lethal risks to officers. Yet when evaluated in the current study in the context of all law enforcement response categories, domestic violence calls for service account for less than 15 percent of all incidents in which an officer is murdered.

**Murdered on Domestic Violence Calls for Service: Circumstances of Officer Deaths (1996-2009)**

During the study period, 89 lethal domestic violence incidents resulted in the deaths of 106 officers, with several incidents resulting in the deaths of 2 or more officers. In the majority of
events, domestic violence suspects murdered officers in ambushes and unprovoked attacks. In fact, 51 percent of all lethal domestic violence incidents involved officers slain without any warning, before they had made contact with the domestic violence suspect and before officers perceived any immediate threat to their safety.

In contrast to attacks that occur out of nowhere, a substantial subset of victim officers was murdered after having made some form of contact with the domestic violence suspect. Specifically, 40 percent of all lethal domestic violence calls for service involved officers slain subsequent to interacting with a domestic violence suspect.

Finally, in just less than 10 percent of total lethal domestic violence calls for service, victim officers were murdered in the context of a tactical situation. Almost 20 percent of lethal domestic violence calls for service involved a barricaded or hostage-taking subject. In those incidents where a tactical response was involved, officers were slain most frequently while attempting to make entry and gain access to a barricaded domestic violence suspect.

**Ambushes and Unprovoked Attacks**

As indicated, more than half of all lethal domestic violence calls for service involve the murder of victim officers in ambushes or unprovoked attacks (n=45). In this subset of incidents, officers made no contact with domestic violence suspects prior to being killed by them. While disturbing, this finding is not unique. Research has documented the frequency with which officers are killed without warning and without any knowledge that they are in danger. In fact, in the majority of all felonious killings, the first interaction that the officer and suspect have is the suspect’s lethal attack on the officer.⁶

**Ambushes and Unprovoked Attacks: Circumstances at Scene**

Moreover, it appears that the time of law enforcement’s 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. Likewise, on lethal domestic violence calls for service, more than three-quarters of ambushes and unprovoked attacks on victim officers occurred within the first minutes of arrival on the scene, prior to the officer initiating any investigatory activity or direct inquiry into the incident.

Specifically, 13 percent of ambushes occurred immediately upon arrival; these officers were slain either before having the chance to exit or directly upon exiting their vehicles (but before having a chance to approach the scene or identify the suspect). Similarly, 27 percent of ambushes occurred while officers were making their approaches (almost always to a residence); and 36 percent of attacks occurred immediately upon the officer’s entering a residence.
Contact with Suspects
Forty percent (n=36) of all domestic violence calls for service are characterized by lethal violence occurring after some form of interaction between the victim officer and suspect. In this category of incidents, the vast majority of victim officers are killed when their face-to-face interaction with the domestic violence suspect escalates into the suspect’s lethal attack against them (versus the attack following a pursuit—25 percent—or the attack occurring subsequent to the suspect being taken into custody—8 percent).

Incidents where face-to-face contacts precipitate fatal attacks tend to follow one of three patterns:

1. The domestic violence suspect’s interaction with the officer escalates almost immediately and without warning. Based on the initial interaction in these cases, there is little indication that the suspect will resort to lethal violence against the officer. This is similar to an ambush in that it is a surprise attack, but it is preceded by face-to-face contact.

2. Victim officers begin their interaction with a domestic violence suspect with a substantially clearer awareness of the risks inherent in the encounter. In these cases, suspects are wielding firearms from the outset of their communication with the victim officer. While these interactions also may shift very rapidly, the transition is one from recognizable threat to lethal attack. Unlike the first subset, these victim officers have significantly more forewarning that their contact with the domestic violence suspect has the real potential to turn deadly.

3. There is a physical struggle between the suspect and officer. In these incidents, officers were physically overpowered by a suspect and in the process were frequently disarmed; in fact, this subset of officers was most likely to be murdered with their own weapons.

Killing Events
Almost one third of all deadly domestic violence calls for service (n=25) were exceptionally lethal events. Here, the murder of an officer occurred in the context of a larger killing event by the domestic violence suspect. In the majority of these incidents, the victim officer came into contact with and was killed by the suspect subsequent to the suspect having murdered the suspect’s partner and/or children. In the remaining incidents, this situation was reversed. In these cases,
the law enforcement contact, including the murder of the officer, immediately preceded the suspect’s murder of a partner and/or children. Killing events were extremely deadly, averaging almost three deaths per incident, and frequently included the suspect’s death. Twenty-five killing events resulted in the death of twenty-nine officers, two fire fighters who were present as first responders, and nineteen women and children. This last group of individuals can only be characterized as prototypical domestic homicide victims. They included twelve intimate partners, one ex-partner, and six young children. In addition to the fifty victims murdered by killing event suspects, there were an additional twenty-seven individuals that suspects attempted to murder but who ultimately survived the events. Despite their brutality, killing events are not necessarily unique, particularly in the context of domestic homicide and familicide. Less common than homicide or murder-suicide, killing events exist as consistent but infrequently studied domestic violence–related phenomena.

Recommendations
When the absence of relevant information and the persistence of myth are combined, the results can be quite misleading. It is evident that domestic violence calls for service can be lethal for responding police officers. Nevertheless, it is also the case that when examined in context, domestic violence calls for service account for a relatively small proportion of the overall rate of police officers murders. When the characteristics of lethal domestic violence calls for service are evaluated, results are largely in keeping with that found in the general policing literature: the majority of officers are murdered in ambushes and unprovoked attacks and in their first moments on the scene. Officers are also frequently murdered during the course of an escalating interaction with a suspect. While many suspects—already armed with a deadly weapon—come to confrontations with law enforcement, many others succeed in disarming the victim officer. Finally, a third of lethal domestic violence calls for service occur in the context of a larger domestic violence killing event. Here, the victim officer appears to be a casualty in the suspect’s pursuit of his primary goal: the murder of an intimate partner.

The results reported herein help to enhance the understanding of domestic violence calls for service. Nevertheless, these come with caveats. For example, official data available on police killings are simply insufficient to researchers’ tasks. Among other things, they lack the level of detail necessary to adequately understand the specifics of situations and the totality of events. With respect to deadly domestic violence calls for service, whether access to additional data would have changed the nature of the current findings is unknown. In a related vein, the lack of relevant empirical data means that the level of risk associated with domestic violence calls for service cannot be established at this time. Likewise, the degree of risk that domestic violence calls for service pose compared to other categories of calls remains unanswered as well. In light of these issues, it is critical that law enforcement executives both support and participate in research efforts aimed at redressing existing gaps in knowledge. The ability to clearly articulate those factors related to officer safety and risk has practicable consequences: officers simply cannot be kept safe if there is not a clear understanding of why, how, and under what circumstances they face the greatest peril.
Policies Must Prioritize Safety

The centrality of the law enforcement executive in establishing, promoting, and maintaining a culture of safety cannot be overstated. Policy remains the primary vehicle through which law enforcement executives articulate and codify departmental values and priorities. As such, policies should consistently reflect and prioritize officer safety principles. Additionally, written policies should be specific and binding, as this has been shown to be an essential factor in preventing line of duty deaths. Similarly, procedures, including the descriptions of tasks, practices, and directives on performance, must emphasize officer safety in decision-making practices across all categories of activity. In sum, it is essential that a culture of safety be fostered across the organization through policies, procedures, and “supervision for increased safety.” As has been documented here and elsewhere, the costs for not doing so are simply too great.

Risk Management for Routine Activities

Despite an investment in officer safety, general risk assessment and management methods have been underutilized in many aspects of policing. When they are used, these practices are largely employed in the service of identifying and lessening risk to members of the public—those individuals that law enforcement has sworn to protect and serve. On the other hand, these methodologies are rarely used in the service of protecting police officers themselves, nor do individual officers regularly use risk management principles in the performance of their day-to-day activities. Perhaps the most notable exception to this is the careful planning that typifies high-risk (and largely tactical) operations. Nevertheless, risk management methods are applied only to a small subset of law enforcement activities, and it is precisely the absence of this approach to so-called routine activities that places officers in significant danger.

There are likely a number of reasons why risk management approaches are rarely incorporated into many of the repetitive and seemingly mundane tasks associated with policing. These may include a lack of training, complacency, a false sense of invulnerability, or what might be labeled “danger fatigue” (the physical and psychological toll taken when one is constantly vigilant for signs of lethal danger). Nevertheless, it is precisely when officers are engaged in routine activities that they are most frequently murdered. Maintaining situational awareness, control of scenes and persons, and remaining vigilant during approach are fundamental survival practices.

Incorporating risk management practices into routine policing activities requires a cautious, thorough, and systematic approach to every situation. It also necessitates that basic practices are guided by the principle “Don’t assume that what you don’t know can’t hurt you.” It is all too evident that routine activities can hurt officers; what we must remember, however, is that it also can kill them.

Notes:


2 For example, see Joel Garner and Elizabeth Clemmer, “Danger to Police in Domestic Disturbances—A New Look,” Research in Brief (November 1986): 1–9; Lorie A. Fridell and Antony

3 For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Garner and Clemmer, “Danger to Police in Domestic Disturbances.”

4 Of the 771 officers killed during the period under review, 685 of these cases had published narratives detailing the circumstances of the officer’s death. Some narratives were not available because of a variety of circumstances, including pending litigation, late submission of information by the victim officer’s department, and court orders.


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