

As police deaths mount, what can you do now to stay safe?

It's a bloody year for cops so far.

At the end of June, total duty-related fatalities in the U.S. are up 8% compared to the same time last year, according to preliminary figures from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. Officer murders from gunfire are spiking an alarming 38% increase. If trends hold through the second half of the year, we could see the worst annual toll in a decade.

What behavioral factors may be influencing this disturbing surge--and, specifically, what can you do *right now* to best avoid becoming one of the grim statistics?

We consulted 3 prominent trainers with Force Science credentials for their recommendations. Here's their compendium of proactive safety measures you can follow immediately, at no cost, and with no complicated training to protect yourself and fellow officers. It's a no-excuses list, highly appropriate for roll-call reinforcement.

What do you think? If you have additional points from your own experience or observation you'd like to share, we'd like to hear them at: editor@forcescience.org.

1. DR. BILL LEWINSKI, executive director of the Force Science Institute and the foremost researcher of the human dynamics involved in deadly encounters.

"From an overview of shootings this year, it's possible to identify at least some fundamental elements of officer safety that officers have disregarded, resulting in their being caught by surprise in untenable positions by offenders who wanted to kill them," Lewinski notes.

"You don't need to be paranoid to survive on the street, but you do need to build certain critical basics of caution into your repertoire that you simply do not deviate from in any of your contacts." Among them:

- **Respect the speed of attack.** "The average suspect can present a gun--from a pocket, from a waistband, from a vehicle console, from his side, from under his body--and fire in any direction in just one-quarter of a second. That's faster than the average officer can shoot, even if his weapon is on target, his finger is on the trigger, and he has already decided to fire. That's because of the time it takes to mentally process and impel a reaction to the suspect's action."

He cites cases earlier this year in which suspects in *less than a second* were able to gun officers down, and in one confrontation 2 officers standing in close proximity apparently were shot in that brief flicker of time before either could respond.

"Remembering the potential lightning speed of an attack will affect all your behavior in approaching and conducting a suspect contact, from your use of cover to your tactical positioning to your verbal commands to your state of alertness," Lewinski says.

"It doesn't matter on a vehicle stop whether you approach from the driver's side or the passenger side if you position yourself directly in front of the driver's or passenger's window and make yourself an easy target. You can be shot there before you can blink.

"Likewise, if you don't monitor and control a suspect's hands from the outset, you're only worsening your reactive disadvantage."

- **'Read' to live.** Force Science experiments in Northern Ireland have shown that officers who are best able to defend themselves generally are those who can accurately "read" suspect behavior that preshadows an attack. [Click here to read a *Force Science News* report on this study.] "The most skilled officers, using their training and experience, tend to know where, when, and how a threat situation is going to unfold," Lewinski says.

"If you're attentive to physical movements and verbal cues, which are sometimes subtle, you often can detect and then defuse or suppress potential threats before you get caught behind the reactionary curve," Lewinski says. "This requires continual assessment of your subjects and your surroundings,

evaluating what they're doing, what they're saying, where and how they're moving, and what's going on around you.

"Before you can assert or maintain control, you have to be *aware* and not in a state of denial or inattention. Some officers, unfortunately, do not even acknowledge that something as blatant as an armed subject refusing to comply with commands is a strong threat cue."

- **Avoid verbal traps.** "We've all seen dash-cam videos of officers standing in the open and repeatedly yelling commands to '*Drop the gun!*' at noncompliant, threatening offenders," Lewinski says. "The officers are not using the deadly force that they're legally justified in using, and they're not doing anything else--like moving to cover or withdrawing--to gain a tactical advantage."

"These officers get caught in a repetitive verbal loop because they perceive they are losing control of the situation and they can't figure a way out. They are tactically frozen."

"You can't think creatively at the moment you're confronted with the possibility of your own death, especially if you've never been in a similar situation before. Your preparation must come before the event. And that means experiencing an abundance of realistic, force-on-force scenarios, performed at gunfight speed, even if this training has to be done on your personal time. This will embed options you can call forth when you need them so you don't just keep yelling at an offender who isn't listening."

- **Train your mind.** One low-cost, easily conducted training technique for overcoming tactical freezing that Lewinski likes is hooded drills--if they're done correctly. "The idea isn't to immediately bombard you with such intense and challenging stimuli that you're overwhelmed with fear, and then call it 'stress inoculation.'"

"The most productive approach is to start with scenarios that are less urgent, where there's some time for you to practice reading a situation, evaluating suspect behavior, and then making tactical decisions. As you get more skilled, your training partners can push the urgency, gradually introducing more intensity."

"The focus should not be merely inflicting stress. It should be on your *mind*, on getting you adept at quickly evaluating situations, detecting potential threats or not, and employing appropriate options. This takes many exposures on a continuing basis, not just 1 or 2 exercises in the course of a year."

2. BRIAN WILLIS, a former Calgary (Alberta) officer and trainer, president of Winning Mind Training, and a certified Force Science Analyst. Willis is a leader in the campaign initiated by Law Officer Magazine to reduce the yearly toll of LEO deaths in this country to below 100, a goal that has not been achieved since 1944.

The Below 100 drive focuses on 5 basic tenets, simple concepts that Willis refers to as the "low-hanging fruit" of law enforcement behavior modification--"things any officer can easily make a part of his or her daily performance that will have a profound cumulative effect."

- **Wear your seat belt.** "Over the years, we've used officer safety as an excuse not to strap in for fear of being trapped in an ambush," Willis says. "In reality, very few if any officers have been murdered because they couldn't release their seat belt quickly."

"Yet it's confirmed that nearly 40% of officers killed in vehicle collisions were not wearing their belts, and many of those lost lives undoubtedly could have been saved. Risk manager Gordon Graham, formerly of the California Highway Patrol, estimates that faithful seat belt use could cut line of duty deaths by at least 30 immediately."

- **Wear your vest.** "More than 3,500 officers' lives have been saved by soft body armor," Willis says, "yet about half of all active officers don't consistently wear their vests. Even in agencies with mandatory-wear policies, the policy is often ignored and unenforced." One study reports that the vast majority of agencies--90%--do not regularly inspect officers' vests to ensure that they fit and are properly maintained, conveying an attitude of indifference."

"We need to start calling out officers who show up at roll call without their vests and insist that they get them on before they go out on the street," Willis believes.

- **Watch your speed.** Officer fatalities from traffic mishaps are actually down this year compared to last, but many cops still are "driving way too fast to calls that are minor in nature," Willis says. "Four in 10 fatal crashes of law enforcement vehicles involve a single vehicle striking a fixed object off the roadway, usually an indication of driving too fast or too fast for conditions and losing control."

Sometimes it's not the driver who's the victim. He cites one case in which an officer was driving 100 mph in a 45-mph zone in response to a shoplifting call. He struck a fellow officer who was on foot picking up flares from a previous collision and killed him, before slamming into a telephone pole. That driver officer is now serving a 17-year term in prison.

● **Decide 'What's Important Now'**. This is Willis's signature concept. "It involves continually weighing your options and determining what best advances your goals," he explains.

"Do you rush in to make an arrest, or wait until you have backup? Do you end a pursuit when the risk is too great, or stay in it regardless? Do you engage in a foot chase or a foot-surveillance? Do you talk or do you fight? Do you close the gap and use empty-hand control, or maintain distance and use an intermediate weapon. Do you shoot or not shoot?"

"Deciding what's most important right now, given the circumstances you're facing, allows you to prioritize your behavior. It affects every aspect of your life, on duty or off."

● **Remember: Complacency kills.** "Reflect on the way you're doing the job," Willis suggests. "What has become 'routine' in your practices? What does complacency look like in your life, and how can you change your mind-set so you can be on active patrol at all times? This is vital self-assessment that needs to occur on a regular basis."

Also, he urges, "watch for signs of complacency in other officers and bring it to their attention. We need to care enough about each other to challenge dangerous behavior rather than let it pass. Ignored behavior becomes condoned behavior, and the cost too often is tallied in officers' lives."

[Willis, Law Officer editor Dale Stockton, and Capt. Travis Yates of the Tulsa (OK) PD will present a 4-hour train-the-trainer program on the Below 100 initiative on July 14 at the Charlotte (NC) Police & Fire Training Academy. The instruction, with abundant take-home training materials, is free of charge. Phone (704) 432-1603 for information.]

3. BOB "COACH" LINDSEY, a certified Force Science Analyst, retired colonel from the Jefferson Parish (LA) SO, and creator of the popular training course, "Mental Preparation for Winning & Surviving on Duty and Off-Duty."

In Lindsey's view, reducing officer fatalities boils down to 1 simple question: Are you willing?

"Today," he says, "we have the best trained, best equipped officers in history. Every one of them *can* keep a seat belt buckled while their car is in motion, *can* wear a protective vest even if it's uncomfortable, *can* be alert for pre-attack cues that usually precede violent acts, *can* intervene to correct a fellow officer's dangerous tactical errors...but there's a critical difference between ability and *willingness*."

"We have a professional obligation to be willing, a personal responsibility to be our own best bodyguard. We are compelled to have better training and stronger conviction than the armed adversary we confront. If that adversary finds us unsure, not prepared to react, hesitant but he is willing to kill without hesitation, who's going to win?"

"You won't have time in a life-threatening situation to decide if you are willing. You must do that beforehand and repeatedly confirm your determination through self-talk, visualization, pre-planning, and the mastery of tactical options as part of your preparation for combat."

"Most officers, God willing, will never meet lethal competition. But we all must stand ready and *willing* when that moment does come to address and stop the threat and to return home safely to our loved ones at the end of shift."

