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Body Armor in the Law Enforcement Community

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ABSTRACT

Most Law Enforcement officers from across the United States have to make a very important decision on a daily basis. This decision is whether or not to wear body armor on that particular day. Some officers are willing to take a "chance" by not wearing their body armor. Factors that contribute to this decision are heat build up, comfort / wearability, freedom of movement, weight, concealability, and then the bullet proof attitude. Some officers think that they are invincible and that nothing is going to happen to them. They think that as long as they have the armor with them, they can stop and put it on prior to getting into a deadly force situation. This is a terrible mindset and officers should realize that any situation could be a deadly situation. Officers should wear body armor when performing law enforcement duties.

The purpose of this project is to examine facts regarding body armor, determine the effectiveness of body armor, and hopefully help save officers lives. This will be accomplished by presenting facts about the amount of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty over the past several years that were not wearing body armor. Additionally presented, will be the facts regarding the amount of agencies that have mandatory, optional, and no policy's regarding body armor. Finally, a real life experience will elaborate how an Allen Police Officer's life was "saved" due to the fact that he made the right decision to wear his body armor.

The findings show that even though law enforcement agencies are not requiring officers to wear their vest, it appears that locally and nationally, officers are making the right choice and wearing their vest. The bottom line is that body armor can and does save the lives of many police officers every year.

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INTRODUCTION

While studying the body armor in the law enforcement community, we must look at several factors. One factor is: “Are officers wearing body armor?” The second factor is: “Does wearing body armor helps save lives?” The third factor would be: “Do law enforcement agencies require law enforcement officers to wear body armor?”

Police Officers are issued many items to help protect their lives. One of the most important items is body armor. On a daily basis across the nation, officers confront individuals who intend to cause harm to the police officer in order to remain free. One of the main threats to police officers is handguns (U.S. Department of Justice, 2004). Body armor provides protection to some of the most vital organs of the human body; therefore, by wearing body armor some of the threats are eliminated.

In 1987, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and DuPont formed a partnership known as the IACP/DuPont Kevlar Survivors Club. Currently there are 2,822 members in the DuPont Kevlar Survivors Club (IACP, 2004). The Kevlar Survivors Club includes officers that were assaulted with blunt trauma (fist, clubs, auto steering wheel columns), knives and edged weapons (slashing not stabbing), and firearms (Bullet Proof ME Body Armor, 2004).

All law enforcement agencies should implement a policy or general order that mandates law enforcement officers to wear body armor. Implementation of this policy or general order can reduce an agency’s liability in the event a police officer is killed in the line of duty. The purpose of the research paper is to show the need for the law enforcement community to wear body armor.

The intended method of inquiry includes a review of published materials along with personal experience and personal interview. The anticipated findings are that the death rates will decrease, and liability on the department could decrease with mandated use of body armor. The law enforcement community will benefit from this research through becoming aware of the positives of mandated use of body armor. The families and communities benefit in having the life of an officer saved through the use of body armor in more ways than financially. No amount of money can bring back a fallen officer.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When looking body armor in the law enforcement community, a first look at how body armor works is paramount. Body armor is designed to stop a bullet by catching it in a "web" of very strong fibers. As the bullet hits the vest the fibers absorb the impact energy causing the bullet to mushroom. The energy is then caught in multiple layers of fibers until the bullet is finally stopped and there is no more energy left in the bullet.

Body armor or bullet resistant vest has been available for law enforcement since the early 1970's. The first maker of the bullet resistant fiber, Kevlar, was DuPont. In 1988, DuPont introduced the second generation of Kevlar known as Kevlar 129. In 1995 DuPont introduced a fiber which protects officers from puncture type threats (A History of Body Armor-Bullet Proof Vest, 2002).

As of February 2001 body armor has a perfect safety record. Soft body armor has never been defeated by a bullet that it was rated to stop. Body armor is a counter measure that will assist in the chances of a police officer surviving a gunfight. FBI data shows that 40 % of police officers killed felonious in the line of duty could have been prevented by the use of body armor (Sanow, 2001).

Body armor can protect against many threats. Some of the threats that officers face on a daily basis include blunt trauma, (fist, clubs and auto steering wheels), knife/edged weapon attacks, (slashing), and firearms. The level of armor that is purchased will dictate the protection from firearms (A History of Body Armor-Bullet Proof Vest, 2002).

Some of the practical considerations when wearing body armor are the heat build-up, comfort / wearability, freedom of movement, weight, and concealability. The heat build-up is considered the number one problem for armor users. During the summer months vests are very uncomfortable and cause the officer to sweat a considerable amount. Next, the comfort and wearability is a factor because if the officer is not comfortable wearing the vest, he will not wear it. The freedom of movement is also a factor because if the officer feels confined in the vest and cannot move when required, the vest can become more of a liability. The weight of the vest is a factor because with additional weight the officers fatigue level could possibly be affected. The last factor would be the concealability. If an armed criminal notices the body armor, they can easily move their point of aim to another place on the body which is not protected and possibly fire a fatal wound to the unprotected area (Bullet Proof Me Body Armor, 2002).

The first recorded police officer death was recorded in 1794. Since 1794, there have been more than 14,000 law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. Disturbing trends began to arise through the 20th century as the number of deaths continued to increase steadily. This disturbing trend led to a partnership between the federal government and private sector as they began to collaborate on this safety issue. Their effort lead to the design of a soft body armor that would ultimately save more lives (Law Enforcement Facts, 1999).

Federal Bureau of Investigation data in 2001 shows that in the year 2000 there were fifty-one officers killed feloniously in the line of duty. Of the fifty-one officers killed thirty of them

were not wearing body armor. Additionally eighty-three officers were killed accidentally in the performance of their duties (Law Enforcement Officers Killed in the Line of Duty, 2001). FBI data from 2002 shows that in the year 2001 there were one hundred and forty officers killed feloniously in the line of duty of which seventy-one were killed in the September 11 terrorist attacks. Of the remaining sixty-nine officers killed, thirty-nine were not wearing body armor. Additionally seventy-seven officers were killed accidentally in the performance in their duties (Law Enforcement Officers Killed in the Line of Duty, 2001). Also, FBI data from 2003 shows that in the year 2002 there were fifty-six officers killed feloniously in the line of duty. Of the fifty-six officers killed twenty-one of them were not wearing body armor. Additionally seventy-six were killed accidentally in the performance of their duties (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Federal Bureau of Investigation data in 2004 shows that in the year 2003 there were fifty-two officers killed feloniously in the line of duty. Of the fifty-two officers killed seventeen of them were not wearing body armor. Additionally eighty-two officers were killed accidentally in the performance of their duties (U.S. Department of Justice, 2004).

No research or data collected takes the stand that wearing body armor is unnecessary. In fact, the research overwhelmingly supports the use of body armor for law enforcement officers.

METHODOLOGY

The most important question is are officers presented with the overwhelming factual information that lives are saved by wearing body armor. Even though officers should be allowed to make the decision on body armor themselves, having these facts presented will allow them to make a more informed rational decision on the effectiveness of body armor.

A personal experience provided on September 8, 2004, at the Regional Police Academy in Arlington, Texas, about critical incident survival led to a discussion about the use of body

armor. If all officers are given the facts related to body armor, then they will choose to wear the body armor. The method of inquiry includes reviewing the latest findings on body armor, personal experiences, and survey of police officers. On February 13, 1993, an Allen Police Officer was shot multiple times during a traffic stop. The officer stopped the vehicle for speeding. After a routine computer check the officer received information that the driver, and only occupant in the vehicle, was possibly wanted for a misdemeanor traffic warrant out of Dallas Police Department. The communication technician then contacted Dallas Police Department in an attempt to confirm the warrant. After several minutes the officer along with a back-up officer went back to contact the driver of the vehicle in an attempt to find out if he knew why the warrant was issued for his arrest. The Allen officer contacted the driver and asked him to step out of the vehicle and over next to the curb. As the driver exited the vehicle, he produced a handgun from his waistband. The gun was concealed by a light weight jacket that the driver of the vehicle was wearing. The driver began firing at the Allen officer. The officer was shot a total five times at a distance of less than five feet with a Glock 10mm handgun. One of the bullets struck the trauma plate in the center of the vest, and the second struck in the top right portion of the vest. Two of the bullets struck the officer in his hands, and the last bullet struck the officer just below the vest in the abdomen causing severe internal injuries. The trauma plate that was struck by the bullet did exactly what it was designed to do by disbursing the energy of the bullet across the chest area preventing any type of blunt trauma. The other bullet that struck the top portion of the body armor was entwined in the Kevlar which stopped the bullet from penetrating his chest. The body armor was a Threat Level IIA vest produced by U S Armor. The back-up officer and the driver of the vehicle engaged in a gun battle back and forth. As the driver advanced towards the back-up officer, the Allen officer was able to draw his weapon and

fire at the driver. When the Allen officer fired at the driver he paused for a second and looked back at the Allen officer. When the driver paused, the back-up officer was able to fire another shot which struck the driver in the back of the head incapacitating him and eventually killing him. The driver was shot two times one of which was in the head and another round was in the chest area. Had the Allen officer not been wearing his body armor the rounds that struck him could have incapacitated him, most likely killing him, and the outcome could have been different. A total of twenty-five rounds were fired during the shootout in which the Allen officer was struck five times, the driver was struck twice, and the back-up officer was unharmed. The Allen officer was able to make a full recovery from his injuries and returned to the streets fourteen months after the shooting.

After this information was discussed, the survey was conducted on September 8, 2004, at North Texas Regional Police Academy in Arlington, Texas. The make up of this group consisted of sworn police officers who have a range of experience of one to fifteen years of law enforcement experience. The question asked for the survey was, “Do you wear body armor?” Of the fifty police officers in attendance, forty police officers affirmed that they use body armor on a daily basis. Of the remaining ten police officers, five of them stated that they occasionally use body armor, once a month. The remaining five police officers stated that their use was rare. This obtained information will be analyzed in terms of current research on the use of body armor. This information will contribute to the premise that using body armor saves lives.

Another survey conducted during February 2005 indicates that Texas Police Agencies are very liberal when it comes to wearing body armor. Of twenty agencies surveyed eleven agencies have a mandatory wear policy, eight have an optional wear policy, and six have no policy.

FINDINGS

Body armor is made up of strong layers of fiber that prevent a bullet from penetrating the armor. The fibers absorb and disperse the impact energy from a bullet causing the bullet to mushroom. The fibers work together with the other layers using a large area to prevent the bullet from penetrating (A History of Body Armor-Bullet Proof Vests, 2003).

Body armor has a perfect safety record. Soft body armor has never been defeated by a bullet that it was rated to stop. FBI data reflects that felonious officer deaths could decrease by more than 40% had they been wearing soft body armor (Sanow, 2001)

FBI data shows that in the year 2000 there were fifty-one officers killed feloniously in the line of duty and that thirty of them were not wearing body armor (Law Enforcement Officers Killed in the Line of Duty, 2001). In the year 2001, FBI data shows that one hundred and forty officers were killed feloniously in the line of duty. This number is high due to the 911 attack that took seventy-one officers lives. However, the remaining sixty-nine officers that were killed feloniously in the line of duty thirty-nine of them were not wearing body armor (Law Enforcement Officers Killed in the Line of Duty, 2001). In 2002 FBI data shows that fifty-six officers were killed feloniously in the line of duty and that twenty-one of them were not wearing body armor (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). In 2003 FBI data shows that fifty-two officers were killed feloniously in the line of duty and that seventeen of them were not wearing body armor (U.S. Department of Justice, 2004). The number of officers killed feloniously in the line of duty may vary quit a bit however the overall percentage of officers not wearing their vest remains around 40% (Sanow, 2001). Figure 1 shows the relationship between the amount of officers killed in the line of duty, and the amount of officers not wearing body armor when killed.

Figure 1

The survey conducted at Regional Police Academy in Arlington, Texas, reflects that 80% of officers on the job from one to fifteen years wear their vest on a daily basis. An additional 10% of officers surveyed stated that they wear their vest once a month. The remaining 10% stated that they rarely wear their vest. Figure 2 shows the amount of officers that wear their vest on a daily basis, monthly basis or rarely.

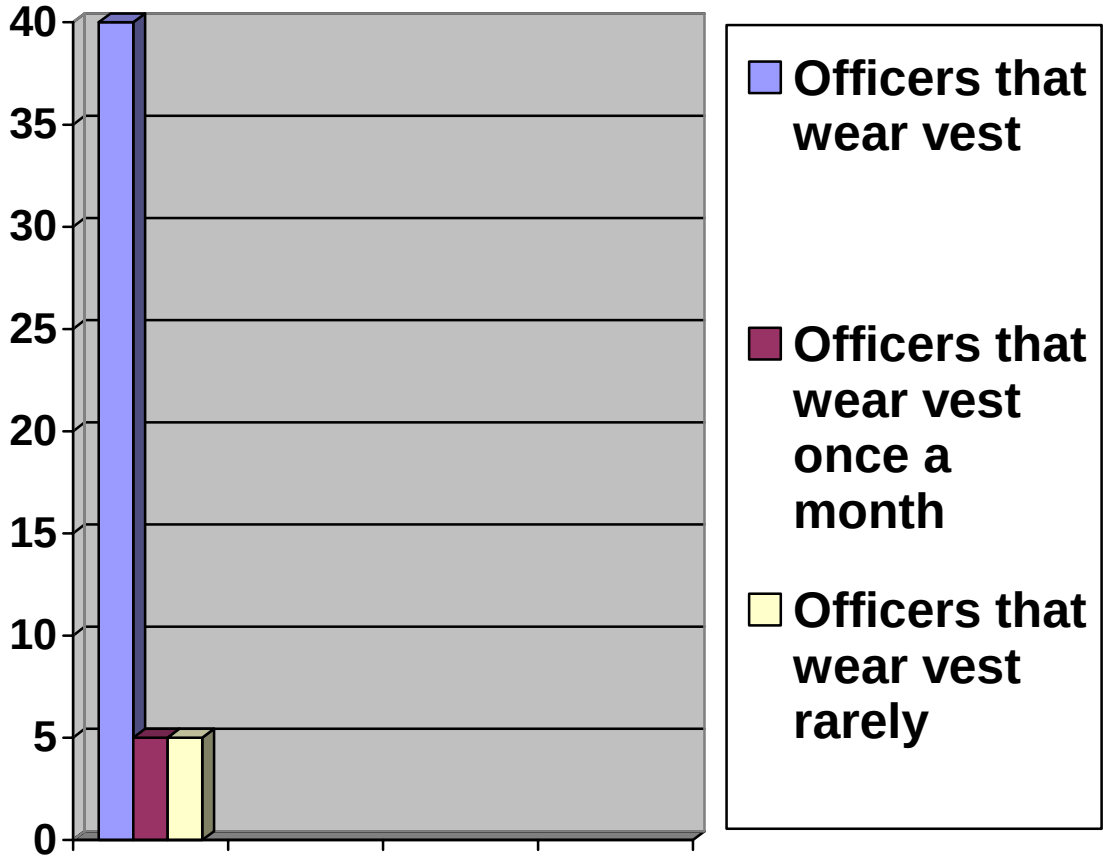

Figure 2

The data collected from references and survey show an overwhelming discrepancy in the amount of officers that regularly wear their vest. The discrepancy could be contributed to the facts that the FBI stats are on a National basis, and the survey that was conducted was on a smaller level for North Texas police officers. Even though all agencies do not have a mandatory wear policy, it appears as though officers in Texas are making the right choice and wearing body armor. Only eleven out of the twenty-five Texas agencies have a mandatory wear policy. Of the remaining fourteen agencies eight have an optional wear policy and six do not have a policy regarding body armor. Figure 3 shows the data on body armor policies.

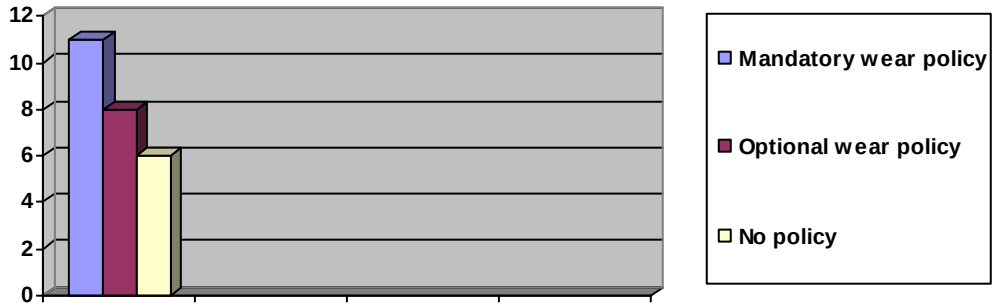

Figure 3

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the research is to prove that wearing body armor saves lives. Law enforcement agencies that provide their police officers with this valuable information will decrease in the line of duty fatalities. The personal experience about an Allen Police Officer being shot shared with law enforcement officers a first hand view about the effectiveness of body armor. The body armor in question was not defeated by the 10mm bullets that were fired at a close distance. Personal experience along with current research findings add to the knowledge of the necessity of wearing body armor. With the statistics shown, it is clear that if more officers wore body armor, the number of officers killed in the line of duty would decrease. The facts are overwhelming in the amount of police officers that do not wear body armor nationally. Body armor is a valuable piece of equipment that is available to law enforcement officers and should be used just like the firearm they carry. The data shows that there is no justification for police officers not to wear body armor. In addition, if law enforcement agencies had a mandatory wear policy it would increase the amount of officers wearing body armor, and decrease the number of officers killed in the line of duty. The body armor should be considered a part of the uniform just like the shirt, pants, badge, and gun. As with life, there are no guarantees. There are ways to

circumvent the effectiveness of body armor, but why not utilize all the tools that are provided to us. If there is a piece of equipment that could possibly save a life, why wouldn't any police officer wear it? Bottom line is: Body Armor saves lives.

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