

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Heavy Body Armor: From the Battlefield to the Streets of America**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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**By  
William F. Pitmon II**

**Bee Cave Police Department  
Bee Cave, Texas  
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## **ABSTRACT**

There is a fast growing problem in the United States that directly affects the livelihood of police officers nationwide (Kelly, 2012). This problem is that of the ambush attacker or active shooter. Individuals who commit these acts often deploy tactics that are superior to the level that law enforcement is traditionally trained to manage. The weapons used by today's attacker are usually of a high powered caliber with the ability to shoot multiple rounds accurately at the responding police officers.

Law enforcement, although a paramilitary organization, has attempted for years to separate themselves from the military in tactics and use of equipment. Since the early 1970s until even today, only Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams are using heavy body armor and military type weaponry in their assignments. Most police departments train their patrol officers and first responders in the use of the AR-15 type long guns and even in the tactics dealing with an active shooter, but do not issue their officers a heavy body armor option to use when dealing with the offender. Heavy duty body armor is designed to stop rifled rounds and provide the officer with 360 degrees of upper body protection while the ballistic helmet is designed to protect the officer's head.

Active shooters will most likely use weapons with a high capacity for ammunition, so they can kill as many people as possible in a short amount of time. This type of weaponry and tactics is usually seen in war. And just like the U.S. soldiers serving in combat arenas who are protected by heavy body armor, police administrators have a responsibility to protect their police personnel. Standard issued for today's first responders must now include heavy body armor and ballistic helmets.

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## INTRODUCTION

On October 13, 2012, Constable Brian Bachmann was killed in the line of duty while serving an eviction notice in College Station, Texas. Constable Bachmann was shot three times by a .40 caliber pistol from the suspect whom ambushed attacked him while walking up to the suspect's residence. The suspect disarmed Constable Bachmann and retreated into his home where several other high powered rifles and ammunition awaited for him to use against responding officers. The responding officers of the College Station Police Department were mostly uniformed personnel, armed with only their sidearm and soft body armor. The suspect killed a citizen, shot and seriously injured another citizen, and seriously injured one responding College Station police officer. The suspect successfully held off responding units by firing hundreds of 7.62 caliber rounds at the officers and their vehicles. The officers were outgunned and underequipped to deal with a person in this circumstance. Two plain clothes College Station police detectives, one armed with an AR-15 rifle and the other with his pistol but both wearing their S.W.A.T. (Special Weapons and Tactics) issued heavy armor, approached and subsequently shot and killed the suspect to end the violence of that day ("Loss of Constable," 2012).

Kelly's NYPD Active Shooter Analysis (2012) stated that active shootings have become more frequent since 2000. Due to the increase in active shooter and ambush shooters incidents, it is clear that law enforcement first responders should be issued or has easy access to heavy ballistic vests and helmets to provide them with the upmost protection. Heavy ballistic vests provide a higher protection for the responding officer against today's weapon of choice; the rifle. Police administrators should be providing

this level of protection to their officers who are responding to situations where known gunfire exists; the active or ambush shooter.

Body armor has been in existence since man began attacking each other from the beginning of time. Heavy body armor was introduced as far back as the Civil War but the military did not provide it for their troops; rather the troops purchased such armor from peddlers. According to the article, *Body Armor History* (n.d.), "Two types have been described as being most popular among Union soldiers. These consisted of the "Soldiers' Bullet Proof Vest," manufactured by the G. & D. Cook & Company, and the second most popular was manufactured by the Atwater Armor Company. Both were manufactured in New Haven, Connecticut. Additionally, both types of vests were of metallic material, mostly of steel plates, and constructed of cast iron making them extremely heavy ("Body Armor History", n.d.).

Today, ballistic vests are made from Kevlar and can incorporate ceramic, composite, or metal rifle plates. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is responsible for ensuring that ballistic vest and helmet companies meet specific standards to provide the very best protection for police and military personnel who wear the protective equipment. The NIJ rates body armor in five categories, with two of the five for hard body armor; Type III or Type IV. According to the Protech (n.d.) Tactical Body Armor website, "Type III protects against 7.62mm FMJ" and "Type IV protects against .30 caliber armor piercing (AP)" (para. 3).

Although it could be difficult task to narrow down the preferred weapon of the active shooter, experts from the New York Police Department found that most use more than one and deploy a rifle more than not. Kelly (2010) found that collecting statistics

on the specific caliber used most by active shooters was difficult to define. From 1966 to present day, the United States leads the world in active shooter incidents. This is a serious problem, and law enforcement should be better prepared.

## **POSITION**

The U.S. Department of Justice (2008) firmly stated that no vest or helmet is completely “bulletproof”; they also have proven statistically that more officers are saved by wearing a Kevlar vest when shot than those who did not wear their issued vest. The ballistic vest issued to most police officers today is referred to soft body armor. Soft body armor, depending on the level, has proven in both testing and real world scenarios to stop most pistol rounds. Soft body armor is no safer to wear than a piece of paper when it comes to rifle rounds that can rip right through the armor without resistance. Hard body armor, Type III and Type IV, will stop most rifle rounds and provide the responding officers with the most torso protection. Heavy body armor, such as Type III and Type IV, offer much better protection for responding officers than the traditionally issued Type II or Type IIA. The National Institute of Justice rates the Type II as being able to stop a 9mm and .357 magnum round. The Type IIA will stop the 9mm and the .40 S&W caliber round. Both Type II and IIA are protected against pistol ammunition and shrapnel. A ballistic helmet is considered a Type IIA in that it most likely will not stop a rifle round. Type III, IIIA, and IV vests will stop .357 SIG, .44 magnum, rifle rounds, and armor piercing rifle rounds respectively (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008).

Another reason that first responders should be issued heavy body armor is that the cost of actual vest is much more cost effective than medical bills or funeral costs should an officer be seriously injured or killed. Hudley (2011) stated that “Body armor

costs anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 per vest, depending upon what company bought from and who manufactured the end product” (p. 4). Most of today’s heavy vest manufacturer designed their vests to be one size fits all. Because having to wear them is rare, the vests can last for quite some time and be passed from Officer to Officer as long as the actual Kevlar is maintained and taken care of. The American Body Armor (ABA) company guarantees their Kevlar vests for five years if properly taken care of per their instructions (ABA Body Armor, n.d.). Gunshot wound victims can expect to pay almost \$50,000 for a year of treatment in the aftermath. If the victim is a police officer, the costs could be financially devastating; thus causing further stresses. Hilts (1999) found that “the average cost of a gunshot wound that brings the victim to a hospital is \$14,600 for emergency care and \$35,400 for lifetime medical care resulting from the shooting” (para. 7). Surely city officials would rather spend \$1,500.00 per vest than having to pay thousands of dollars in medical treatment for the Officer.

The third and most important reason to issue police officers heavy body armor is to reduce liability of the department by providing protection to their officers. With active shootings becoming more prevalent since 2000, it only makes sense to equip police officers with the gear necessary to provide only the highest level of protection (Kelly, 2012). The Illinois State Police (ISP) follow the strict guidelines of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) when it comes to mandatory protective clothing while working in drug laboratory cleanup. Not only does the Illinois State Police require that an officer or investigator is “properly trained” prior to entering a drug laboratory, but that all law enforcement that work in or near drug labs be trained in clandestine drug laboratories. In addition to the ISP’s mandatory requirements of being

trained before handling any criminal drug lab, they also require that the officer attend a recertification on an annual basis as refresher training. As part of the ISP protocol for handling drug lab seizures or cleanup, the use of protective equipment while working in those environments is mandatory ("Investigation and Closure," n.d.). It is clear that the ISP believes in making sure that its officers are both trained and protected when dealing with an unknown dangerous situation such as a clandestine drug lab. Police administrators could follow the lead set by the Illinois State Police and provide heavy body armor to all of its first responders. No one can predict where and when an active shooting will occur so protecting the police officers "in case of" is perfectly acceptable and the right action to take.

### **COUNTER POSITION**

There are some who would question such an expense of equipment to protect an officer from an event that they may never experience. After all, active shootings do not occur every day like automobile accidents. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report (FBI UCR) (2009) reported that "thirty-four of the 47 officers who were accidentally killed in the line of duty in 2009 died as a result of automobile accidents" (p. 2). In the same year, 48 police officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty. Fifteen of those 48 were killed by ambush attackers (FBI, 2009). Therefore, 31% of all officers feloniously killed in 2009 were by an ambush attacker. Unfortunately, active and ambush shooters are becoming more and more common in the United States' as shown in the New York Police Department's 2012 Active Shooter report. There have been 14 prominent active shootings throughout the world in the last five years alone, with a combined casualty rate of nearly 215 (Quinn, 2012).



Another issue against issuance of heavy body armor is that they are heavy and cumbersome. The U.S. Army soldier serving in combat today is issued the Improved Outer Tactical Vest (IOTV). A size large in the IOTV with front and back ceramic plates can weigh approximately 35 pounds (Dawson, 2007). With that weight, it would make it very difficult on the officer when responding to an active shooter incident. When training in the heavy body armor, officers can feel the difference in weight distribution versus wearing a fully loaded duty belt which rests unevenly on their waistlines. Officers should be trained to remove their duty belt when wearing the heavy vest to remove the added weight while becoming more agile. An outfitted duty belt can weigh up to 15 pounds, and its weight is distributed on the waistline and hips of the officer. This causes an imbalance to the officer when performing physical demanding assignments that include running, climbing, and possibly jumping (Stone, 2000). Although the heavy armor vest weighs more than an outfitted duty belt, it carries the same duty equipment and has the capability of carrying other items needed for emergency response. For the extra 15 pounds, the officer is protected from high caliber bullets versus the duty belt that does not provide ballistic protection. Heavy armor vests can also be personalized in its design to the individual officer versus a duty belt that is not a custom piece of equipment. Officers may lay out their individual vest where their equipment is more easily accessible than their duty belts may have provided (Espinoza, 2010).

Public perception also has a stake in this issue. Most communities would disapprove of their local police officers dressing like SWAT or a military soldier. After all, the community is not a warzone. According to Rizer and Hartman (2011), "Undoubtedly, American police departments have substantially increased their use of

military-grade equipment and weaponry to perform their counterterrorism duties, adopting everything from body armor to, in some cases, attack helicopters” (para. 6). Rizer and Hartman (2011) added that by police officers using military equipment in the course of their duty, it could confuse the line between being a peace officer and a military soldier.

The reality is that police officers would not be wearing the heavy body armor throughout their tour of duty. In fact, the only time that the officer will wear the heavy body armor is when responding to an incident where there is known gunfire. When an active shooting is occurring, it is extremely chaotic and leaves witnesses and victims confused, panicked, and fearful. The phenomenon that happens with persons involved in an active shooting is the fight or flight response; an activation of the sympathetic nervous system. When a victim of an active shooting has the fight or flight response, they can feel nausea, tunnel vision, panic, racing heart, excessive sweating, numbness in arms and legs, and several other physical and psychological symptoms (Dryden-Edwards, 2011). In a situation, like an active shooting, where chaos and terror already exist, what the responding officers are wearing is not important. There is not a single documented incident of an active shooting where a surviving witness stated anything in reference to the responding Officer’s appearance. This is mainly because of the fight or flight response and the effect it has on the witnesses’ tunnel vision. In other words, what the police officer was wearing when they arrived is not a detail that their memory could remember or care about under the circumstances. Public perception of officers arriving to an active shooter incident will not be as negative as one might think.

## CONCLUSION

One of the most valued traits of a good leader is the ability to be a forward thinker. A police administrator that possesses such a trait understands the importance of evaluating the crime trends of today and preparing for the future. If it were a known fact that a hurricane was to hit a city, it could be assumed that city officials would take measures to ensure that their citizens are safe from the storm. Active shootings are the hurricanes of the future. No one can predict when or where an active shooting will occur, but recent events have proven that active shooters and ambush shooters are rapidly becoming a criminal trend that has grown since 2000 (Kelly, 2012). Knowing that such a horrific trend is growing, it makes the most rational sense to issue responding officers the equipment they will need to deal with such an event.

Heavy ballistic armor vests offer the very best in rifle bullet resistance on the current market. They can be purchased for \$1,500.00 or less and weigh just under 35 pounds fully equipped. The weight of the fully loaded vest is evenly distributed on the officer's upper torso and replaces the officer's duty belt. It can be worn in a matter of seconds which can be very easily taught to officers in training. The vest can be personalized and fitted to the individual officer in a few minutes and has pockets that are modular. Not only does the heavy vest provide the best ballistic protection, but it also carries extra ammunition, batteries, police identification, writing instruments, a radio, and anything else the officer wants to carry when responding to the active shooting. An officer responding to an active shooting in his/her duty uniform and personal body armor will not provide ballistic protection from a rifled bullet.

Skeptics would argue that heavy ballistic vests are too expensive a piece of equipment that may never be used. They would say that officers would not wear them because of their weight and bulkiness. Some would even question the negative perception from the community of officers responding dressed like U.S. Army soldiers. But there is no real evidence that any of these claims are reason enough to not protect police officers. The vest is cheaper than any medical expense that may be accrued from an officer that is shot in the line of duty. U.S. Army soldiers are wear heavy ballistic vests everyday in combat zones throughout the world and manage despite the added 15 pounds difference than the duty belt. And finally, the last thing that a citizen would be concerned with during an active shooting is whether the responding officers looked like over aggressive soldiers.

Police departments who make the decision to protect their officers with heavy ballistic vests would also need to modify their own policy and procedure to match the issuance and use of the heavy ballistic vest. This can be done in the standard operating procedures (SOP) section of response to an active shooting. The SOP should instruct the officer how and when the vest should be worn but supported in interagency training. An adjustment in policy and procedure under the section of uniform issuance may also need to be modified. It would not take very long to modify the policy and procedure to accommodate the heavy vest into the department's duty issue.

Police department administration can seek out programs and grants to acquire the vests for little to no money. Military programs offer used military equipment to police departments and vests are sometimes part of that program. Police associations and

benevolent foundations can also raise money for the purchase of the vests. The Department of Homeland Security also provides funding to police departments for equipment used to protect the “homeland.”

Providing police officers with the very best in ballistic protection should be priority number one of any good police administrator as it shows that protecting the lives of police officers is important to them. It shows the police officer and the police officer’s family that the administration accepts the fact that active shootings are on the rise since the year 2000, and they are taking the best steps in protecting them from serious injury or even death (Kelly, 2012). There is no absolute perfect approach to protecting police officers from gunfire. It is responsible leadership to acknowledge the current trends of active shootings and, to at the very least, attempt to protect its officers as best that they can.

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