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The Benefits of Physical Fitness to Law Enforcement Officers

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ABSTRACT

The issue of instituting a physical fitness regimen for the law enforcement officer is the topic of this research paper, with the purpose being to examine the overall benefits to the law enforcement officer who undertakes a physical fitness program. The issue addressed in this paper was to determine whether an officer who institutes a physical fitness regimen, or a department that institutes mandatory physical fitness requirements for their officers, are better able to perform their daily duties, as well as, what are the implications to the department where their officers are mandated or elect to follow a physical fitness regimen, to wit: is there less sick time used, are there less reported injuries, and does the department save on these claims? During the course of the research for this paper, articles published in various law enforcement magazines, dealing with health and fitness for law enforcement officers, were mostly utilized, books on health and fitness were also used, and finally, a questionnaire/survey was constructed and mailed out to inquire whether the selected agencies mandated a physical fitness requirement for their officers, and if so, what were the recorded benefits to these agencies. After the conclusion of the research, it was discovered that most agencies surveyed do not have a physical fitness requirement/policy in place for their agency, but felt that instituting one would benefit their agency. It was also discovered in the research that only one of the surveyed agencies experienced increased morale and decreased injuries and sick time used. The theorized results were not supported in this paper with the survey employed, but research supports the benefits of beginning and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.	1
Review of Literature	3
Methodology	6
Findings	8
Discussions/Conclusions	12
References	16

INTRODUCTION

The profession of law enforcement can be a very physically, as well as psychologically demanding line of work. Officers are constantly faced with stressors on their job and in their personal lives. Because of the nature of police work, it is often listed as one of the most stressful jobs in the workplace today. Law enforcement has some of the highest rates of alcoholism, tobacco use, drug abuse, and suicide rates of any profession. Due to the factors placed on today's law enforcement, an officer's health can suffer greatly, which is why it is so important that officers and departments begin a physical fitness regimen to combat these issues.

A study into the benefits and effects of instituting a physical fitness program or regimen will be investigated in this research paper. Most police departments across the country do not currently mandate physical fitness requirements for their officers, other than during entrance examinations. The purpose of this research paper is to examine the overall benefits to the law enforcement officer who undertakes a physical fitness program. These benefits include: factors of the individual's health, affects of on and off the job injuries, the reduction of illness and reduced consumption of sick time at work, and the overall savings to the police agency the police officer works for.

During the course of the research, this paper will attempt to determine whether an officer who begins a fitness program, or a department that institutes mandatory physical fitness requirements for their officers, are better able to perform their daily duties. This paper will also address what are the implications to the department where their officers are mandated or elect to follow a fitness regimen, to wit: Is there less sick

time used, are there less reported injuries, and does the department save on the decreases in these claims?

In order to find the answers to these questions, a number of resources will be utilized. Articles published in various law enforcement magazines relating to the benefits and advantages of maintaining health and fitness are frequently put out. This information will be utilized to a great extent to provide answers to the above listed questions. Books on fitness and healthy eating will provide additional information to answer the questions posed by this research paper. Finally, a questionnaire/survey will be constructed and distributed to various police agencies to inquire whether or not they have mandated a physical fitness requirement for officers, and if so, what have been the recorded benefits to their agency.

After the conclusion of research, this paper should demonstrate several key factors. The most important being that officers and individuals who undertake a physical fitness program will reap the benefits of improved overall health. These benefits include: increased flexibility and strength, an increased sense of well being, lowered blood pressure and cholesterol, greater endurance, fewer instances of illness and disease, and an overall decreased level of body fat. Agencies who employ officers who maintain high standards of physical fitness, will receive several benefits as well. These benefits include, but are not limited to: decreased levels of absenteeism from work, due to illness or disease, a dramatic drop in the number of on the job injuries and workman's compensation claims, improved moral and productivity, and less overtime consumed from the budget to cover for officers who are out due to illness or injury.

The field of law enforcement, as well as the community at large will benefit from these findings. The police agency that implements a physical fitness requirement for their agency will benefit for the reasons listed in the previous paragraph. The public, or community, will benefit because they will receive increased levels of service from the officers within that department. The public as a whole can also benefit from this research in another way. The advantages of planning, executing, and following a physical fitness program are well documented. By beginning and maintaining a physical fitness regimen, everyone, not just individuals involved in the law enforcement profession, can benefit.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a great deal of literature published on the benefits of beginning and instituting a physical fitness plan. Studies and evaluations of law enforcement agencies throughout the country indicate an officer's worst enemy is not a felon with a loaded gun, but job stress (Arters and Aaron, 1989, p. 62). Because of this stress and lack of physical activity, police officers are at risk of health problems. According to Colligon (1995) recent research suggests that the rate of occurrence of lifestyle-related diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, ulcers, cirrhosis, and lower back pain among police officers presents valid reasons for concern. Such diseases are typically related to the individual's level of physical activity, eating habits, stress management skills, tobacco usage, alcohol consumption, rest and relaxation habits, etc. (p. 48). It is because of this, that it is so important to begin physical fitness program. Colligon (1995) states adequate physical activity and proper nutritional habits can

improve overall physical fitness and decrease incidence of obesity, which has been associated with many lifestyle-related diseases and disorders (p. 48).

The nature of police work can contribute to the lack of fitness of an officer, or even an entire police agency. Police work, by nature is a sedentary job, involving sitting in a patrol car for extended periods of time. According to Puccetti (1995) a typical officer spends the majority of an eight -or ten-hour shift sitting, patrolling in a vehicle. The prolonged sitting, hour after hour, shift after shift, takes its toll (p. 13). Hoffman and Collingwood (1996) indicate that in law enforcement, officers have little day-to-day physical activity in their jobs. In addition, irregular hours and unpredictable meal schedules can contribute to poor nutrition (p. 17). These conditions can lead to increased risk of injury. Puccetti indicates the vehicle environments to which officers are subjected each day demonstrate a direct link between police work and back injury (p. 13). A person's overall physique and health play a significant role in the cause and prevention of back injury. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle by exercising and keeping proper body weight is good for the back (Puccetti, 1995, p. 14). Francis and Francis (1988) assert toning and strengthening helps reduce the risk of injury. Weaker muscles are more easily injured than stronger muscles, and muscle tone helps protect your joints and ligaments so they can withstand stresses they will undergo when you take part in vigorous activity (p. 75). According to Reviere and Young (1994) policing has been described as one of the most dangerous of all occupations, and it is the nature of the occupation that contributes to many of the health problems and premature deaths of police officers (pg. 51).

Age, as it relates to exercise, can contribute to the health problems faced

by law enforcement officers. As Southall and Bartlett (1987) explain, after the age of 35, it is important not to reduce participation in exercise or indulge the appetite too much. Too often during these middle years, people withdraw from active participation in sport, and at the same time, with success has come an easier life style (p. 8). As most people grow older, they become less active, thus becoming more prone to disease and injury. O'Neill and Libby (1979) point out that the major cause of death in our middle years are from failures of the heart, lungs, and liver. More than half the deaths in this country come from failures of our cardiovascular system, and coronary disease is the No. 1 killer (p. 1). By officers undertaking a fitness program, they will be better able to combat these problems and live longer, healthier, more productive lives. Reviere and Young (1994) point out that there is a relationship between the risk of heart disease and the age of the officer (p. 52). Colligon, Green, & Pinkard (1995) make reference to a study that indicated that 45-year old men following six or more basic health practices out of seven, lived 11.5 years longer than those following three or fewer practices (p. 51). As a police officer ages, it becomes even more important to begin a fitness program to ensure they do not fall prey to the hazards of health problems. Research has shown that police departments that begin physical fitness programs and/or standards, have many positive results. Collingwood (1995) states that validation studies indicate that the same physical fitness areas that are important for health---aerobic power, strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition---are also the underlying and predictive factors of job performance, providing the physiological readiness or preparedness to perform frequent or critical physical job tasks (p. 34). In other words, the better the health of the officer, the better he or she will be able to

perform the required physical tasks that come with the job. Arters and Aaron (1989) indicate that the Hobbs Police Department undertook a mandatory fitness program, and from the inception in 1987, mandatory physical fitness and stress management classes have saved the city more than \$11,000 in sick time wages for police officers---a decrease of more than 800 sick days for that period (p. 63). Better overall health of the officers and significant savings in sick time used, indicate that there is proof that mandatory physical fitness programs work, and benefit the department as a whole. Hobbs Police Department feels that in looking ahead, they will see great benefits over the next 10-15 years. Their fitness program's emphasis on mental attitudes helps the officers look at the department as a career, not just a job (Arters & Aaron, 1989, p. 63). This example shows that as the health and lifestyles of the officers change for the better, their attitudes (morale) and work performance improve as well. By undertaking a physical fitness program, a police department can improve its work performance of the officers, mental attitudes, and save a significant amount of money in sick time used for illness and injury.

METHODOLOGY

In doing this research, this paper attempts to show that officers who undertake a physical fitness program, or a department who institutes a mandated physical fitness program, are better able to perform their duties. This research paper also attempts to answer what the implications are to departments who mandate a physical fitness program, or whose officers elect to follow one, to wit: is there a decreased amount of sick time used, are there less reported injuries on the job, and does the department save on the decreases in these claims?

The outcome of this research yields several key points. For one, officers who undertake a physical fitness program, either by choice or by mandated policy, reap the benefits of increased overall health. This increased overall health leads to less sick time used by the individual officer. It also decreases the chances the officer will sustain an on the job injury. Better health leads to feeling better about oneself, so the officer experiences better morale, and in turn, provides better job performance. Agencies who employ officers who maintain high physical fitness standards experience several benefits as well. These include, but are not limited to: decreased absenteeism from work due to illness or disease, a drop in the number of workman's compensation claims for on the job injuries, improved morale amongst the officers and productivity, and less overtime consumed from the agency's budget to cover for officers who are out due to illness or injury.

In addition to printed literature covered in the Review of Literature section of this paper, a written survey is used to analyze the research questions this paper proposes. Various law enforcement agencies are surveyed to inquire about information related to the topic of this research paper. In order to get a well-rounded response, responses from the 30 surveys of random police departments in the State of Texas are used. These departments vary in size and location across the state. The sample attempts to obtain information from different geographic areas of Texas, as well as encompassing different department sizes.

The survey design is simple in the hopes that a higher response rate might be obtained. As it turns out, this hypothesis was correct. Out of the 30 questionnaires, 24 were returned within an approximate 3-week period. In other words, all but 6

questionnaires were mailed back, and completed. From the information obtained within these questionnaires, several things are analyzed. First, how many of the surveyed agencies have a mandated physical fitness requirement? For those agencies that do have physical fitness standards and/or policies, has there been a decrease in the amount of sick time used by their officers? Are there less on the job injuries and workman's compensation claims? What is the age range of the officers within their department? And finally, if the department has instituted a physical fitness program and/or policy, has there been an increase in the morale and productivity of the officers?

FINDINGS

Once the returned questionnaires were received, the data was analyzed. The first area addressed is whether or not each of the agencies surveyed had a physical fitness policy and/or program instituted within their department. Of the 24 replying agencies, only 7 currently have a physical fitness policy and/or program instituted. The other 17 do not have one in effect. One agency notes that they would be instituting a physical fitness policy sometime in 2005 or 2006. As noted in the Introduction of this paper, most departments do not currently have a physical fitness program instituted within their departments.

The next area addressed is whether there is a reduction in sick time used, and/or a reduction in the number of on the job injuries, if the department had a physical fitness policy and/or program in effect. Of the responses, only one agency notes a reduction in the amount of sick time used by their officers, and/or a reduction in on the job injuries, resulting in workman's compensation claims. Surprisingly, 4 of the responding agencies note that they do not have a reduction in these areas. One agency comments that they

have not had enough time to evaluate the results of the policy being instituted, due to the short period of time since the policy was placed into effect. Another agency states that their policy has been in effect for so long, they are not able to evaluate that data.

One of the questions to be answered by this paper is whether those agencies who have instituted a physical fitness policy and/or program have experienced an increase in the overall morale of their officers and an increase in the productivity of the officers. Of the agencies currently having a physical fitness policy and/or program, 2 state they have experienced an increase in the morale of the officers within their department, as well as experiencing greater productivity. Three departments comment that they have not experienced an increase in the morale of the officers and/or greater work productivity. The other two departments did not answer this question. The agencies that did not answer the question did so for the same reasons as given in the previous paragraph. One of the agencies has had their policy and/or program in effect long enough to evaluate that data, and the other agency has had the policy and/or program in effect for so long, they are not able to go back that far and evaluate the results.

To get a better perspective on the results of this survey, the surveyed agencies are asked the age range of the officers within their departments. All agencies responses are similar. Each police department has officers of a very young age, early 20's, and range up to officers in their 50's to 60's. The youngest officer within a responding department surveyed is 21 years of age. The oldest officer employed by a responding surveyed agency is 65 years of age. The average age of the youngest within surveyed departments is 22 years of age, and the average oldest age is 55 years

of age. It was not asked of the agencies surveyed for a breakdown in the age ranges of their officers. No one department has a staff containing only young officers, or older officers.

Even though a majority of the responding departments surveyed (17) do not currently have a physical fitness policy and/or program in place, they are asked if they felt that instituting one would be beneficial to their agency. An overwhelming majority of the departments without a physical fitness policy and/or program feel having one would benefit their agency. Fourteen agencies state that having a physical fitness policy and/or program would be overall beneficial to their officers and department. Only one police department does not feel this type of a policy and/or program would not be beneficial. This department did not elaborate as to why they felt this way. One of the responding agencies is not sure of the answer to the question. Another responding agency did not know if instituting a physical fitness policy and/or program would benefit their department. In both of these instances, neither of these agencies provide an answer as to why they responded to the question the way they did. The results from this survey show that even though most of the responding surveyed agencies do not have any type of a policy or program, involving physical fitness standards, almost all of them feel that if they are to institute one, the agency will benefit as a whole.

The final question asked of the departments surveyed is whether their agency has considered instituting some type of policy or program, involving physical fitness requirements or standards. Again, a majority of the responding departments answer that they have considered developing and instituting a physical fitness policy and/or program. Thirteen of the agencies without physical fitness policies and/or programs

said they have considered putting a policy or program in place for their agency. This answer coincides with the answer to the previous paragraph. All but one agency that believes physical fitness programs will benefit their department has also considered developing and instituting these programs. Three agencies state that they have not considered having a physical fitness policy and/or program put in place within their department. It is not explained by these departments why they have not considered developing some type of physical fitness standard or requirement for their agency. The final responding agency that did not have a physical fitness policy and/or program comments that they have not considered instituting one because it is not within their budget. This is the only agency that had not considered one, that offered an explanation as to why their department has not considered this type of a policy or program.

The survey conducted during the course of the research for this paper yields several results. The answers to the last two questions asked, and the topics covered in this paragraph and the previous paragraph provide similar results. A vast majority of the departments surveyed in this research paper, that responded, state they felt a physical fitness program would be beneficial to their department, and that they have considered instituting some type of a policy or program for their department. The age range for all surveyed, responding agencies shows that they all have a wide variety of age groups within their departments. Most of the responding agencies do not currently have a physical fitness policy/program in effect for their agency. Only one responding agency with a physical fitness policy/program demonstrates a reduction in sick time used by their officers, as well as a reduction in the amount of on the job injuries and

workman's compensation claims. Finally, there are more responding agencies who have a physical fitness policy/program in place that do not experience a boost in morale and productivity of their officers than do.

DISCUSSION

Law enforcement, as a profession, is a physically demanding job at times. It is listed as one of the most stressful jobs in the workplace today. This research paper begins with a study into the benefits and effects of instituting a physical fitness program or regimen, either by the individual officer, or the department he/she works for as a whole. The purpose of the research is to examine the overall benefits to the law enforcement officer who undertakes a physical fitness program. The benefits to be examined are: factors that affect the individuals health, effects of on and off the job injuries, the reduction of illness and reduced usage of sick time at work, and if the agency the officer works for experiences savings overall. This research paper is designed to answer whether an officer who begins a fitness program, or an agency that institutes a mandatory physical fitness program for their officers is better able to perform their duties. This paper is also designed to answer what the implications to the department where their officers are mandated or elect to follow a physical fitness program, to wit: Is there less sick time used, are there less reported injuries, and does the agency save on the decreases in these claims?

The outcome of the research is believed to reveal several key points. The most important being, that an officer who undertakes a fitness program will reap the benefits of overall health. The increased overall health of the officer will lead to less sick time used by the officer, and the officer should experience less on the job injuries. Better

health also leads to a better feeling about oneself, which will increase the morale of the officer. The increased morale will lead to better work performance. The department that employs officers, who maintain high standards of physical fitness, will receive several benefits as well. These benefits include, but are not limited to: decreased levels of absenteeism from work, due to illness or disease, a drop in the number of on the job injuries and workman's compensation claims, improved moral and productivity, and less overtime used to cover for officers who are out due to the above mentioned illness or injury.

The findings of the research reveal several key points. The first being, that most of the departments surveyed, do not currently have a physical fitness program/policy instituted within their departments. This fact is noted in the Introduction to this paper. Only one agency that has a physical fitness regimen mandated for their department experienced a drop in sick time used and workman's compensation claims, resulting from on the job injuries. More of the responding agencies who have a physical fitness requirement policy within their department state they do not experience an increase in morale and productivity, than do. Almost all of responding departments state they felt their department would benefit from a physical fitness policy and/or program, including the departments that already have one in place.

The findings of the research, and conclusions reached from it are inconclusive. Based upon research data, the hypothesis of this paper is not supported. Law enforcement agencies surveyed that have a physical fitness program/policy in effect do not experience the theorized reduction in sick time used, the drop in workman's compensation claims from injuries, and increased morale and productivity of their

officers. From the results received, improved overall health of the officers in responding agencies does not seem to dramatically improve, as hypothesized. That is not to say that the theorized results are not experienced. One agency does show that their officers have an increase in all hypothesized categories. The research just shows that more agencies than not, do not experience the benefits of having a mandated physical fitness policy and/or program.

Several limitations may have hindered this study. For one, the amount of agencies surveyed, and the region selected could have been expanded. This would provide a broader base for comparison, and yield better results. The questionnaire mailed out, could have asked for more information. This would have required more time to research by surveyed agencies, and may have shown a decreased response rate, but agencies that did respond, would have provided more detailed information on the topic researched. The departments selected to participate in the survey are probably not truly random in the selection process, thus skewing the results obtained. Finally, alternate methods of inquiry could have been used to obtain additional research data for this paper.

The study conducted in this research paper involves an area in law enforcement that is often neglected or overlooked, even though it holds a great deal of relevance to the profession. Being in the stressful and physically demanding work environment of law enforcement, can lead to many health related problems for today's police officers. This is why it is paramount that the individual officer be in the best overall physical health that they can be. If an officer works for a department that does not have a physical fitness regimen mandated for their department, they need to develop one for

themselves. Even though the questions posed by this research paper were not answered or supported, in the actual research conducted for this paper, other research still shows, and the Review of Literature section of this paper demonstrates, that eating right and exercising provides a myriad of benefits. Anyone employed in the law enforcement profession can benefit from taking better care of themselves, and developing a physical fitness program. The public, as a whole, stands to benefit from officers who are in better health. The level and quality of the service they receive will increase, as a whole. The benefits of improved fitness extend to anyone, regardless of occupation. Exercise, proper nutrition, and increased fitness are beneficial to everyone.

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