

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

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Patrol Officers in Shorts: Is Command Presence Diminished?

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ABSTRACT

A police officers authority is best manifested by the uniform he or she wears. Traditionally, this uniform was comprised of dark colored fabric fashioned in a paramilitary style, which was meant to convey a powerful psychological impact on the civilian population for whom the police are sworn to serve and protect. With the implementation and shift towards a more approachable police force perpetuated by the Community Oriented Policing philosophy, many police departments have adopted a more casual and relaxed form of dress. The most common variation of the traditional paramilitary uniform is a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts. It is apparent that there are some disparate opinions among police officers and civilians as to whether or not officers on patrol in shorts project the necessary command presence to effectively perform their duties.

No research was located on the specific aspect of command presence as it relates to a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts. In order to assess the opinions of police and civilians on this issue, four surveys were conducted using two separate questionnaires. Emphasis was placed on the one question each survey had in common: Do you think a police officer in a summer uniform has less command presence than a police officer dressed in a traditional uniform? The outcome of the surveys indicated that both the police and public were divided on the issue, however 53 percent of all participants did not feel like command presence was diminished when an officer wore shorts.

In conclusion, those departments wishing to transition to a more casual and relaxed uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts can do so without fear of losing the edge command presence provides.

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INTRODUCTION

Command presence is an essential tool for law enforcement officers. The authority that a police officer's uniform conveys to the community it serves is contingent upon the type of uniform the officer wears. It is not unusual to see a bicycle patrol or beach patrol officer in shorts and a polo shirt, however, recently there has been a trend to incorporate a summer uniform consisting of shorts and polo shirts into the wardrobe of the uniformed patrol officer. The major reason for this trend is the unbearably hot summer temperatures that can rise above the one hundred-degree mark in many states across the country. One of the easiest methods of alleviating this problem is for a police administrator to approve the wearing of summer uniforms for officers of all uniformed divisions. It appears that there are some disparate opinions among officers as to whether or not officers on patrol in shorts project the necessary command presence to effectively perform their duties. If the police officers are divided on this issue, it is presumable that the citizens they police may have differing views on how the officers are perceived also.

In order to determine the effect that patrol officers in shorts have on command presence, it will be necessary to survey a sample of police officers from various departments across the state. The first survey will be conducted using the participants of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module One class, who represent twenty-seven separate law enforcement agencies. The survey will consist of five questions relating to the topic of the command presence of patrol officers in shorts. There will also be a section for any additional comments that a participant

may like to add. The same survey will then be distributed among the nineteen participants representing 18 agencies at the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Module Two. A third survey will consist of four questions relating to the topic of the command presence of patrol officers in shorts. This survey will be distributed to a random sample of civilian students at Texas Women's University, in Denton, Texas. The fourth and final survey will be distributed among members of the City of Deer Park Texas Chamber of Commerce. This survey will be set up in the same manner, with a section specifically for any personal comments the participant may have. Previous research on various aspects of the psychological influence of uniforms will be cited also. Last, but not least, personal interviews will be conducted with both officers and civilians to determine just what their opinions are on this subject.

More and more police departments are allowing their patrol officers to wear a uniform consisting of shorts and polo shirts in the summer months. While this is of great benefit to the comfort of the officers, there is some question as to whether their command presence is diminished by the casualness of the uniform. It is hypothesized that the research conducted on this subject will indeed show that command presence is significantly reduced when a patrol officer dresses in shorts and a polo shirt. The implications of these findings will depend on the mindset of each individual law enforcement administrator. An administrator whose philosophy is one of community oriented policing will embrace the casualness of the summer uniform. Those who have a more traditional quasi-military philosophy would want to maintain a high level of

command presence and therefore would not be interested in the use of a summer uniform.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Turn on any television set and beautiful men and women bombard the viewer in an attempt to sell cosmetics, automobiles, clothing, insurance, music, you name it. The premise is that the appealing appearance of these sales people will compel the viewer to go out and buy the product being sold. Advertising has capitalized on the realization that appearance has a strong influence on individual perception. This is not a new concept-just take a look at prehistoric man. Caveman chose their mates based on the perception of how well he or she could perpetuate the species. The female was required to be healthy and strong with the ability to bear children. She too was looking for a healthy, strong, masculine and virile caveman to provide protection and keep her and her offspring safe. This selection was based solely on outward appearance.

Modern dating works on the same premise. Men and women are attracted to one another based on appearance. If a man or woman is attempting to capture the interest of a suitor, he or she will usually take the extra time with personal grooming and clothing selection to make themselves the most appealing to the target of their attraction.

A person interviewing for a new job places emphasis on looking sharp and professional because there is a perception that the smarter dresser is the more intelligent candidate. This is not necessarily always true, but it demonstrates how strongly appearance can influence different aspects of life. Having sat on numerous

hiring boards for the Deer Park Police Department, it has been my experience that appearance does matter and plays a very prevalent role in developing a first impression and an opinion of the candidate being interviewed.

The way a person dresses has a remarkable impact on the people we meet professionally or socially and greatly affects how they treat us. It is possible, through skillful manipulation of dress, in any particular situation, to evoke a favorable response to your personality and your needs. (* Any good defense attorney will make sure that his scummy, longhaired, unshaven murder suspect of a client has had a haircut, a shave, and a new suit prior to his court date. The impression and outward appearance of the defendant has more than a considerable amount of influence over the jury's perception of guilt or innocence.

In each of the four examples given above, perceptions formed are based on first impression. "First impressions are formed in the first ten to ninety seconds". According to Paul Dishman, Ph.D., you can spend an entire lifetime overcoming those first ten to ninety seconds.* With that thought in mind, it is safe to deduce that the appearance of a police officer in uniform evokes an immediate impression on anyone who sees one. Spindler (2000) notes that observing an officer in uniform patrolling our neighborhood can make us feel safe, but the same officer in uniform sitting on the side of the highway with a radar gun as we speed by can scare us to death. * Police uniforms are very distinct and are meant to convey power and authority.* Police uniforms have steadily evolved over the years from a suit of armor worn in 1625 by New York City's first police officer, to the military inspired uniforms that are standard dress today.*

Police have not deviated too far in any one direction when it comes to uniforms. In 1969, the Menlo Park, California Police Department experimented with a more relaxed dress code for their police force. They did away with the traditional uniform, instead opting for a blazer and slacks. Tenzel and Cizanckas (1973) state:

The initial focus of the experiment was to alter the visual image of the policeman in order to make his appearance less threatening and more professional to the community....

In 1969, this was a bold and unprecedented move. Menlo Park maintained this style of dress for seven years. Statistics showed that in the first year, assaults on the Menlo Park Police dropped considerably, which initially was attributed to the relaxed manner of dress. It was later determined that other factors such as an increase in officer education and a change in management style may have had as much to do with these statistics as the dress code. One interesting note regarding this experiment that Tenzel and Cizanckas touched on: the Menlo Park Police officers were “ridiculed by other police officers” (Mauro, 1984, 45). According to the FOP Journal*, what a person wears has an impact on first impressions and the way a person is treated in a social setting (FOP, 1990). Apparently, many officers outside of Menlo Park formed their own negative impressions of the blazer-clad police. Throughout time, authority has been carried by the garment; more complete covering and uniformity conveys more authority.*

However, there has been a trend that goes hand in hand with community oriented policing to outfit police in a uniform that is much more comfortable to the wearer and is perceived as being more approachable by the public. This uniform normally consists of a polo shirt that has the police agency identified on it along with some type of a

nametag and badge, and a pair of shorts. The police community has very strong feelings on this issue and is almost equally divided on their views in regards to police officers wearing shorts on duty. Some agency heads embrace the notion; others abhor the idea. The burning question surrounding the "summer uniform" is whether or not a police officer in a summer uniform exudes the same amount of command presence as a police officer in the traditional uniform. Once again, the police community is divided. I believe that if the police themselves have strong feelings about this issue, it should only go hand in hand that the public they serve feel very strongly about the issue also.

METHODOLOGY

Does the wearing of a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts diminish the command presence of a police officer? This is the question being posed. It is hypothesized that command presence is indeed diminished when an officer deviates from the traditional, military inspired uniform to the more casual summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts.

Because there was no research located on this topic, surveys had to be conducted to find out what the general opinion was on the subject of police command presence and a summer uniform. The first survey was conducted among police officers from 25 different agencies who attended Module I of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute, Leadership Command College at Texas A & M University in College Station Texas in April 2002. The police officers were first asked to identify themselves, their agency, their age and their rank. They were then given a written questionnaire with the following five questions to answer:

1. Does your department utilize a summer uniform or patrol officers that incorporate shorts into the uniform?
2. If your department allowed it, would you wear shorts while working patrol?
3. Do you think shorts are only appropriate in specialized divisions such as bike patrol or beach patrol?
4. Do you think a patrol officer in shorts has less command presence than one in a standard uniform?
5. Do you think the public would perceive a diminished sense of command presence from a patrol officer in a summer uniform wearing shorts?

The survey also had space for any additional comments an officer would like to add on the subject of command presence of patrol officers in shorts.

The second police survey was conducted among 19 officers representing 18 police agencies in Module II of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute, Leadership Command College at Texas Women's University, Denton, Texas in April 2005. These officers received the same questionnaire as the first group.

The third survey was given to 47 students who were attending Texas Women's University in April 2005. The written questionnaire asked the students to identify their gender and age only. Command presence was defined for them and then the following four questions were asked:

1. Do you think police officers should be allowed to wear a summer uniform consisting of shorts and a polo shirt?
2. Do you think a summer uniform consisting of shorts and a polo shirt is only appropriate for police officers on a specialized assignment such as bike or beach patrol?
3. If you needed help from a police officer and you saw two officers together, one in a traditional uniform and one in a summer uniform consisting of shorts and a polo shirt, which officer would you go to for help?

4. Do you think a police officer in a summer uniform consisting of shorts and a polo shirt has less command presence than a police officer dressed in a traditional uniform?

There was also room left for the student to add any comments they might have on the subject of command presence and police officers in a summer uniform.

A fourth and final survey was conducted by distributing the civilian questionnaire used above to 41 members of the City of Deer Park Chamber of Commerce in May 2005. It should be noted that no one in any of the surveys declined to participate. The four surveys will be reviewed and evaluated and the central tendency will be reported. This will be determined by analyzing all answers to the survey, with emphasis on the question, *do you think a police officer in a summer uniform has less command presence than a police officer dressed in a traditional uniform?* Charts and graphs will be compiled utilizing data collected from the surveys and results obtained through analysis.

FINDINGS

The two surveys that were conducted at the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute, Leadership Command College, Modules I and II gathered opinions from forty-eight (48) law enforcement officers representing thirty-nine (39) agencies. It was determined that fourteen (14) of the 39 agencies allow an officer to wear a summer uniform while working routine patrol duty. Six (6) agencies allow an officer to wear a summer uniform for a specialized job function such as beach or bike patrol, and one of these six allows it if the temperature is expected to rise above 95 degrees. Eighteen (18) agencies do not allow officers to wear a summer uniform under any circumstances.

Of the forty-eight (48) officers surveyed, twenty-six (26) stated that they believed a patrol officer's command presence was diminished by the wearing of a summer uniform. Some of the comments that were added are as follows: "It seems some officers drop in grooming standards with shorts/summer uniforms"; "I believe that it reduces officer effectiveness to public"; "Shorts are not professional attire in law enforcement, it is also a safety issue to have more skin exposed than necessary"; "One of the perceptions that the public has of the effectiveness of a police agency is their appearance. If you appear casual then the public will perceive your ability to police will be casual"; "Would you like to see some officers in shorts? Bad vision". Twenty-two (22) did not think that wearing a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts diminished an officer's command presence.

Of the forty-seven civilians surveyed at Texas Women's University, twenty-six said they did not think wearing a summer uniform diminished a police officer's command presence. A female aged twenty-six stated that command presence is more about how the officer carries himself and how professional he/she is-not their clothes. Seventeen respondents said they did think a police officer's command presence was diminished. One student commented that seeing a police officer in shorts "always makes me laugh, I don't take them seriously". Four survey participants said that an officer's command presence "might" be diminished.

The final survey conducted among forty-one members of the City of Deer Park Chamber of Commerce found that twenty-four respondents felt like a summer uniform did not decrease the command presence of a police officer. A male, age thirty-nine

stated that “people are more effective and pleasant when they are comfortable”. A twenty-eight year old female said, “if police badges are visible (as well as weapons) I believe people will still respect their authority”. Thirteen of the forty-one Chamber of Commerce members felt like a police officer in shorts and a polo shirt would not be as commanding as one in a traditional uniform. One male, age 26 stated that “I have two kids that I would not feel comfortable with approaching someone in a polo shirt. That type of uniform would be easy to imitate”. A young female participant said that “polo shirts are okay, but they should be wearing pants”. In random interviews, a twenty-year old female said that she thought that a female officer in shorts would be more vulnerable and less credible than if she wore uniform pants. Four people in this group said that the command presence issue would be situational.

Overall, a total of one hundred thirty six civilians and police officers were surveyed as to their opinions surrounding the issue of command presence of a police officer wearing a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts.

CONCLUSIONS

For different reasons, many police departments have allowed their officers to deviate from the traditional, distinctive, paramilitary uniform that conveys power and authority in favor of a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts. Johnson states that a police officer’s uniform has a profound psychological impact on others, and even slight alterations to the style of the uniform may change how citizens perceive them.* With this thought in mind, it is feasible to believe that allowing police officers to wear a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts would negatively affect

the command presence and authority police officers traditionally possess. This study was conducted to determine if indeed a police officers command presence was diminished by the casualness of a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts. It was hypothesized that an officer wearing a uniform composed of shorts and a polo shirt would have less command presence than an officer dressed in the distinguishable, traditional uniform. It was expected the surveys would reveal that both the public sector and the police officers themselves overwhelmingly regarded an officer in a summer uniform as having much less command presence than a traditionally dressed officer. After reviewing the results of the surveys conducted, surprisingly, it was the group of forty-eight police officers who had the largest number of responses citing a diminished sense of command presence when wearing a summer uniform, not the public. The police uniform conveys much information about the person who wears it: it is an ultimate symbol of power, giving the wearer the authority to deprive another human being of his liberty and even in extreme circumstances, his life. Many officers define themselves by the uniform they wear, so it is understandable why they might see a summer uniform as less authoritarian than the traditional police garb. The civilians who were surveyed actually showed a larger number citing that they did not feel that the command presence of a police officer in shorts was diminished. Many qualified their statements by saying as long as there was a badge, a gun, or some distinguishing markings identifying the person as a police officer, there was no difference in the perception of command performance. One or two civilians did relate that they felt a younger person might perceive a diminished sense of control. It is

speculation to say that generational attitudes may play a role in the perception of authority and command presence all together. The comment that one of the TWU students made... "It always makes me laugh, (to see a police officer in shorts) I don't take them seriously", sums up the stereotypical perception most police harbor regarding the younger generations. Although the surveys were not measured with regard to age, it would be interesting to expand on the topic of police command presence in shorts in a manner that would take into account the participants age, socio-economic status and demographics

Based on the one hundred thirty six responses from a random sample of police and civilians, it can be deduced that the research did not support the hypothesis that a police officers command presence is diminished when wearing a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts. Seventy-two of the one hundred thirty six said that they did not feel like an officer's command presence was diminished versus forty-six who stated that they felt it did. The remaining eight felt like it was a situational matter best utilized for special events, excessive heat, or specialized assignments such as beach or bike patrol.

This research was initially conducted for the purpose of providing some type of gauge regarding citizens and officer's perception of the command presence a summer uniform consisting of a polo shirt and shorts has on the citizens they serve. The implications to the law enforcement community are such that although the research was limited in scope, there is now some documentation that a police officer in a summer uniform can command the same sense of authority as a police officer in the

traditional quasi-military garb. The manner in which the civilian surveys were done also fosters the “consultation” stage of the Community Oriented Policing philosophy that calls for the police to actively interact and seek input from the public in an effort to provide a better relationship and sense of understanding between the two groups. Agencies who may be considering the prospect of relaxing their dress code but had been undecided on how the public would perceive the move could learn from this exercise and make their decisions accordingly or expand upon this research by taking the questionnaires to their respective citizens in their own backyard.

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