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Mandatory or Not:
Should Peace Officers be Required to Wear Body Armor?

**A Policy Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Professional Designation
Graduate, Management Institute**

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ABSTRACT

The Pasadena Police Department has been considering implementing a policy that would require the wearing of soft body armor by police officers. Police administrators are constantly examining ways to improve operational safety and to make available the tools needed to assist officers perform their duties. Administrators for the Pasadena Police Department believe safety is a priority and should be evaluated continuously. Although body armor is provided to all sworn officers with the city of Pasadena, the wearing of this protective equipment is optional.

The purpose of this project is to determine whether or not a mandatory policy should be enacted requiring officers to wear body armor. Research concentrated on broad and narrow issues raised by such a policy. A study of departments with similar work force characteristics and law enforcement concerns was performed, and a questionnaire was provided to all officers employed with the city of Pasadena requesting their personal thoughts. Also, criminal justice textbooks and law enforcement journals were reviewed, and personal interviews were conducted with law enforcement personnel of all ranks.

After a thorough examination of the collected data, it is concluded that a mandatory policy is needed and would improve individual officer's job safety. The policy would ensure the wearing of protective equipment for uniformed officers working on and off duty assignments, and would provide guidelines for officers assigned to special details such as narcotics. Also, exceptions to a mandatory policy would be clearly stated and in a written format. In summary, the merits of implementing a mandatory policy outweigh the concerns opponents have to such a decision.

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Introduction

In the law enforcement profession, a number of policies and procedures exist that provide for the protection of peace officers involved in life-threatening situations. Such protection is also influenced by a police department's provision of necessary protective equipment. A police administrator's decision to develop and enact a specific personal protective policy should be based on a careful study of job-related safety issues, the needs of those affected by such policy, and the ability of the department to meet its responsibilities in the policy. The successful administrator will examine all aspects of a policy enactment and will seek the opinion of those affected by the change and those requiring it.

Peace Officers are equipped with many tools to assist them in performing their duties; arguably, body armor is the most important. Across the nation, individuals confront law enforcement officers with the intent to harm or kill them. In most aggression against peace officers, officers are acting in a defensive manner and are at a distinctive disadvantage compared to aggressors. Therefore, administrators should evaluate any advantages that can be offered to peace officers in an attempt to increase survival. Administrators should strive to outfit officers with the finest equipment available and require that such equipment be utilized in all appropriate situations.

Currently, the Pasadena Police Department provides officers with protective body armor but does not require it to be worn. As a result, numerous officers choose not to wear this equipment. The purpose of this project is to determine whether or not a mandatory policy should be enacted requiring officers to wear body armor. Before a policy of this nature can be implemented, several factors must be taken into consideration.

The intended audience of this policy research paper is the Pasadena City Council, police administrators, and peace officers. The financial responsibilities of equipment purchases usually reside with the city council, and ultimately the council is responsible for providing the safest environment and equipment possible for all its employees. The police administrator must provide the council with pertinent and accurate information surrounding safety issues, and should insist protection be a priority. The individual officer also contributes greatly to the success or failure of such an issue and can be an excellent resource for developing and implementing a policy.

In order to evaluate the project proposal, several sources will be examined. A study of police departments with similar work force characteristics and law enforcement concerns will be conducted along with a review of their current policies concerning the wearing of protective equipment. Sources will be gathered from criminal justice textbooks, law enforcement journals, and personal communications with law enforcement personnel. In addition, manufacturers of protective gear will be contacted and the information gathered will be evaluated.

After a thorough study has been completed, the intended outcome of this policy research paper is to persuade the decision- makers and affected parties to accept the mandated policy of wearing body armor. If exceptions are made to the policy, then a clear and concise list of exceptions will be stated. The proposal will attempt to address the concerns of officers who choose not to wear body armor, and emphasize the advantages of this potential life saving equipment. Ultimately, the goal is to encourage all parties to seriously weigh the benefits of such a policy and to truly understand the consequences of a rejection.

Historical Context

History plays a significant role in the development of a profession, and law enforcement is no exception. Safety concerns began to appear in the early days of this profession. Throughout the history of law enforcement in the United States, many police officers lost their lives while serving in their voluntary assignments. "Since the first recorded police death in 1794, there have been more than 14,000 law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty"(Law Enforcement Facts 1). The number of deaths among officers was not anticipated, or planned, and as the profession progressed through the twentieth century new, disturbing trends began to arise.

During the mid 1960s and early 70s, the number of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty more than doubled, from 57 to 129 (NIJ 4). This disturbing trend encouraged persons from the federal government and private sector to work together and address the issue of safety. The National Institute of Justice (formerly known as the National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice) played an instrumental role in pursuing safety measures, particularly related to soft body armor, which would benefit the law enforcement profession. Private corporations and other governmental entities joined the effort to design a soft body armor that would ultimately save lives. "Of all the equipment developed and evaluated in the 1970s by NIJ, one of its most significant achievements was the development of body armor that employed DuPont's Kevlar ballistic fabric" (NIJ 4).

Kevlar proved to be a necessary ingredient for the production of a bullet proof vest which the experts believed would achieve two major goals: the prevention of the most commonly used ammunition from penetrating the protective gear worn by officers,

and the production of protective gear that could be worn on a daily basis. If these two goals could be attained, then the risk to officers would decrease. The Pasadena Police Department recognized the benefits of providing protective equipment for police officers, and with the assistance of an outside non-profit organization the benefit became a reality.

The Pasadena Police Department first received body armor from the 100 Club in 1981 under the leadership of Chief Doug Wilson. The 100 Club purchased approximately one hundred bullet proof vest for male officers assigned to work street patrol, and eventually bullet proof vests were ordered for female officers. Since that time, all sworn officers have been provided with protective equipment and encouraged to wear the vests. Soft body armor has proven to be a tremendous benefit for eight Pasadena officers and their families. The armor protected one officer from a knife attack, another after being shoved through a stained-glass window, and others involved in major automobile accidents.

History has confirmed that the law enforcement profession is a dangerous occupation and the risk of being injured or killed is increasing. However, risk can be minimized if administrators and officers carefully analyze the benefits of wearing protective equipment. Acknowledging that other factors such as training contribute to the probability of surviving a life-threatening incident, officers can improve their chances by simply wearing soft body armor. In 1997, 65 officers were killed in the line of duty and 62 of the 65 were killed with firearms (1997 UCR 3). This statistic alone should convince officers to take preemptive measures against unforeseen job-related dangers and improve their chances of returning home safely after their tours of duty. In the past twenty years, there has been more acceptance of the efficacy of soft body armor. According to a 1993

Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) survey, there has been a dramatic increase in the general acceptance of body armor among law enforcement professionals (NIJ 12). The survey revealed that 539 of the 661 law enforcement agencies surveyed (81%) either provided body armor or cash allowances to purchase body armor to all of their uniformed patrol officers (NIJ 12). In comparison, BJS conducted the same survey in 1987, which indicated that only 28% of agencies surveyed provided armor or a cash allowance to purchase armor (NIJ 12).

Review of Literature or Practice

The purpose of issuing body armor to police personnel is to provide officers with a tool that can protect vital organs from particular rounds of ammunition, and increase the officer's likelihood of surviving a gun battle. Prior to 1980, an estimated 1181 officers had been murdered by firearms and the vast majority of the bullets (approximately 95%) fired at officers could have been easily stopped in concealable body armor (Westriek 41). By increasing one officer's chances of survival, body armor allows that officer to continue engaging the threat and possibly preventing a partner or citizen from being injured or killed. The facts illustrate that officers who choose not to wear protective equipment increase their probability of being harmed. "The FBI estimates that the risk of being killed during a firearms assault is 14 times higher for those officers not wearing body armor"(Westriek 41). Statistically, the evidence overwhelmingly supports officers wearing body armor and this protective item has been successful in preventing serious injuries or death. Body armor provides a protective wrap around many of the body's vital organs, preventing serious injury in a wide variety of non-ballistic events, including falls,

assaults, cuts and punctures, clubbings, car crashes and motorcycle spills, explosions and thermal threats (Knight, Brierley 20).

Since March 1988 the Pasadena Police Department has been considering developing a policy requiring officers to wear soft body armor. In a survey of nineteen agencies from across the country, only six agencies suggest the use of body armor by patrol officers, three mandate that the vest be "immediately available," and ten have policies which require the wearing of body armor by patrol officers (Baird, Wilkerson 1). The New Orleans Police Department has a policy in effect that the wearing of body armor is mandatory for all commissioned police officers, uniformed or plain clothes; an exception may be granted for those members working in an administrative assignment (Baird, Wilkerson). The Arlington Police Department in Texas requires body armor be issued to each officer and the armor must either be worn by or immediately available to all officers assigned to routine field duties (Baird, Wilkerson). In the Corpus Christi Police Department, all officers requesting to wear a protective vest are issued one; once issued, officers are required to wear it at all times while on duty (Baird, Wilkerson). A variety of guidelines and definitions exist throughout the remaining policies collected from the nineteen agencies.

The idea of a policy requiring officers to wear body armor is not uniformly accepted. Opponents within and outside the law enforcement community believe there are a number of reasons to allow each officer the choice of whether or not to wear protective equipment. Dr. Robert Soule, Tactical Medical Physician for the Pasadena S.W.A.T., and Richard Bowling, RN, Emergency Room Supervisor at Hermann Hospital for more than eleven years, conclude five disadvantages to a mandatory policy. They believe that a vest

is too uncomfortable to wear in Texas weather, restricts body movement, and could be dangerous with air-bag deployment. Additionally, these medical experts believe that a vest could lead to a false sense of security or protection and could cause some officers to develop a psychosis regarding a mandatory policy because they believe their chances of survival are better when not wearing a vest. Pasadena Police Supervisors Lt. M. Reiss and Patrol Captain G. Cunningham support a policy of personal choice and strongly give credence to an individual knowing what is best for them. Lt. Reiss has been assigned to patrol for the past eleven years is of the opinion that fate dictates when threat to life occurs, and officers should not be forced to wear body armor. Basically, these four professionals agree that body armor can prevent injury or death but an individual's right to choose is more important than a mandatory policy. Dr. Soule and Mr. Bowling believe officers should have a "pullover" vest easily accessible for situations the department deems appropriate.

A questionnaire was submitted to 239 sworn officers employed with the city of Pasadena and 56% of the officers responded. The questionnaire sought to provide officers an avenue to express their opinions concerning the wearing of protective equipment and to provide meaningful information to those responsible for safety. Officers were asked six relevant questions and the survey provided ample space for written comments. The majority of the responding officers (98%) stated that they were in fact concerned about safety related issues. Of those who responded to the survey, 60% of the officers stated that they wear body armor all the time while working on duty and 51% while working off duty. The analysis revealed that evening shift officers choose to wear their body armor

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more than day or night shift officers. Officers who oppose the wearing of body armor listed heat as their primary reasons followed by comfort and personal choice.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

Successful organizations constantly evaluate themselves to improve operations and adopt changes that would benefit the entire organization. Instituting change will inevitably cause dissension among some employees regardless of the issue and requiring the wearing of body armor will experience obstacles. The decision for a new policy implementation must include a careful study by those professionals knowledgeable in the field of protective equipment and law enforcement officers.

The administrator must decide whether or not a mandatory policy is required for the continued success of an organization. Consideration must also be given to the employees affected by the change, and how such a change will alter existing practices and assignments. Administrators wanting to achieve success should include all parties in decisions that can contribute to the implementation of a new policy. Requiring officers to wear protective equipment is a difficult decision, and the decision should be based strictly on an objective analysis.

Body armor was developed to improve officer's chances of survival if confronted with life-threatening incidents involving firearms. Although this protective equipment improves safety, officers face some constraints when wearing body armor. Body armor is uncomfortable, hot, bulky, and restricts movement, and these obstacles make it more difficult on the officer. The average cost for soft body armor is approximately four hundred dollars and this cost can be overwhelming for smaller departments. Also, expertise is needed to evaluate and test body armor on a routine basis so that the proper

selection is made. These constraints contribute to the philosophy departments have had for many years of making it optional for officers to wear body armor.

Opportunities exist for administrators to improve safety issues without causing financial hardships for the department or the individual officer. Administrators can seek financial assistance from the federal government and non-profit organizations for the purchase of protective equipment. The Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Act of 1997 establishes a Federal grant program for State and local law enforcement agencies needing soft body armor for their officers (Legislative Office 1). Non-profit organizations such as The 100 Club routinely provide funds to law enforcement agencies for products that improve safety for officers.

Dissension among officers who prefer not to wear body armor is a greater obstacle than the financial burden of providing this protective equipment. The problem administrators face with officers who believe that vests are more of a hindrance than a benefit can be overcome by providing the most technically advanced product on the market. New vests are more durable and lighter than prior manufactured armor, and with these changes overall comfort is improved. By improving the product, officers no longer can use the lack of comfort as an excuse for not wearing body armor.

Law enforcement agencies must address many issues related to budgeting and are usually limited in the amount of resources available for equipment. The cost of purchasing body armor can be tremendous, but the protection armor provides is priceless. Body armor theoretically can reduce medical costs by preventing or diminishing the effects of a gunshot wound; therefore, it is difficult to place an exact monetary value on the actual

savings. The benefits of wearing body armor outweigh any obstacles faced by the law enforcement community.

Conclusion

Officers are inherently at risk of being harmed or killed during their tour of duty and the need to decrease this risk should be a priority for all police personnel. The police administrator becomes the pivotal person in decisions that are difficult and important to the overall success of a department, and this person's leadership usually is the deciding factor. The successful administrator should take steps to provide the equipment and training necessary for peace officers to handle high-risk situations and to provide officers with advantages over those whose intent is to destroy human life.

The issue being considered affects police personnel, family members and city administrators. The process has been long and tedious, but revealed important conclusions. Under consideration is a policy mandating the wearing of body armor and its deliberation has created a thoughtful debate among officers of all ranks and assignments. Objective and subjective information has been analyzed to assist in determining the merits of a mandatory policy, and the concerns of those on both sides have been considered.

The merits of implementing a mandatory policy outweigh the concerns opponents have to such a decision. Wearing of body armor improves the chances of survival for officers involved in life threatening situations, and it has proven to be successful in protecting officers involved in accidents, assaults, and knife attacks. The medical cost a department and individual incur from a felonious attack can be tremendous, and by improving survival body armor ultimately decreases financial cost. The department should develop a mandatory policy requiring uniform officers working on or off duty assignments

to wear soft body armor. Also, to provide guidelines for officers assigned to special details (such as narcotics and detectives) when it would be mandatory for the wearing of armor.

The creation of a mandatory policy will ultimately prevent injuries and save lives. Recommending implementation of this new policy will reinforce the administrator's stance on improving safety. Again, the goal is to increase the probability of survival for officers involved in dangerous situations. Additionally, body armor protects officers involved in accidents, knife attacks and assaults. The physical protection and financial savings this protective equipment provides will improve the overall work environment for the peace officer.

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Pasadena Police Department Survey

Please complete the following survey in reference to body armor.

Please check all appropriate boxes.

1. Police Experience:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1-5 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 10-15 years | <input type="checkbox"/> over 20 years |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5-10 years | <input type="checkbox"/> 15-20 years | |

2. Rank:

- ☐ patrolman
- ☐ sergeant
- ☐ lieutenant
- ☐ captain
- ☐ assistant chief
- ☐ chief

3. Division:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> patrol | <input type="checkbox"/> ID |
| <input type="checkbox"/> motorcycle | <input type="checkbox"/> bicycle |
| <input type="checkbox"/> DOT | <input type="checkbox"/> investigations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> gangs | <input type="checkbox"/> canine |
| <input type="checkbox"/> code enforcement | <input type="checkbox"/> crime prevention |
| <input type="checkbox"/> narcotics | <input type="checkbox"/> academy |

4. Shift assignment:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 6am-2pm | <input type="checkbox"/> 10am-6pm |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2pm-10pm | <input type="checkbox"/> 8am-4pm |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10pm-6am | <input type="checkbox"/> other _____ (list hours) |

5. Are you concerned about safety issues?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

6. Do you believe the administration should take steps to improve safety?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

7. Do you believe the safety factor is increased by wearing body armor?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

8. Do you currently wear body armor while working extra jobs?

- ☐ all the time
- ☐ sometime
- ☐ never

9. Do you currently wear body armor while working on duty?

- ☐ all the time
- ☐ sometime
- ☐ never

10. Should there be in place a program or policy to inspect, test, and replace body armor?

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

PLEASE COMPLETE THE BACK PORTION OF THE SURVEY

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