

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Benefits of Physical Fitness in Law Enforcement**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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**By  
Ricky Schwartz**

**Bridgeport Police Department  
Bridgeport, Texas  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Fitness among law enforcers is a crucial topic. Most of the people agree upon maintaining their fitness, but there are many arguments on ways to attain fitness objectives with the stressful characteristic of the work police officers conduct. Individual officers ought to develop methods where they can build on fitness with programs that are well-matched with the particular requirements and limitations subjected by the type of the work. In "Street Survival: Tactics for Armed Encounters" (1980), a communication that is believed by most of the officers in law enforcement to be the primary reference that is used by offers to train on safety issues. The writer asserts that: "Let us face reality, most of the officers are in worst shape. In most agencies, physical exercise is rigorously voluntary, and little is said about poor conditions" (para. 1). Unfortunately, these are the facts that people have been living with, and thus the need to initiate changes in these agencies in a personal level if doing so at the organizational level seem fruitless. Physical fitness of an officer is the most crucial element both for their own safety and community safety.

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## INTRODUCTION

The definition of fitness may vary according to different sources, but it can be defined as, “The physiological contribution to wellness through nutrition and exercise behaviors that ensures high aerobic capacity, adequate strength, balanced body composition, and flexibility to minimize the risk of chronic health problems. Moreover, to enhance the enjoyment of life” (Anshel, 2000, p. 28). Though this definition sets a starting basis for discussing law enforcement fitness, it does not address the fundamental elements that are peculiar to law enforcement profession.

The physical agility test is the most important consideration for individuals with aspirations of becoming a police officer. Psychology screening is also done in the course of training to ensure selection of well-fit individuals. This test is conducted before any procedure is started and has to be passed so that one can proceed to the next stage. Usually, when new officers are being recruited, the steps and procedures that are conducted should be given the seriousness it deserves since these tests are directly related to the physical fitness of the police officers. The candidate is reviewed and checked against preset standards when they are opting to pursue a career in law enforcement. If they pass the tests, the testing stops there. Cases that have been raised to require the officers to maintain that level of fitness have not been taken positively. This contradicting issue, therefore, cuts to the core the subject of how physical fitness is defined in law enforcement (Parks & Steelman, 2008). In weighing the different aspects of the physical fitness of law enforcers to satisfy the legal as well as practical reasons, measuring points should be directly relational to the daily duties performed by the officers.

Supervisors should step up and implement a regular fitness schedule. It is imperative to put the description of fitness in the perspective of the legislation related to it to accommodate the agents and police officers who toil to implement and protect the law. Regarding the legal aspects required to the definition of fitness according to their performance, the balance in what is needed for the officers who are recruited and the subsequent protection at their disposal can be evaluated through the laws and the Constitution. People put reasonable expectations regarding the performance of police officers in executing their tasks hence they are entrusted with law enforcement.

According to Norvell and Belles (1993), physical fitness is a challenge that faces the nation. Today, a huge percentage of the population has proved is unhealthy. The study was published March 21, 2016, in the journal *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*. This fitness is an alarming problem when a percentage of this proportion are police officers. The police force participates in physically vigorous and strenuous work, so it is imperative that they remain in good physical health to undertake their jobs with maximum effort and determination with the resources at their disposal. Their fitness contributes directly to the security of the public, their fellow agents, and also personal safety. Physical fitness of police officer is essential for survival. "Fitness is critical for two reasons: one is the fit for duty purposes": this is according to Lieutenant Arnold G. who works in the Buffalo Police Department Academy as a Fitness Director (Suminsk, 2005, p. 7). "We ought to be physically fit some extent so that you can do the kind of tasks we are employed to do, and the other feature is longevity. There are big differences between the survival in the civilian population and law enforcement." According to Strandberg (2004), the life expectancy of an officer of the law is 59 and a

half years when all the factors have been put into consideration. Poor lifestyle and behavioral habits are on one way or another linked to the fact that they work during irregular hours and get short breaks during meals. Officers should maintain physical fitness standards personally and professionally.

## **POSITION**

Many forces work against a law enforcement officer or an agent. Minor things that are usually disregarded as having no significant impact, like the belt, often prove otherwise in the long run. These belts can be blamed for the back pains that are felt by the majority of the officers on active duty. Many items are usually hooked to the belt, and that adds weight to it which in turn leads to backaches with all the elements that are on the strap; it adds a lot of weight to the officer. Therefore, those agents who have invested their time in maintaining their fitness tend to be more resistant to these side effects. This explains as to why setting regular plans and schedules that require the officers to train and exercise is vital. Physical fitness contributes to weight control which is imperative for police officers (Anshel, 2000).

Peters, Cady, Bischoff, Bernstein, & Pike (1983) concluded that physical fitness boosts energy levels and mental clarity: police foundation courses typically include physical education classes which involve dedication of time in the gym. It enables the officer attained good shape after doing it continuously for a period. Training and conditioning take strong dedication and commitment on the officers' part. When an officer has been serving for some time and they understand how the system operates, they tend to become lazy which promotes overeating, and this trend leads to the officers skipping exercise (Peters et al., 1983). Therefore, a lot of problems will follow since their

fruits and sustainability of good health will only be realized if they commit fully to proper and consistent physical exercise and health fitness regarding the diet. When all these aspects are upheld, they will be insulated from various diseases, especially those related to the heart.

Proper nutrition program enables officers to get good health since their bodies will be continuously supplemented with the necessary nutrients and thus can set fitness goals. A human's body requires food that helps it keep running efficiently which is what the officer's bodies should be. This can only be achieved by eating a well-balanced diet. This program can only be essential to the enforcement officers if they have full information on how their bodies convert food into combustible compounds. The essentials are water, proteins, vitamins, and carbohydrates. Water is an essential nutrient; it helps to flush toxins from the system, maintain body temperature, and in the transportation of nutrients. Carbohydrates, on the other hand, are also very crucial in matters of health and fitness. They give energy to the body. Foodstuffs such as fruits, bread, vegetables, and grains all contain some traces of complex carbohydrates, which are sometimes regarded as fibers or starches. While the excess carbohydrates are transformed into the fat and stored in the body, fibers remain vital and indispensable in the human body.

Also, proteins have been known for the vital role it does in repairing body tissue. Proteins cannot be depended upon as a direct source of energy and only provide power when the body has exhausted its main sources of energy, which is the carbohydrates. Vitamins control biochemical reactions and are considered to be the helpers in the

majority of the cellular functions and are also needed in aiding the body to make more energy.

Anderson, Cychosz, and Frank (1998) write that when recruits are enrolled in the police academy with the strict rules, they are faced with giving them no chance to indulge in habits to destabilize their fitness and hence end up graduating from the academy with excellent fitness. Matthew Loux, Faculty Member, Criminal Justice at American Military University (2017) conducted research which proved otherwise. The percentage of recruits who were found to be either obese or overweight amounted to a staggering 76.8%. This is because the current standards by training agencies and facilities today do not sufficiently restrict a recruit's competence level. Most councils need recruits to join in high amounts of tolerance training. Endurance training enhances body inflammation, and at the same time, it helped reduce the stress hormone known as cortisol. The authors identified the effects on the bone and the body which will cause their gradual degeneration and thus increase the probability of being infected with the cardiovascular disease (Williams, Petratis, Baechle, Ryschon, Campain & Sketch, 1987).

Cortisol hormones have also been linked with the maintenance of body fat more so in the area around the stomach. Police recruits who are getting ready to start training are first evaluated to know where they stand in the academy; this is done through the participation in the endurance training. Young and Steindhart (1993) concluded from a police academy based in Toronto, Canada that the use of circuit education should be used to train the agents extensively and comprehensively. This is because the agencies do not have structured mechanisms or departments that work



specifically with fitness and thus the members become negligent to training. So Kales, Tsismenakis, Zhang, and Soteriades (2009), in their investigation, ascertained that within three years, the body fat starts to build and also infections regarding the heart become noted in the research. Greenhow, Steinhardt, and Stewart (1991), on the other hand, ventured into the details regarding skin folds and they measured the employee's skin folds at intervals of two years to adequately monitor the changes that were unfolding. The findings confirmed the hypothesis when the police officers were found to be possessing substantial amounts of body fat results; it could be concluded that police officers had increased skinfold measurements, ultimately having higher body fat content.

Norvell and Belles (1993) criticized the remarkable recurrence of premature deaths, injuries, and diseases, on the reluctance of agencies to employ a specialist to handle fitness. Different authors who wrote their books in various periods of time have been blaming the authorities for doing little to deal with an issue that revolves around them. This is despite knowing that by doing so they are bettering services offered. Raymond A. Noe, John R. Hollenbeck, Barry Gerhart and Patrick M. Wright (2006) unveiled that the law enforcement officers who died because of cardiovascular disease were all reluctant and not interested in enrolling with physical fitness or in programs that offered classes that could have to help them keep the diseases in check. Their levels of cholesterol had soared in their bodies because fat slowly accumulated in their bodies leading to obesity and reported cases of high blood pressure were also identified. According to Anderson, Cychosz, and Franke, (1998), the majority of the police officers who were poor participators in the training agendas were taking medications for one

disease of the other, like diabetes and heart diseases. This, therefore, leaves clues on the existence of a link between these conditions and the people who do not heed to the free urges and advice to train. With the discussion above, readers are left wondering about the fate of those officers who gain weight in the future. Peters et al. (1983) are more confident where he notes that rigorous exercise is not a necessity for all law enforcers but regular and light practice can do the trick in maintaining one's physical fitness. The primary challenge, however, is the changing nature and the dynamics of how training is perceived and educating on the benefits of training.

### **COUNTER ARGUMENTS**

One of the reasons why officers do not prioritize fitness is because of the injuries persevered in the process. Individual officers who have specialized only on endurance have overstrained their bodies and therefore tend to suffer from the back pains. Regarding injuries, they are not escapable, when police officers attempt muscular training they will strain their shoulders and muscle in the back since their environment does not expose them to scenarios where they have to use that much energy readily. Pain in the back area can significantly affect how an officer does his job on with back pains his level of performance is greatly reduced, more so those who drive for long distance during active duty. From research conducted by Anshel (2000), over 1,000 officers (Active on duty) were examined, where they were sent a questionnaire by the researchers with clear indications of what to respond. First was to give a response on their experience with back pains and then explain how they think their risk of getting back pains and lastly mentioning some of the risks they face. The analysis of the data 76.3 % of the people confessed to having encountered back pain within the past year,

54% is the percentage of those who experienced chronic back pain. The severe nature of work done by the police exposes them to many risk factors that place them at 8.6% of the total percentage, according to Peters et al. (1993).

However, physical fitness should be greatly emphasized because it will help reduce the risk of getting back pains. According to Noe et al., (2006) there was a positive curve in the analysis of the vulnerability to lower back pains as compared to the performance of the officers in the endurance challenge. This information seeks to address the essence of physical training, where officers are seen being fit and aggressive enough in the field to chase after thieves and other law breakers. Sprains are also results of such training sometimes, but those are the short terms, the real triumph will be in the future when officers have fully mastered their energies and can manipulate them in conducting their constitutional duties.

Another reason why officers do not prioritize fitness is that they have learned to persevere the pains they endure during work. Also, over half of the police force admitted that when feeling back pains, that could get them a sick leave but in many instances, the officers just work harder even when not feeling good. Over 75% of the officers were obliged to wear the belt with all the things, and they lack options and end up following the rules and wear the belt and also driving around the neighborhood to protect the citizens.

The police officers are usually at a high risk of getting cardiovascular disease and conditions related to heart disease. Police constables contact cardiovascular risk elements such as insulin sensitivity, high blood pressure, weight gain, adrenal gland issues, soft tissues problem and fatigue (Williams et al., 1987). All these problems are

associated with the strenuous habit of police exercises and training. Moreover, the cortisol to testosterone proportions will be altered in the bodies of the officers which will consequently end up being deposited in the midsection as fat.

However, well-organized training programs should be emphasized in the police department. The strenuous exercises must be regulated such that they do not have long-term effects on their health such as being overweight. It is clear that their training is quite demanding and requires professionalism. According to Young and Steinhardt (1993) focused on the cardiovascular and metabolic syndromes in the lives of police officers and then he decided to collect data from the ordinary people than did his comparison and analysis to find the relationship between the two groups of the pole under the same mirror of the mentioned diseases. The findings indicate a dissimilarity between the two groups where the police had a higher metabolic rate, hypertension. The policemen were also seen to be overweight as compared to the ordinary people in the society. This, therefore, exposes them to health problems and issues as emphasized by the contrast between them and the people.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Physical fitness is crucial for police officers to achieve consistency in their performance. Every police officer that is recruited should be willing to undertake the rigorous training and maintain it even after graduation. There are many risks associated with lack of exercise which lead to poor performance among the officers with time and also health-related issues. All these problems have been looked upon and measures to mitigate them have been put in place.

Police officers face challenges during their work as seen through the belts worn almost throughout the day. These belts are often loaded with weights that lead to back pains. This situation can be countered by regular exercise which will help the officers develop endurance and stay in good shape. A balanced diet is also essential to provide sufficient nutrients for the body. Strictness should not be bent during training of recruits. Regular exercise helps to reduce production of a hormone called cortisol which is a result of stress. This hormone leads to accumulation of fats around the midsection which is a common scenario among many police officers. There has been a notable recurrence of premature deaths, injuries, and diseases, on the reluctance of agencies to employ a specialist to handle fitness. It was found out that officers who died of cardiovascular diseases had not been doing regular exercises (Ronald , Remsberg & Thomas, 1980). Therefore, fats accumulated slowly in their bodies which resulted in adverse effects in the long run. Some officers are under medications to curb diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure. We can see what ignorance can cost the health of officers hence they should embrace the spirit of regular exercise wholeheartedly.

Even with this knowledge, the police officers still avoid regular exercises because they end up having back pains due to the strenuous exercises they do. Muscular training involves lifting heavy weights above their shoulders which lead to injuries. Their work also does not require them to use as much energy as they gained during training. This pain often leads to decrease in their performance since they are not comfortable. However, this problem can be countered by maintaining a regular exercise throughout their work life. Taking a break reduces endurance to back pains, and hence their

performance will not be affected. Police officers also avoid exercises because the strenuous exercises put them at a greater risk of getting cardiovascular diseases. They have also learned to operate with back pains and wearing belts as they work. It is important to attend to this situation by inculcating good training programs into their system. Their health should be a priority hence they should not ignore the back pains at the expense of remaining at work.

The benefits associated with physical fitness play a major role in rescuing the police officers in law enforcement. The officers play a significant role in maintaining law and order in the society. Their lives are more endangered than those of the regular citizens. It is therefore crucial for their health to be well monitored by all means so that they can perform their duties with maximum proficiency. Premature deaths due to high blood pressure and heart-related diseases should be taken with concern. If their lives are not protected, the nation will be insecure since the level of protection will have reduced.

A general theme that is characteristic of the rules mentioned above is that tests are given at the outset of Academy training. The testing should frequently be done after one converts to an officer because that is when the physical fitness of officers decreases immediately. A supervisor can play a remarkably significant role in implementation and maintenance of a health program. Every administrator must perform the first step in promoting a program that satisfies the needs of their officers and commissions to producing a fit force since their physical condition can mean the distinction between life and death. They then must get legislative permission, such as from the chief or sheriff. Officers need the track from their betters to look approximately

at their fitness levels so that they are on the job administration is what it should be. Maybe they could strengthen the squad to serve out with them and try to set up times and dates where everybody could meet commonly.

Achieving a fitness program can be one of the most advantageous factors in a police officer's life that can increase the health of the officers and their survival opportunities when they are out on the street and confronted with danger. It will also assist them to have more confidence in themselves, and in time the officers will see the positive aspects of the fitness program and hopefully enjoy themselves and boost their morale. Awards could be given for the "most-improved. Other ideas include participating in sports leagues or mapping field days where the officer's families could develop for a picnic. Incorporating fun into the conditioning could be a strong motivational factor. Since physical fitness programs are not enforced after the academy, supervisors should step up and implement a regular fitness schedule. Manageable ideas as the ones above can instigate huge discrepancies in the well-being and health of an officer.

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