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**The Sam Browne vs. The Load-Bearing Vest:
Vesting into the future**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this work is to inform the reader that police agencies bear the responsibility to care for employees; therefore, agencies should offer the option for officers to transition from the Sam Browne duty belt to the load-bearing vest. The duty belt presents the possibility of health issues for employees such as back and sciatica pain, to the less obvious issues, to include nerve damage, soft tissue damage and circulatory system restriction. The load-bearing vest offers a more comfortable, versatile, and highly functional platform compared to the duty belt. The weight of the officer's equipment can be dispersed evenly across the vest and the weight is supported by the shoulders and torso. Not only does this help eliminate any health issues that may arise, but this also promotes less environmental stress for the officer. Less environmental stress promotes productivity and job satisfaction.

Opponents of this change include the perception of police militarization as a hurdle; however, this term is highly subjective and undefined. Other Opponents believe that the cost to supply the officers with this equipment is unattainable. Just the opposite is true. The cost of the unit is cheap and non-recurring. The health benefits alone are predicted to pay for the vests, but productivity should also be increased. The issues with the duty belt platform should not be ignored by departments. It is time that departments offer the option for officers to transition to the load-bearing vest.

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INTRODUCTION

Health and quality of life are very important aspects of human existence.

Although aging is imminent, prolonging the aging process by taking care of the body is of much importance to most members of society, even those that choose policing as a profession. Most police agencies require that employees, especially a uniformed patrol officer, don some type of uniform. More times than not, a Sam Browne-style duty belt is a fixture of the police uniform. The Sam Browne belt is a hip-borne belt that is made to carry policing tools such as electronic control weapons, batons, pepper spray, firearms, etc. This equipment is heavy and can cause adverse impacts to the wearer's health and wellness. Jonathan Kozlowski advises in his 2010 work, *A pain in the neck... hips and back: Addressing ergonomic challenges and what manufacturers are doing for duty gear comfort*, "With the average weight of a duty belt nearing 20 pounds, there should be no trouble in understanding how officers can develop an injury simply by wearing the tools they need to do their job" (p. 26). This is unsatisfactory by any industry standard when there is another option readily available to replace what may contribute to problematic injuries to employees.

With the information and technology available that is geared toward ergonomics, it is time that a reconsideration is explored by policing agencies regarding the duty uniform. All too many officers are experiencing ailments, from discomfort to problems that require surgical attention, which may be caused by simply donning the uniform in order to work. Kevin Davis touches on these issues in his 2012 work, *External Vest Carriers*. It is well known in the policing world that the weight of the duty belt and

equipment hanging from the hips contributes to back pain and other back conditions, as well as sciatic pain (Davis, 2012).

The alternative to the hip-borne tool belt for police officers is the load-bearing vest. The vest can carry the same tools and more, because there is much more surface area and the weight can be evenly distributed and supported by the shoulders and torso. The individual officer can organize the tools on the vest, to suit his or her placement preference, making use of the many attachment options available in the multitude of vest platforms. It is highly recommended that uniformed patrol operations, across the board, should transition from the traditional hip-borne duty belt to the load-bearing vest.

POSITION

There are many health benefits of switching from the Sam Browne belt to the load-bearing vest. The individual officer's health and quality of life should be one of the greatest considerations for managers in the field of policing. Nobody wants to live their "golden years" hunched over a walker or leaning on a cane. Wearing the duty belt as part of the uniform can surely contribute to the reality mentioned above. Alexandra Wessling advised in her 2018 article, *5 agency improvements police officers want to see in 2019: We asked our members how they would like to see their agency improve in the coming year*, that after polling the members, replacing the duty belt with the load-bearing vest was the number one recommended agency improvement (2018). Deploying the load-bearing vest in place of the duty belt also ranked number one amongst police officers compared to some very important issues, to include changes in the perception of the public and ending the recruiting crisis (Wessling, 2018).

Research on the health benefits of switching to the load-bearing vest, other than polling, is not of overabundance but studies are being done. Judy Berthiaume, in her 2018 piece, *Blugold research aims to improve police officers' health, quality of life*, states that an extensive six-month study was conducted by a team from the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. This study, led by faculty and Dr. Jeff Janot, a kinesiology professor at the university, produced findings that when the duty equipment of police officers is carried on the vest platform, rather than the belt, reported pain in the hips and lower-back was significantly less (Berthiaume, 2018). Referring back to Wessling's work, expanding on Berthiaume's information, Wessling tells us in reference to the six-month study, Janot stated, "The findings are clear and they are significant... While the vests weigh more, the weight is more evenly distributed so there is less strain on the hips and lower back" (Wessling, 2018, para. 10). With these opinions of scholars and kinesiologists beginning to surface, the issue of health benefits being linked to the transition from the duty belt to the load-bearing vest is becoming more common.

Taking strain off the lower back could be a "game changer" for many officers trying to tough out one more day on the streets. Some issues that can be caused by the hip-borne duty belt can be more serious than mere pain to the lower back and hips. Returning to Kozlowski, he suggests "... discomfort impacts more than musculoskeletal pain (like back pain) [but] also considers impact to the nervous system, soft-tissue damage as well as circulatory system restrictions" (2010, p. 28). When it comes to the soft tissues of the human body, the thick, heavy and unforgiving qualities of the leather duty belt can be more damaging than agencies may have realized. Kozlowski goes on to inform his readers that the belt rubs on 31 pairs of nerve roots at the spinal base and

restricts the flow of blood needed for proper communication between the lower extremities and the brain (2010). Nerve damage and restricted blood flow can lead to numbness and a slower reaction time.

Functionality is also an important point when it comes to choosing between the Sam Browne-style belt and the load-bearing vest. Comfort of the officer carries paramount importance in everyday operations. The load-bearing vest offers the individual a more comfortable and practical platform that aides in multiple aspects of the job. J. C. Vischer conducted a study in 2007 where she suggests there is evidence that the physical environment of the job does, without a doubt, affect job performance and the employee's job satisfaction (Vischer, 2007). One of the greatest physical stressors involving the duty belt and the police profession is getting in and out of a patrol car, clad in the duty uniform. Transitioning from the duty belt to the load bearing vest is a step toward a more comfortable and more productive tour of duty, especially concerning getting in and out of the patrol vehicle.

Managers of departments not only need to consider the health and quality of life of employees and their comfort and safety, but also the safety of the citizens in which the officers are sworn to protect. The hip-borne belt is under direct scrutiny for issues discussed above, such as lower back problems and sciatica issues. These symptoms, many times, are caused by the belt-influenced posture that many hours in the equipment may affect. Carlton, Carbone, Stierli, and Orr conducted a study in 2014 suggesting that marksmanship can also be influenced by load carriage. In their work,

they speak on load, posture and marksmanship. Posture can be affected by load carriage, which, in turn, can affect the stability of an officer and impact his or her marksmanship on the range and in the field (Carlton, Carbone, Stierli, & Orr, 2014).

With the load-bearing vest platform, an officer can take weight from the hips and evenly distribute weight across the vest. The Modular Lightweight Load-carrying Equipment, or MOLLE type system, that most of these vest platforms offer, is one more aspect shedding a positive light on the functionality of the load-bearing vest (Davis 2012). The load-bearing vest boasts functionality, even weight distribution and health benefits that can be considered by an agency when discussing the transition from the duty belt to the load-bearing vest. There are many other positive arguments that can be raised regarding the load-bearing vest for law enforcement; however, there are also some arguments against the transition from the traditional duty belt to the load-bearing vest.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Not all organizations are proponents of the load-bearing vest and prefer the Sam Browne-style belt. One argument that can be made is that the public may perceive the load-bearing vest as one step closer to the militarization of police. The term, militarization of police, is not only subjective, but it is also undefinable. Bieler (2016) suggests that some scholars believe that militarization of police can create hostility between the police and the community. He also suggests that the police force that is militarized may tend to see the use of force as the “go-to” method of problem solving. Bieler, as his research concludes, contradicts the aforementioned statement, going on to inform the reader that there are some scholars that believe militarization promotes

discipline, more advanced training and accountability that leads to the decline of excessive use of force. Regardless, the term militarization is subjective to the point that Bieler also states that there is no agreed upon, scholarly, definition of the term (Bieler, 2016).

Although some research may show that the militarization of police is not typically preferred by the citizens in some settings, there is evidence that points toward positive attributes, and that many do support police militarization. Fox, Moule, and Parry (2018) conducted an extensive survey of over 700 Americans and produced some results proving that there were many persons that do not support the militarization of police and want to combat the militarization of police, at all costs. Although, Fox, Moule, and Parry show that there are some that do not support police militarization, when looking at the totality of the research, there was concerning results that proved agreement on militarization of police is not cut and dry. It is not as opposed as some scholars may try to convince. Fox, Moule, and Parry make some concerning discoveries regarding the court of public opinion (See Appendix A). They suggest that the opinion regarding police militarization is based on many factors to include belief in police legitimacy, fear of crime, political party, education level, gun ownership status, and even sex and race (Fox, Moule, & Parry, 2018).

Another study conducted by O'Neill, Swenson, Stark, O'Neill, and Lewinski (2018) tells the reader that participants rated the importance of vest attributes for police. Confidence in the officer was rated most important, while intimidation and a militarized appearance significantly carried the least degree of importance among the public (O'Neil, Swenson, Stark, O'Neil, & Lewinski, 2018). There are multiple factors affecting

support or non-support of militarization, making it impossible to draw an educated conclusion; therefore, the argument that the load-bearing vest will be unfavored due to it leaning toward militarization cannot be validated.

Another reason that many agencies are reluctant to transition to the load-bearing vest is the cost that the department would incur. Police budgets are extremely burdensome on local governments, and in many agencies the money is not available because it is already allocated throughout all departments within the local government. Zhao, Ren, and Lovrich, in their 2010 journal, *Budgetary support for police services in U.S. municipalities: Comparing political culture, socioeconomic characteristics and incrementalism as rival explanations for budget share allocation to police*, support this claim. Zhao, Ren, and Lovrich explain that police protection is necessary, yet expensive, “command[ing] a lion’s share of annual municipal budgets... [but] nonetheless do differ somewhat on the budget share allocated to police services from one year to the next” (Zhao, Ren & Lovrich, 2010, p.266).

Many departments may have an initial “sticker-shock” reaction; however, the positives, to include officer morale, productivity, and job satisfaction should be highly considered in decision making. The “big picture” cost savings, regarding back issues and surgeries can also be considered. Costs of surgeries differ with severity and locations; however, Judy Berthiaume (2016) interviewed an officer who informed that after a mere five years on the force “he’s already experiencing hip and lower-back pain from long hours of sitting in his squad car, walking his beat or apprehending suspects, all while carrying the heavy gear around his waist” (Berthiaume, 2016, p. 3).

While fretting over the cost of equipping a department with the load-bearing vest and scrapping the duty belt, managers may be pleasantly surprised to know that the cost of the vests are not as great as one may think. The cost of the load-bearing vest varies depending on the brand, platform, and number of attachments; however, without Kevlar panels the units average about three hundred dollars each (Berthiaume, 2018). Managers may also consider that the cost of the vests is non-recurring and can be spread out over time. The officers' existing Kevlar panels are easily transferrable from whatever carrier is currently deployed to the load-bearing vest. It may take commitment and time to purchase the vests for a department's officers, but three hundred dollars is a small price to pay for the betterment of the department and employees.

RECOMMENDATION

After careful consideration, the decision should be made by law enforcement agencies to discontinue the use of the Sam Browne-style, hip-borne, duty belt and transition to the load-bearing vest. A police officer that puts his or her life on the line, daily and nightly, deserves the best and most comfortable equipment available. Upon retirement, the individual officer deserves to have the best quality of life that can be afforded to him or her. Managers of departments can contribute to the officer's quality of life by making this simple switch, and at the very least, offer the option.

Brandl and Smith (2013) conducted a research to compare the age in which City of Detroit police officers died and the length of their retirements compared to City of Detroit civilian employees. The data collected by the researchers was supplied by the City of Detroit Retirement Systems Office. The results of Brandl and Smith's study proved that retired police officers have significantly shorter retirements than civilian

employees and they die at a significantly younger age than their civilian counterparts (2013). This information can also aid in a department's decision to equip their officers with top of the line tools that offer the best chance at a healthy and more enjoyable retirement.

With that said, there is factual data that an officer will benefit in the area of health and wellness and quality of life simply by transitioning from the duty belt to the load-bearing vest. Janot's study on the Eau Claire Police Department's officers is paving the way for change regarding the ergonomic benefits of the load-bearing vest (Berthiaume, 2018). The testimonies of the officers that participated in the study are truly remarkable. It is reported that Cory Reeves, a five-year officer with the Eau Claire police department, was already suffering from hip and lower-back pain. He credits the pain to the heavy gear worn on his waist while performing everyday duties. Berthiaume tells the reader, "As soon as I put the vest on, I noticed the difference," said Reeves. "I wore the duty belt the first three months, and noticed an immediate difference when I put on the vest for the last three months" (Berthiaume, 2018, p. 3). There are many more testimonies from officers of the Eau Claire Police Department outlined Berthiaume's work. Matt Rokus, the Eau Claire deputy chief of police, informs that not only is the opportunity for improved health for his officers important, but he also predicts a "reduction in health care cost and lost time due to injury" (Berthiaume, 2018, p. 4).

The health benefits of the load-bearing vests are paramount to the promotion of change, but so is the functionality. Being that the load-bearing vest offers many options for a department to choose from, the "sky is the limit" when it comes to attachments, color choices, styles, etc. (see Appendix B). Because the weight is supported by the

shoulders and the torso, an officer may be able to carry more equipment on the load-bearing vest than the traditional Sam Browne-style belt. Not only can the shoulders support more weight comfortably, there is much more surface area on the load-bearing vest to put attachments.

There are also choices on attachment methods that range from the MOLLE system to the old-style All-purpose Lightweight Individual Carrying Equipment, or ALICE clips (Davis 2012). The officer that dons the load-bearing vest is typically able to move more comfortably and have a greater range of motion. Davis informs his readers, "... they increase comfort and decrease fatigue and in the case of some designs, offer the patrol officer a relief from the burdensome weight of the duty equipment they must carry" (Davis, 2012, p. 4).

Although many departments argue that the load-bearing vest is too militarized in appearance, evidence suggests that much of the public supports the militarization of police. The typical citizen's opinion is based mostly on whether the subject answering the question likes and supports the police (Fox, Moule, & Parry, 2018). Also, the term militarization of police lacks an agreed upon scholarly definition. If there is not an accepted definition of the term, there can be no definitive methodology to measure the response of the public; therefore, any survey regarding public opinion cannot be validated.

Other agencies may argue that the cost to replace the hip-borne duty belt with the load-bearing vest is not attainable. However, research has proven that when an employee is more comfortable, the employee performs better and is typically more satisfied with one's job (Vischer, 2007). When productivity is increased, as a rule,

revenue is also increased. If one puts pen to paper, the math will show that the load-bearing vest has the potential to pay for itself. The long-term savings of switching to the load-bearing vest is also remarkable. More time at work due to less ailments can also help pay for the costs of the vests. This not only means that the department will get more productivity from an employee, but it also suggests that employees will call in sick less, which will save in overtime, also.

Brandl and Smith state, "Government leaders and police policy makers have an obligation to consider the health and welfare of their employees" (Brandl & Smith, 2013). Transitioning from the Sam Browne-style duty belt to the load-bearing vest is a definite step in the consideration of the health and welfare of the police employee. There are some officers that may not want the change. Some officers may be more comfortable wearing the duty belt and do not care to take the time to get used to the new configuration. Departments are not obligated to mandate the change amongst employees, but they should offer the option, at the very least, to transition from the Sam Browne-style belt to the load-bearing vest.

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APPENDIX A



(Fox, Moule, & Parry, 2018, p. 42)

APPENDIX B



(O’neill, Swenson, Stark, O’neill, & Lewinski, 2018, p. 4/22)