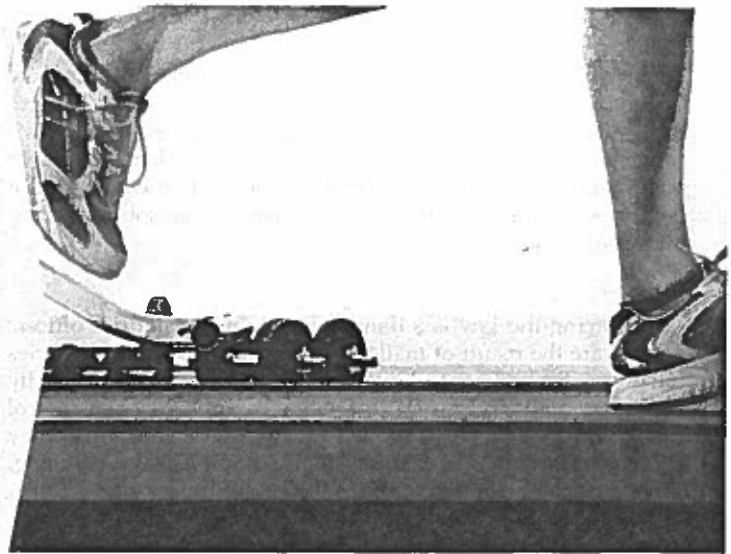


Fit for Duty?

The Need for Physical Fitness Programs for Law Enforcement Officers

By Sergeant Adrienne Quigley, Arlington County, Virginia, Police Department; and IACP Fellow



It should not be surprising that physical fitness and exercise improve long-term health. Studies have shown that sedentary people have twice the risk of coronary artery disease than active people as well as a higher risk of stroke, colon cancer, and back injuries. Only 22 percent of U.S. adults get at least 30 minutes of light to moderate exercise five or more times a week, and less than 10 percent exercise vigorously at least three times a week.¹ More than 50 percent of deaths in the United States are attributable to these and other lifestyle choices.²

Regular physical activity helps to prevent coronary heart disease and assists with weight control. Weight training and strength exercises build muscles and endurance and enhance flexibility, thus protecting the body from injury and disability. Consistent physical activity has also been shown to reduce blood pressure, blood lipids, and glucose tolerance, thus helping to prevent hypertension, heart disease, and diabetes. Expending at least 2,000 calories a week in physical activity reduces an individual's risk of dying of any cause by 28 percent. Mortality rates for unfit men were estimated at 64 per 10,000 persons. However, that number drops to 18.6 per 10,000 persons when looking at those that are most fit.³ Being physically fit translates into fewer sick days, disabilities, and injuries—thereby reducing health-care costs.

Even though many U.S. citizens are aware of these or similar statistics, the U.S. population in general is not as fit as it should be—and police officers are no exception. In recent years, there has been a reduction in the health and fitness of law enforcement officers across the United States. This lack of fitness makes officers prone to on-duty injuries and illnesses, increases their exposure to liability, and engenders a loss of respect from the community based on their appearance.

The Current Danger

From 1983 to 1993, a study was conducted by the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research that randomly sampled approximately 1,700 officers from different law enforcement agencies across the country. The results show that when compared with the general population, officers' average fitness levels are below normal in the areas of aerobic fitness, body fat, and abdominal strength and average in upper-body strength and lower-back flexibility. The data show that law enforcement officers are less fit in most areas than at least half of all U.S. citizens despite the fact that the physical demands of their profession require that they be more fit than the average person.⁴

As a group, law enforcement officers have a greater morbidity and mortality rate than the general public, due mostly to cardiovascular disease, colon cancer, and suicide. Recent studies have shown an annual increase in the frequency and severity of cardiovascular incidences among law enforcement personnel. The risk of having a heart attack doubles with each decade of law enforcement service.⁵ Because of this, numerous states have adopted the "heart and lung bill," allowing officers who develop cardiovascular disease to take an early retirement.

Furthermore, law enforcement officers suffer more job-related stress than people in other occupations. Many realize that the nature of the profession itself exposes officers to increased levels of stress. Making split-second, lifesaving decisions; facing inherent dangers; working shift work and long hours; and constantly interacting with people who are upset, angry, or uncooperative all take a toll on individuals. Job-related stress is a major health concern for the law enforcement community because it can affect the physical, emotional, and mental well-being of the officers. Stress-related emotional problems such as divorce, suicide, and alcoholism are prev-

alent in the law enforcement community. Physically, stress has been linked to cardiovascular disease, hypertension, lower-back pain, and gastrointestinal disorders. However, exercise and physical activity have been shown to reduce stress levels and alleviate some of the pressures officers feel as part of their profession.

To determine at what level of health risk an individual may be, a statistical measure called *relative risk* was developed. Relative risk evaluates the likelihood of dying or developing a particular disease for an individual with an identified risk factor. An average risk would be noted as a relative risk of 1.0. The relative risk for law enforcement for being unfit and inactive is 2.2. This means that unfit and inactive law enforcement officers have a chance of suffering a heart attack 2.2 times greater than those officers who participate in a physical fitness program. If an officer has a second risk factor, such as smoking, high blood pressure, or high cholesterol, the increased risk rises to 6.6 times.⁶ One study of a major metropolitan police department showed that almost 50 percent of its officers had at least three of the five major risk factors for coronary heart disease: high cholesterol, smoking, obesity, inactivity/poor cardiovascular fitness, or high blood pressure. Because of this, it is not hard to understand why the average life span of an officer after retirement is only two to five years.⁷ A major contributing factor to this phenomenon is the lack of personal and agency fitness and wellness programs.

Fitness and Performance

In the law enforcement field, fitness also has a direct impact on job performance. Based on job descriptions from agencies across the country, a core list of physical tasks required to perform the duties of a law enforcement officer were identified. The critical tasks—those tasks where poor performance could put officers or the public in jeopardy—were

identified as running, climbing, jumping, lifting/carrying, dragging, pushing, and use of force.⁹

For over 75 percent of police apprehensions, the amount of resistance given by the suspect is described as moderate or strong, and the average amount of time it takes to subdue a subject can vary between 30 seconds and two minutes. For most physical tasks lasting over two minutes, officers use 75-90 percent of their maximum capability.⁹ Cardiovascular endurance, anaerobic power, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition are all underlying factors in successful job performance.

An in-depth study conducted by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1997 examined 40 cases of serious assaults against law enforcement officers across the country. The incidents were analyzed through offender and officer interviews and document reviews. Of the 52 officers participating in the study, 47 stated that they were in "excellent" health at the time of the assault, four reported being in "better than average" health, and the remaining officer reported "average" health. Seventy-three percent of the officers were involved in a physical fitness program, the most common of which were running and weightlifting. Repeatedly, officers credited their fitness level with aiding them in their survival.¹⁰

Physical fitness can also protect officers from becoming victims. In the numerous offender interviews conducted by the FBI over the course of the past 10 years, it was learned that offenders typically size up their victims when deciding what they are going to do. Many had difficulty identifying a particular trait or mannerism that made them pick or not pick a particular officer, but they did articulate that the deciding factor was whether or not they felt they could "take them." If officers appeared fit and conducted themselves in a professional manner, offenders hesitated; however, when officers were perceived as potential targets, offenders capitalized on the situation. Officers need to be cognizant of the image they convey and recognize that their appearance and demeanor in uniform is a primary factor in how others will perceive them.¹¹

Cost of the Least Fit

National accident, injury, and illness data have shown that 20 percent of the average law enforcement agency's workforce is responsible for 80 percent of the cost of the accidents. The small percentage of least-fit officers is responsible for the majority of the compensable injuries. Various law enforcement

agencies calculated the average cost of an in-service heart attack to be between \$400,000 and \$700,000. Heart disease accounts for 20-50 percent of all early retirements, and back problems account for another 15-35 percent. Lack of physical activity is one major contributor to both conditions.¹² One study tabs the cost of early disability at 165 percent of an officer's salary.¹³

Establishing Fitness and Wellness Programs

Due to the alarming health data and the steady decline in the wellness of U.S. citizens, a task force was created by various law enforcement organizations to establish a model health and fitness program that would be voluntary. Unfortunately, even with a large publicity campaign, the program was not supported by the majority of law enforcement agencies across the country. The state of North Carolina was one of the few jurisdictions that recognized the dire need for intervention in the area of health and fitness and approved funding for seven agencies to participate in a pilot study. The data show improvements across the board in overall fitness. Significant cardiovascular and strength improvements were noted, and several participants were even able to stop taking medication

for diabetes and hypertension because of their weight loss. The participating agencies reported a 25 percent increase in productivity through a variety of factors: reduced absenteeism, reduced turnover rate, reduced accidents, and reduced worker's compensation claims. Research has shown that for every one dollar invested into fitness and wellness programs, the return ranges from two to five dollars.¹⁴

A total fitness and wellness program provides benefits to participants as well as to the agency that establishes such a program. Officers stand to profit from an improved ability to perform job functions, reduced stress, and better physical and psychological preparation. Agencies stand to benefit in terms of efficiency as well as fiscally. Officers are less likely to be injured or retire on disability, thus reducing the costs of disability payments and the hiring and training of new employees. Studies analyzing the civilian workforce show that active employees demonstrated greater productivity. Based on this theory, the performance ratings of fit and unfit officers were examined, and it was learned that the more fit and active officers received higher ratings on their performance evaluations than their less fit and inactive peers. In addition to this, officers that are more fit and



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active have 40-70 percent less absenteeism than less-fit officers.¹⁵ Agencies that utilize proactive fitness and wellness programs are considered preferred risks by state municipal league self-insured pooling organizations, and incentive programs have been established to encourage more participation.

By implementing an exercise program, agencies also reduce their liability by ensuring that officers are prepared to handle tasks while controlling the possible risks and their associated costs. Failure to provide fitness and wellness training can open an agency to unnecessary liability, especially in cases alleging excessive force. In the case of *Parker v. District of Columbia*, the arresting officer was accused of using excessive force to effect an arrest of a combative subject. The officer's lack of physical fitness and inability to use defensive tactics or less-lethal options resulted in his discharging his firearm, rendering the suspect a paraplegic. The D.C. Metropolitan Police Department was found to be deliberately indifferent to the physical training needs of its officers, and the plaintiff was awarded a substantial sum of money.¹⁶

A total fitness program incorporates the development of good lifestyle habits, including regular exercise, good nutrition, weight management, stress management, and substance abuse pre-

vention. Such a program must be supported by an agency's administrators for it to be successful. Fitness and health programs are believed to increase employee loyalty, improve morale, and decrease turnover. More importantly, employees benefit from improved quality of life and health while reducing employee-related accidents, injuries, and illnesses, thus reducing operating costs. There is a recent trend within the law enforcement community to recognize the importance of fitness as it relates to job performance, officer safety, and wellness. Several agencies have initiated incentive programs for officers to encourage participation and improve health.

Fitness and Officer Safety

There has been a long-standing belief that deaths in the line of duty are unacceptable, and law enforcement professionals have done everything they can to reduce them. This philosophy should also extend to officer injuries. Law enforcement leaders cannot accept the proposition that accidents or injuries are a reality of the law enforcement profession. The only acceptable belief is *zero officers killed or injured*. Studies have shown repeatedly that physical fitness has a direct impact on reducing injuries and improving personal well-being as well as work performance. There needs to

be a national push to increase the development and participation in fitness and health programs by law enforcement agencies to protect officers and save lives. At the 2006 annual IACP conference, a resolution recognizing the importance of law enforcement fitness and wellness programs was adopted. The IACP commends the development of fitness programs utilizing activities generally performed by police officers and encourages the adoption of career-long fitness and wellness standards by law enforcement agencies. ❖

Notes:

¹J. E. Smith Jr. and G. Gregory Tooker, "Health and Fitness in Law Enforcement: A Voluntary Model Program Response to a Critical Issue," *CALEA Update*, no. 87 (February 2005): 28, <http://www.calea.org/Online/newsletter/No87/healthfitness.htm> (accessed April 29, 2008).

²Thomas R. Collingwood et al., "Why Officers Need to Be Fit," chap. 1 in *Fit Force Administrators Guide* (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1998), 5.

³*Ibid.*, 13.

⁴*Ibid.*, 8.

⁵*Ibid.*, 10.

⁶*Ibid.*, 11.

⁷Smith and Tooker, "Health and Fitness in Law Enforcement," 28.

⁸Collingwood, "Why Officers Need to Be Fit," 3.

⁹*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰Anthony J. Pinizzotto, Edward F. Davis, and Charles E. Miller III, *In the Line of Fire* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997), 14.

¹¹Anthony J. Pinizzotto and Edward F. Davis, "Offender's Perceptual Shorthand: What Messages Are Law Enforcement Officers Sending to Offenders?" *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 68, no. 6 (June 1999): 1, <http://www.fbi.gov/publications/leb/1999/jun99leb.pdf> (accessed April 29, 2008).

¹²Smith and Tooker, "Health and Fitness in Law Enforcement," 28.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴G. Gregory Tooker and David D. Cashwell, "Revisiting the Fitness and Health in Law Enforcement Model Program," *CALEA Update*, no. 96 (February 2008): 23.

¹⁵Smith and Tooker, "Health and Fitness in Law Enforcement," 28.

¹⁶*Parker v. District of Columbia*, 850 F.2d 708 (D.C. Cir. 1988).

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