

## Force Science Calls for Training in Officer Down Scenarios

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In the Force Science Center's recent newsletter they address the very difficult topic of how do we respond to an Officer down scenario and appropriately address and calculate the risk/benefit of a rescue.

The issue is SO difficult that it may explain how little training we receive in the topic. However, Dr. Matthew Sztajnkrzyer, an advisor to the Force Science Research Center and chairman of the emergency medicine research division at the Mayo Clinic as well as a medical director for a city/county SWAT team and a police agency in Minnesota, devised a survey after conducting officer-down training exercises with some 150 LEOs from various departments.

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Surprising preliminary results from a survey about responses to downed-officer rescues suggest it may be more practical to modify training and equipment related to this high-intensity field challenge than to try changing officers' instinctive responses.

"Officers appear to view risk in this situation very differently than would be predicted based on studies of risk in other contexts," says Dr. Matthew Sztajnkrycer, an advisor to the Force Science Research Center and chairman of the emergency medicine research division at the Mayo Clinic, who conducted the poll earlier this year. "Better understanding of the meaning of the survey responses will hopefully result in recommendations on training and equipment that will save the lives of downed officers and rescuers alike."

Sztajnkrycer, a medical director for a city/county SWAT team and a police agency in Minnesota, devised the poll after conducting officer-down training exercises with some 150 LEOs from various departments [see Force Science News #109, sent 11/7/08]. That study revealed that when a colleague is hit and unable to escape the kill zone on his own, officers overwhelmingly attempt an immediate rescue that places them at risk but may not in fact improve the victim's survival odds.

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**SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS.** His recent survey, disseminated online through Force Science News and our strategic partner PoliceOne.com, was designed to explore this behavior in greater depth. More than 1,700 LEOs responded from the U.S. and other countries, an impressive number that "speaks to the chord this issue strikes," Sztajnkrycer says.

According to the results, 6% of respondents report having been personally involved in rescuing a downed officer in the last 5 years, "an unexpectedly high number," in Sztajnkrycer's opinion. More than half have been on the job for over 15 years, indicating that "very experienced personnel weighed in." Some 55% work patrol; the rest are divided between full-time SWAT, investigations, administration, reserve, and miscellaneous assignments.

In establishing background information, the respondents were asked: "On a scale of 1-10 (least dangerous to most dangerous), how risky do you consider law enforcement as a profession?" The most commonly ranked number was 8, Sztajnkrycer reports.

"This is a striking finding about the character of the profession," he says. "Cops consider what they do dangerous and they still go out and do it every day. It's easy to do a job when you don't think its risky. It's much harder when you consider yourself in danger every time you go to work."

REVEALING SCENARIO. A core element of the survey was a scenario to which possible responses carry classic psychological connotations. The scenario reads:

"An IED explodes, injuring 3 officers as they respond to a reported 'man with a gun' call. They are lying on the ground, screaming, with shrapnel wounds to the lower extremities. There is quite a bit of blood. If they do not receive medical aid, all 3 officers will bleed to death."

While stressing that there is no "right" answer, respondents were asked to select what "you feel is the best option," :

- A rescue attempt in which 1 officer will be saved.

- A rescue attempt in which there is a 1/3 chance that all 3 officers will be saved, and a 2/3 chance that no officer will be saved.

"This question basically gets at an officer's view of acceptable risk, at least in the setting of downed-officer rescue," Sztajnkrycer says. Previous studies dealing with non-life-threatening issues (financial risk, for example) have established that when people are asked to choose between a sure gain versus a gamble, typically more than 80% will choose the guaranteed gain rather than risk a potentially substantial loss, he explains. "In other words, people generally are risk-averse when dealing with gains."

The choices made by officers in his survey, however, were radically different. Only a minority (30%) opted for the sure thing, while a whopping 70% chose to gamble in hopes of saving all 3 officers, even though the odds were stacked against them.

"More study is required, but where downed officers are concerned it appears that law enforcement looks at risk in a very different way," Sztajnkrycer says. "When you're talking about

colleagues in jeopardy, cops are willing to gamble on the chance that more lives will be saved.

"This is a very visceral reaction." In effect, he explains, "you can think of us as thinking using 2 different brains. One is a rational, analyzing brain, which produces answers we are aware of. The other is a feeling, intuitive brain that operates at a subconscious, unaware level.

"In a life-or-death situation, there is not a lot of time to be rational. The rational brain may produce better long-term responses, but it is slower. Under stress, we tend to default to the intuitive brain, in effect taking mental shortcuts to solve urgent problems.

"Afterward, officers may not be able to understand or explain why they made an intuitive decision, but under critical stress they're likely to be guided by their gut."

The survey, coupled with his earlier field observations, causes Sztajnkrzyer to speculate that trainers may be wiser to accept that officers will feel compelled to try to rescue a downed colleague, rather than attempting through repeated indoctrination to get them to logically evaluate whether immediate action is really necessary. "It is human nature to want to help. That is a quality we seek out in police officers," he says.

"It's a question of whether you try to train officers to counteract their intuition or you develop and train in tactics and provide equipment like body bunkers for patrol personnel that could work to minimize their risk when they react as they're probably going to react anyway.

"In other words, do you try to overcome strongly impulsive behavior or do you work to accommodate it to make it less dangerous?"

REVISED ABCs. Another revelation from the survey concerns medical responses in the field. In civilian first aid training, officers have been taught the importance of the ABCs: Airway, Breathing, Circulation, prioritized in that order. "Data from the Global War on Terror suggest that this approach is suboptimal when dealing with medical issues in high-threat situations," Sztajnkrzyer says.

In his poll, he asked officers to rank the importance of treating a downed officer for bleeding, pain, and troubled breathing. More than 60% said tending to troubled breathing was "very important," the highest option possible, but only 47% characterized stopping bleeding as having that level of urgency.

In reality, statistics from current combat zones indicate that 2/3 of deaths among the wounded are related to bleeding, says Sztajnkrzyer. "That's why all forward-deployed soldiers are now getting tourniquets."

ABC should really be reprioritized as CBA, he recommends, with officers taught "new combat aid skills accordingly." [FSN will elaborate on this recommendation in a future transmission.]

UNSTRUCTURED RESPONSES. At the end of his survey, Sztajnkrzyer invited participants to submit questions and comments on officer-down crises. He got nearly 500 written responses.

Like some of the rest of the questionnaire data, these have not yet been thoroughly analyzed, but he expects that they will yield "some very insightful observations" that will help in formulating training issues and recommendations.

Sztajnkrzyer expects to complete an in-depth analysis of all the survey content in about 8-12 weeks. When his final findings are complete, FSN will report further. Meanwhile, Sztajnkrzyer expresses his deep appreciation to all officers who participated in his poll and welcomes additional questions and comments at: [Sztajnkrzyer.Matthew@mayo.edu](mailto:Sztajnkrzyer.Matthew@mayo.edu).