

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Complacency in Law Enforcement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Complacency in law enforcement is an ongoing issue. Complacent officers are at risk for injury and or death. This paper will help identify complacency and how to combat it. It is up to every law enforcement officer from command staff to patrolmen and everyone in between to battle. By battling complacency, agencies can reduce injuries, death, and lost work time. It will allow officers to make better decisions, use good tactics, and pre-plan prior to arrival at calls for service. It should be the goal of every officer to go home at the end of the shift.

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## INTRODUCTION

Experienced law enforcement officers can become complacent in their jobs, which can lead to injury or death. Complacency is defined as the non-recognition of danger signs and a false sense of security in individuals who have become too comfortable in their duties (Danaher, 2011). Complacency can occur in the private and public sectors of employment and daily activities of every individual. This paper will be addressing this issue in the law enforcement, a paramilitary structured organization.

There are documented cases of injury and death in relation to this important safety issue. Officers can become complacent in every aspect of their life while at work or home. Complacency affects driving, tactics, decision making, and communication with officers and civilians. This paper will identify complacency, its affects, and ideas to prevent complacency. Complacency has been broken down into three source types: innate complacency that predates their career, complacency learned over the course of their career, and situational complacency imposed by the nature of the law enforcement environment (Asken & Paris, 2008). This paper will focus on complacency learned in the work place. Complacency can develop or learned on the job; Success can decrease diligence and promote negligence (Asken & Paris 2008). Officers fall into a routine because of the repetition of their duties. This repetition can lead to a false sense of security, which can lead to an escalation in assaults, injuries, and deaths of law enforcement officers. Too much experience can lead to over-confidence and complacency, which has been referred to as a disease of expertise (Asken & Paris 2008). Complacent attitudes and actions by law enforcement officers should be identified early to prevent injury or death.

Complacency occurs in experienced law enforcement officers. The reason for this occurrence is the senior officers have more time and experience in dealing with law enforcement issues. As a result of this, the expected outcome becomes the same for every situation they deal with because of the routine they fall into.

As an example, there is Captain Cecil Lancaster, with the Tuscaloosa Police Department, who was headed home after his shift. He merged onto the freeway and saw an out of state police vehicle with a missing rear bumper and license plate and the passengers were wearing t-shirts. What he did not know was that the vehicle was occupied by two escaped prisoners. Captain Lancaster passed the patrol car but kept watch it in his rearview mirror. He began to slow his vehicle to the point that other vehicles were passing him but not the patrol car. He felt this driver was intentionally trying to avoid passing. Captain Lancaster slowed, forcing the patrol car to pass him. As the car passed the occupants, they stared straight ahead and did not look at him as they were passing. He felt they were trying to be invisible. Captain Lancaster stopped the vehicle and offset his car as he did to provide a safety lane. He watched the two for a few minutes who were still staring straight ahead. His instincts were telling him to use caution because something was wrong, but he ignored his instincts, thinking it would be a friendly conversation with two out of state officers. As he reached the driver side rear window, the passenger fired two shots at Captain Lancaster. The first hit and lodged in his duty belt; the second struck him in his right side. Captain Lancaster was not wearing body armor. After the incident was over, Captain Lancaster learned from the incident that one should fight mental drift, heed tactical instincts, respect procedure, and accept what cannot be changed (Remsberg, 2008). To help prevent complacency, the personal

safety switch must be turned on all the times to battle this silent enemy of law officers (McCauley, n.d.).

## **POSITION**

Complacency starts with repetition that develops into routine in which one becomes over-confident in their day to day functions of a law enforcement officer. Complacency is a slow developing process often referred to a routine. As all law enforcement officers know, there is no routine in daily operations. Calls for service can be the same, but each situation should be treated as unique even when dealing with the same citizens. Complacency affects the more experienced law officer because of this routine mentality. It has less of an effect on younger officers because of the tactics they have been taught are still ingrained in their minds, even though they lack on the job experience. Each individual officer should maintain vigilance to help prevent the mindset of complacency.

There are several different areas of complacency: lack of concentration, tombstone courage, not enough rest, taking a bad position, not heading danger signs, failure to watch the hands, relaxing too soon, improper handcuffing, no search or bad search, and dirty or inoperative equipment (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1995). Lack of concentration can be attributed to failing to concentrate on the hazards in law enforcement and too much focus on problems that have been brought to work from their personal environment. Tombstone courage is doing dangerous things without back up or needlessly taking chances. Taking a bad position is the poor use or no use of cover. Not heading the danger signs the officer can be when the officer fails to recognize the clues given off by people prior to violent encounters. Failure to watch the hands; all law

enforcement officers know the hands need to be watched constantly because the hands are where the attacks strike from. The officer has relaxed too soon in a stressful situation which opens them up to attack. Improper handcuffing and failing to control the suspect at the point of handcuffing can lead to surprise attacks on officers. The failure to do a search or no search is probably the most dangerous thing an officer can do before putting someone in their car. This opens a wide variety of unknowns for the officer and raises the chance of assaults or deaths. Dirty or inoperative equipment is an unacceptable situation for any officer. Maintaining equipment in pristine condition is a must for officer safety and usability. Proper working equipment can mean the difference between life and death (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1995).

This continues to occur in law enforcement because law enforcement fails to recognize complacency for what it is in their jobs; it could be intentional blindness which is the selection process of the brain in relation to processing information (Stober, n.d). Basically complacency is just the same groove law enforcement officer find themselves in which becomes comfortable and the dreaded routine of a non-routine job. It is up to all law enforcement officers to recognize complacency in the fellow officer and point it out to them to make them more aware of their surroundings for the protection of themselves, citizens, and partners.

Complacent actions have led to injuries and deaths of law enforcement officers for years. Even as technology, training, and tactics improve, there is little change in the amount of violent encounters involving law enforcement officers. In September 1992, a study was completed and published, *Killed in the Line of Duty*. The study was over a three year period in which 51 distinct cases of officers' homicides were examined. The

incidents studied resulted in the death of 54 law enforcement officers by 50 offenders (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1995). At the completion of the study, several deficiencies were identified; procedural errors, correct procedures, absence of procedures, conflicting procedures, and training.

Procedural errors are not following accepted practices in law enforcement. They were identified as failing to call for back up, acting alone, not searching a suspect or an incomplete search, improper handcuffing technique and no handcuffs, and positioning the vehicle in front of the target vehicle. Correct procedures is when the law enforcement officers followed all accepted practices but were still killed in the line of duty. Absence of procedures was when there were no procedures written or accepted in a law enforcement agency to handle given situations which should have a procedure, like responding to an armed suspect. Conflicting procedures was when the training of the officer conflicts with the personal safety of the officer and in other areas the written policy directly conflicts with the safety of the officers. Training was where the study recognized there is no way to prepare for every situation but it does recommend progressive and updated training (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1995).

Another study, Violent Encounter a Study of Felonious Assaults on Our Nation's Law Enforcement Officers in August 2006 discovered the same basic flaws as in Killed in the Line of Duty. Violent encounters studied 50 victim officers with an average age of 35. This study found the following errors in procedure acting alone, improper vehicle placement, failing to control violators' actions in traffic stops, neglecting to notify dispatcher of traffic stop, careless searching of prisoners, and handling prisoners without the proper restraint. There were instances in which officers followed all correct

procedures but were still assaulted. Absence of policy in which two officers said their agency did not have a procedure for effecting arrests without the benefit of back up. This study also found that there were some equipment malfunctions, firearms. This study identified the deadly mix, which consists of the officer, circumstance, and offender. When these three are brought together, the deadly mix can occur but if one component of the deadly mix is altered, it will change the encounter in the favor of the officer. The study found that the officer's demeanor and alertness override potential deadly mix (Pinizzotto, Davis, & Miller, 2006)

Both studies showed that complacency played a large part of the officer's violent encounters that led to their injuries and or deaths. Complacency is an integral part of a law enforcement officer's life at work and at home. In reality, complacency is not a law enforcement issue but an everyday issue for all people. It is up to co-workers and supervisors to monitor the people they work with to prevent complacency, which plays a big role in injuries and deaths. Supervisors should have high expectations of the personnel assigned to the shift (Brewer, 2003).

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Some will argue that officer attacks are the result of bad tactics used by the victim officer. They approached wrong, took bad cover, did not watch the hands, parked in the wrong area, or did not check their equipment. Tactics cover nearly every aspect law enforcement, from daily driving to SWAT operations. Good tactics lead to safe and successful operations. Standing in front of the door waiting on it to be answered is bad tactics, but it continues to happen and officers continue to get injured or killed. Contacting citizens while sitting in a patrol vehicle is a good example of bad tactics

because the officer has no advantage and is confined to the car with no maneuver room. Bad tactics can be from trying tactics that have not been proven to be effective. Bad tactics can be from poor decision making (Webb, 2011).

Bad tactics and complacency go hand in hand. When one gets complacent, his methodology of thinking and processing of information can become skewed. Bad tactics is also poor officer safety skills that have been employed (Webb, 2011). In order to improve tactics, complacency must be addressed with officers to make them aware and to maintain awareness. This will improve their tactics. Constant and frequent training in tactics and physical skills is a must (Asken & Paris, 2008). Constant reminders are needed to keep the tactical advantage which causes officers to think and be aware and staves away complacency. These are just a few ways to improve tactics that makes one think. Thinking and preparing is a way to combat complacency.

Careless actions by law enforcement officers can result in violent encounters. An officer not notifying dispatch that they are on a traffic violation just to give a verbal warning is an example of carelessness. Officers continue this practice because they are responding to a priority call or going to meet another officer. It appears the officer is just in a hurry when the violation was observed and wanted to get down the road. This is a careless action but it also is a good example of complacency. Complacency is when an officer becomes too comfortable in the work environment and takes unnecessary chances or risks. These chances and risks lead to violent encounters which cost the officer and the agency time and money. A good way to battle carelessness/complacency related to duty is to develop and implement a survival mentality by preparing for each shift before the beginning of the shift. Officers should

use powerful tactical terminology to promote self-awareness and battle the complacency routine (Asken & Paris, 2008).

## **RECOMENDATION**

As a result of this research there have been some methodologies developed to battle complacency. Distance and time equal control in the officer safety pyramid (Danaher, 2011). The first methodology distance and time equal control. As the distance between the officer and suspect decreases, so does the time available to react to a non-compliant or combative individual; this is also known as a deadly mix. Action is faster than reaction, and every step closer to the suspect the level of awareness should increase along with preparations to control of the situation. The officer should be ready to enact plans B and C if A does not work. The officer has to decide to close the distance and use more force than the suspect to gain control of the situation or to separate with distance and try to gain verbal control or the use of intermediate weapons based on policy. Once control of the suspect has been gained, it is now time to bring out the cuffs to restrain the suspect (Danaher, 2011).

The officer safety pyramid was inspired by the pyramid of success by John Wooden (Danaher, 2011). The pyramid is a means of focusing efforts on ten areas that will develop officer safety competence. The first is professional competency. Officers must look professional and be efficient in their duties. Officers should be competent and have good decision making skills. Officers should know and practice with their equipment. The second part of the pyramid is the drive to stay alive, which focuses on safe vehicle operations. Officers should drive vehicles within their training, weather, traffic conditions, and comfort zone. Departmental policy should always be followed and

observed. The third step is a teamwork atmosphere. The officers on a shift should work together as a cohesive unit like a gently flowing river. Officers should know their team members strengths and weaknesses. Regarding physical fitness, all officers should be physically fit and have regular workout routines.

Officers should learn to listen to the hairs on the back of their neck, feelings of uneasiness, and things that do not look right. In other words, they should trust their intuition. Learning and training is a vital asset of any officer. Learning is the best way to find out what works and what does not work. Officers who train are always learning easier and safer ways to accomplish goals. All officers should have a strong sense of self awareness. This allows officer to have a higher degree of safety. These officers constantly know what is going on around them and the physical and mental well-being. Officers should always be thinking in the tactical mindset prior to, during, and after calls for service. Communication is always an attribute that officers need to get there messages or commands understood for all persons they talk with. A proactive attitude is the foundation of constant improvement. Officers should always be looking and learning for way to improve their performance safely (McKenzie, 2007).

When it boils down, officers who are positive, progressive, train, and strive to improve have a lesser chance of being complacent than those who are retired on duty or have no willingness to improve themselves. There are many different suggestions to fight complacency and not one is better than the other. The common denominators in them all is training, positive statements, self-awareness, and continued improvement. Complacency does increase the risks of injury and deaths and taking steps to battle

complacency can reduce the risk of unnecessary injury or death in the law enforcement community.

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