Executive Summary

Driving Forces: What Chiefs Say About Officer-Involved Crashes

This report was written to disseminate findings of academic research conducted in 2012 by Carol Servino in partial fulfillment of dissertation requirements in the public affairs program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The purpose of this study was to learn more about officer-involved injury crashes by asking chiefs of more than 800 police agencies in the U. S. what they believe are causal factors in such crashes in the last five years.

A total of 215 chiefs from state, county, and city agencies opened the online, self-administered, national survey sent to them via official email addresses on June 4, 2012. Nearly 75% of the survey respondents led organizations with more than 76 sworn patrol officers. The majority of respondents, 56%, were in municipal agencies. The number of valid responses to the 50-question survey ranged from 154 to 181.

Top Factors

Speed, distractions, and inexperience are the top factors in crashes that result in injuries to officers. Specifically:

- 66% of the 106 chiefs who answered the question about the top factor in crashes said that speed is the cause; almost 20% cited inexperience; 12% said road conditions.
- Of the 59 respondents who offered additional comments, the top “other” factors included distractions (19), driver inattention (17), other drivers (10), technology, including cell phone and MDT (9), speed (3) and nonuse of safety belts (1);
- Speed and distractions top the list if “technology,” “driver inattention,” and “distractions” are considered related and combined.

Loss Type

Almost one-quarter (23%) of the 181 chiefs who answered this question reported that their agency experienced the death of an officer in the past five years;

- 10% said the death was due to an auto incident;
- 82% said their agencies experienced crashes that resulted in injuries.
- “Roadstruck” (16%) and motorcycle (1%) incidents caused other fatal injuries.
1. Statistically significant relationships exist between injury crashes and policies permitting the use of communication technology in vehicles. Policies permitting mobile data terminals (MDTs) and policies permitting cell phones are significantly associated with crashes resulting in injuries.
   - Policies permitting cell phones have the strongest effect on the likelihood of injury crashes. Logistic regression analysis findings indicate the odds of experiencing injury crashes are about 15 times greater in agencies with policies permitting cell phones compared with those that don’t when size of agency is held constant.

2. Agency size, a demographic variable, is statistically significant as a predictor of injuries in motor vehicle incidents in this study.
   - The odds of experiencing injury crashes are greatest in large and very large agencies.
   - In medium agencies, the odds of experiencing injury crashes are nearly .15 times less than in large and very large agencies.
   - The odds of experiencing injury crashes are smallest in very small and small agencies.

Other Findings

Safety Belt Law

65% of those who responded work in states with primary safety belt laws. It is logical to think that officers who work in primary enforcement states would be knowledgeable about their benefits and would be more likely to use them; however, previous research reveals that 50% of the officers who died in motor vehicle crashes were not using safety belts.

Training

Respondents prioritized all training topics in rank order as:

1. Use of personal protective equipment;
2. Community expectations/officer conduct;
3. Use-of-force training;
4. Driving.

The number of hours of driving training provided to officers annually (after academy training) ranged from a low of 0 to a high of 40 with an average of 6.78.

- Common are four hours (39 agencies, 25.5%) and eight hours (36 agencies, 23.5%).
12.4% (19 agencies) responded that their officers receive no additional driving training after the academy.

**Policies**

100% of the chiefs who responded said their agencies investigate driving records prior to employment. Off-duty driving records of officers are monitored by 58% of the agencies.

- 99% work in agencies with written driving policies;
- 96% mandate safety belt use;
- 92% permit cell phone use in vehicles, and 58% include restrictions;
- 91% use mobile data terminals (MDT), and 52% include restrictions.

**Communication**

Agencies use several methods to communicate driving policy, but policy and procedure manuals are used in 168 (99.4%) of the 169 respondents’ agencies. The best way to communicate driving policy is not at the police academy, but through field training officers, according to 122 (71.3%) of the respondents; written policies are the best way according to 30 (17.6%). Other methods include field training officers (FTOs), supervisors, a variety of other methods. Additional other answers were:

- annual (8), bi-annual (8), semi-annual (1), periodic (6), and remedial review of crashes (1);
- EVOC (Emergency Vehicle Operations Course);
- in-service (5);
- newsletters/bulletins (3),
- Lexipol (1).

**Policy Violations and Situational Severity**

Chiefs rated the severity of six hypothetical patrol situations both from their perspective and from how they believe officers in their agencies would respond. The scale was 1 to 5, with 5 being the most serious.

- 142 (91%) view ignoring a command to terminate a pursuit as the most serious policy violation. All 156 respondents agreed it was either “serious,” “more serious,” or “most serious.” They also think that their officers would view (to a lesser extent) the same policy violation to be the most serious of the six scenarios provided for consideration.
- In all six scenarios when chiefs’ perspectives are compared to those they believe are their
officers’ perspectives, chiefs say they view policy violations as more serious than they believe their officers view the same six policy violations.

- In all scenarios, the chiefs in agencies without crashes view the policy violations as more serious than do those chiefs in agencies that have experienced injury crashes.

**Background**

Traffic-related incidents were the leading cause of fatalities to officers in the U.S. for 14 of the last 15 years (National Law Enforcement Memorial Fund, 2013). The extent and effect of injuries and loss (personnel and property) to agencies and communities served is unknown because a central repository of statistical data on injuries, other than fatalities, does not exist.

Based on the assumption that all police agencies are not the same, this study applied the theoretical framework of organizational culture theory to the problem of officer traffic safety to generate quantifiable data to test variables related to driving policies, training, agency demographics, and organizational culture.

**Conclusion**

The issue of police officer safety continues to be a local problem of national concern. The problem and pattern of police officer injuries and fatalities in motor vehicle incidents does not belong solely to the police or to their governing authority. It is a public problem when officers responding to calls for service are involved in crashes and become additional burdens rather than solutions to the first call for help.

Police chiefs who responded to this study raised the issue of distractions as an important factor that influences motor vehicle crashes experienced by police agencies of all sizes. The results of this study suggest that communication technology is common to agencies of all sizes, and that it is an important factor in predicting injury crashes.

It is important to remember that circumstances of a study reported in the aggregate do not consider or predict single situations; however, results of the hypothetical scenarios indicate there may be significant differences in the culture or environments of driving safety between agencies that experience injury crashes and those that do not. More study is needed in this area.

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