

Police at risk of traffic injuries in stopped cars, as well as when speeding, study finds

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Police officers face an elevated risk of being injured in a collision when they are sitting in a stationary car as compared to low-speed driving, as well as when they are responding to an emergency call with their siren blaring as compared to routine patrol, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

In addition, officers face a higher risk of being injured in a crash when they are riding a motorcycle compared to a driving a car, driving solo compared to having a second officer in the car, or not wearing a seatbelt compared to wearing a seatbelt.

The findings provide the first quantitative estimates of the [risk factors](#) for [injury](#) to [law enforcement officers](#) in vehicle crashes—the largest cause of death among police in the United States. The results are published in *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*.

The study finds that about one-quarter of all crashes and 30 percent of injury crashes studied occurred when a [police officer](#)'s car was stationary.

"Police officers are at risk for getting injured in crashes under all types of driving conditions, not just when they are engaged in emergency driving," said Tom LaTourrette, author of the study and a senior physical scientist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization.

The study found that 80 percent of all nonminor crashes—both those involving injury and those without injury—occurred when officers were driving without lights or siren and more than 70 percent of the nonminor crashes occurred during routine driving.

"These findings suggest there are things that [law enforcement agencies](#) could do to reduce traffic collisions involving officers and reduce the chance of officers being injured," LaTourrette said. "Some steps are as simple as reinforcing the need to wear seat belts and limiting the use of motorcycles."

LaTourrette conducted the analysis by surveying 16 local, county and state law [enforcement agencies](#) across the nation to collect details about officer vehicle crashes and which crash characteristics are associated with officer injuries. The departments queried represented a variety of sizes, were geographically diverse and employed about 19,000 officers in total.

The survey yielded information about 854 crashes, including 90 that involved injuries to the officer driving. Findings from the analysis include:

- Officers are at three-to-four times greater risk for injury in crashes where their emergency lights and siren were on or when responding to an emergency call compared to routine patrol. However, the speed of an officer's car was not a significant risk factor.
- The risk of an officer being injured in a crash when he or she is not using a seatbelt is two-to-three times greater than when wearing a [seatbelt](#). This is similar to the risk seen among all drivers in traffic accidents.
- Motorcycle officers are about five times more likely to sustain injury in a crash than an officer in a car and about 10 times more

likely than officers in sport utility vehicles.

- A single officer in a vehicle has more than twice the risk of injury in a crash compared to having another officer in the car. Conversely, having a nonofficer in the vehicle increased the risk of injury. A possible explanation is that a solo officer faces distractions from the radio, data terminal or suspect passengers.

LaTourrette suggests actions for [law enforcement](#) agencies to take to lower the risk of injury collisions, including restricting motorcycle use to situations where the use of other vehicles is not feasible and developing alternatives to bracket-mounted mobile data terminals, which officers often strike during collisions.

In addition, further study is needed to better understand the injury risk both when officers are [driving](#) under emergency conditions and when officer vehicles are stationary. Efforts also are needed to understand why officers do not always wear their seat belts.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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