



OFFICER PERCEPTIONS OF MANDATORY ANNUAL PHYSICAL FITNESS STANDARDS

Officer Conor J. Strack¹, Dr. David Bugg²

¹Norwood Village Police, NY

²Associate Professor and Chair, Sociology and Criminal Justice, and Service-Learning Coordinator, The State University of New York at Potsdam

Abstract

One of the most important topics regarding law enforcement is officer fitness, or the larger concern, a lack thereof. Lack of fitness can be correlated to instances of inappropriate use of force and the public outcry of police brutality. Physical conditioning can directly assist an officer in achieving their main objective of every shift which is to go home healthy and safe.

Increased fitness increases confidence and provides officers with a greater window of opportunity to de-escalate, showing the public that less drastic measures may be taken in handling stressful confrontations. Failure to set or maintain standards of fitness has in some cases, opened the door to civil litigation such as in *Parker v District of Columbia* where the proceedings showed that the District of Columbia was deliberately indifferent to physical standards resulting in significant financial compensation. Agencies should consider that an officer's shift and work environment may indirectly lead to a lack of attention to health and fitness. A "complacency kills" approach may be able to outline the dangers of these lapses in standards but if a pathway cannot be created for these officers, then it may only reinforce the negative thought that they may not go home.

Keywords

Law Enforcement, Officer Fitness, Physical Fitness Standards, Complacency Kills

Introduction

One of the most important topics regarding law enforcement is officer fitness, or the larger concern, a lack thereof. Lack of fitness can be correlated to instances of inappropriate use of force and the public outcry of police brutality^{[1][2][3][4]}. Physical conditioning can directly assist an officer in achieving their main objective of every shift which is to go home healthy and safe.

Increased fitness increases confidence and provides officers with a greater window of opportunity to de-escalate, showing the public that less drastic measures may be taken in handling stressful confrontations. Failure to set or maintain standards of fitness has in some cases, opened the door to civil litigation such as in *Parker v District of Columbia* where the proceedings showed that the District of Columbia was deliberately indifferent to physical standards resulting in significant financial compensation^[5]. Agencies should consider that an officer's shift and work environment may indirectly lead to a lack of attention to health and fitness. A "complacency kills" approach may be able to outline the dangers of these lapses in standards but if a pathway cannot be created for these officers, then it may only reinforce the negative thought that they may not go home^[6].

Officers should be mandated to reach and maintain a set standard of physical fitness throughout their career to best perform their duties. Their agencies should provide the necessary resources to achieve these standards. Agencies may change shift times, to provide adequate time to engage in sanctioned physical activity, or by providing an in-service space where such training can occur.

Position

When we look at the ranking of tools used by police, it may be easy to categorize their service weapon or their handcuffs as the most important, however, none of those tools can be used properly if the officer holding them is not physically able to do so. Safety of officers is paramount. This leads to developing the officer's skills based on "combat readiness" or the state in which one can do the tasks they are supposed to perform. Lack of that combat readiness is not only a disservice to the officer, but it may lead to lapses which could harm the public^[7]. The general argument stems from a need to be fit to pass the police academy. That necessity fades away graduation for many agencies.

The first step in making sure officers are up to the job could be found in mandating yearly fitness standards similar to those found in the police academy. Standards such as passing a minimum timed distance run, and completing a certain number of push-ups, and sit ups. The initial benefit is that at a minimum, officers in departments with these standards in place, are at least in decent shape to maintain their own security in physical altercations^[8]. The department should also look to its own benefits of having a physically fit workforce, in which they should see a reduction in use of sick time due to injury. Public perception is also a concern as the image of an unfit officer may invite challenges to either resist officer commands, or potentially ignore laws out of a lack of respect.

For example, interviews conducted with strong-arm robbers show a conscious decision was made to choose their victims based on their supposed ability, or lack thereof, depending on their appearance, demeanor, and level of alertness^[8]. If criminals note the physical attributes of their victims, the same goes for those tasked to preventing and stopping these crimes. The build of an officer must establish a respectable presence within the community. Regarding department liability, knowing that agencies can be held accountable in court, the next step is getting mandates in place.

This step must be taken in a way that accounts not only those who still have youth on their side, but also for veteran officers. The knowledge and experience veteran officers possess are invaluable to a department as they are more than likely in positions of leadership and are looked to for guidance. We cannot unilaterally punish or terminate the older members of departments because they are not fit. Mandatory retirement should be the first to be eliminated and be replaced with more psychological evaluations as age lacks a concrete connection with inability to do one's job. The re-introduction of physical assessment tests after academy completion, followed by the continuation of these tests throughout one's career would be a simple option. This would be consistent with the thought that if the test was an impartial measure of ability to gain employment, it is still a fair way to maintain said employment^[8].

Knowledge of martial arts is another important aspect of officers being able to safely complete their shifts when a combative individual must be physically restrained. The popularity of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ), which gained its reputation as an excellent measure of pain compliance for officers to use through joint manipulation, is a prime example. That pain provides an officer with the ability to de-escalate situations without utilizing greater use of force. Many agencies that have implemented or incorporated BJJ as part of their defensive tactics training report reductions in their use of force statistics^[9]. It also doubles as a hobby that trains and reinforces survival skills. For an officer, being on their back during a street altercation is a fear inducing wakeup call, however in BJJ it is the practitioner's comfort zone, and if an officer is confident in their abilities, then more lethal responses may be avoided.

One of the best physical benefits of BJJ is being able to experience grappling against people that are bigger and stronger in an environment where one can learn appropriate applications of force in an educational environment. This prepares an officer for a portion of street combat in a safe and controlled manner so they may hone their skills to not only keep themselves safe, but minimize the damage done to others. Pairing physical confidence with the mental and emotional benefits that can aid in de-escalation when the situation calls for it, as well as providing an outlet for officers to reduce stress that will not contribute to negative interactions at home^[10].

Practicing BJJ reinforces breath control, relaxation, and focus, all of which are large factors in preventing tunnel vision in high-stress situations. BJJ shows returns on cardiovascular health as well as improving flexibility for officers who normally carry an extra 20 pounds of gear and spend most of their shift sitting in a patrol car. Mandatory training which has been dubbed the "Marietta Model" after Marietta Police Department in Georgia, mandates one training session per week of a cadet's academy and field training and will cover the costs up to three sessions per week, all of which the officers are being paid for. Also counting the training hours towards the officer's defensive tactics training, a program in which half of Marietta PD's officers have enrolled in^[9].

Continuing to the mental benefits of exercise, taking part in physical activity will result in improved mood, promote psychological well-being, as well as improve quality of life^[11]. Common benefits of exercise are sharper recollection of thoughts, improved sleep, and improved self-image. Exercise is a key combatant in fighting depression, by promoting neural growth, reducing inflammation, and creating a sense of calmness. By also releasing endorphins, individuals get an energy boost that provides a state of well-being.

Officers are under a great deal of stress everyday dealing with the highs and lows on their shift. Stress accumulates and can force some officers into a perpetual state of tunnel vision, exercising breaks the cycle and puts both muscles and the brain at ease^[12]. Evidence shows that officers afflicted with PTSD, are helped by exercise by focusing on how the body feels which helps the nervous system become “unstuck” and begins to move out of the immobilization stress response that would generalize PTSD.

For officers who work long, strenuous shifts, finding time to exercise on their own can be troublesome, so it is important that they should start exercising in short periods and remember that consistency is key. These unfortunate side effects of police work become barriers to exercise which can lead to anxiety and depression, but it is vital to remember that even a small amount of exercise will directly work to counteract these feelings. When an individual experiences fatigue, forcing a quick five-minute walk can lead to walking longer than expected. If possible, scheduling exercise around a fellow officer’s schedule can make it easier to maintain because peer support reinforces a sense of togetherness that can also combat depression^[12].

Methods

The study includes 173 respondents currently working in law enforcement. Fifteen of the respondents were female, and 155 were male. All levels of law enforcement were represented from patrol officers (52.6%) to chiefs. The average years of working in the field were 11.2 (minimum 0 years to maximum of 33 years). Responses were recorded from officers working in the following states California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maine, Montana, New York, and Texas.

Participants were located through professional networks, social media groups for law enforcement professionals, and purposive sampling of agencies known to the researchers for their agency’s interest in the topic of officer fitness. Purposive sampling is a beneficial approach for research due to the greater insight into the topic typically provided by respondents^[13]. While purposive sampling does not allow for generalizations due to the limitations of having a non-representative sample, the quality of the data and the responses provided are particularly informative for understanding views of this topic. Participants self-selected to answer the survey questions and no compensation was offered for inclusion in the study. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of SUNY-Potsdam.

The survey was administered to participants using Qualtrics, each participant was informed that the survey would take 20 to 30 minutes and all answers would be completely anonymous before providing informed consent to participate. The survey was comprised of 10 questions about fitness standards in policing, as well as basic demographic data. Additional qualitative responses could be provided about the topic in general, or about specific reasons for disagreement with fitness standards in policing. Three participants agreed to take part in the study but did not complete all questions in the survey. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the responses and qualitative data was examined for similarities in responses as well as unique responses.

Results

This research was guided by questions based around four key themes:

1. Is officer fitness importance?;
2. How are unfit officers perceived?;
3. Does the agency have a responsibility to ensure officer fitness?; and
4. Should physical fitness tests be continued after completion of the academy?

Of the 173 who consented to participate in the survey, only three participants (1.7%) were excluded as they did not complete any other questions in the survey. Data collection occurred over a period of six weeks in the spring of 2023.

Approximately three quarters of the officers who responded (76.9%) believed that officer fitness is important. As can be seen in Table 1., most officers (83.2%) believe that fitness is important to do the job with a similar number seeing the overall benefit of staying in shape to overall health. Similarly, 68.2% of respondents view fit officers more positively than unfit officers. Two thirds of respondents (63.6%) agreed that their departments should give them the resources to exercise. With slightly more (74.6%) officers agreeing that being given one hour during their shift to exercise would be beneficial to them. However, only 25.4% of respondents saw a need for their agency to provide healthy snacks or drinks. Finally, 60.7% of respondents believed that annual physical fitness testing should continue after an officer completes the initial academy.

Question	Yes	No	Missing
Is fitness important to you?	133	37	3
Do you believe the public considers officer fitness important?	108	62	3
Do you believe fitness is important to do your job?	144	26	3
Do you believe staying in shape is beneficial to your overall health?	141	29	3
Do you think the public views fit officers more positively than unfit officers?	108	62	3
Do you view fit officers more positively than unfit officers?	118	33	22
While on the job, have you been able to maintain a regular exercise routine?	64	100	9
Do you feel your department should give you the resources to exercise?	110	60	3
If you were offered one hour during your shift to exercise, would you use it?	129	63	14
Do you feel your department should provide healthier foods/snacks/drinks for work?	44	101	28
Do you believe there should be a yearly physical training test?	105	65	3

Table 1. Responses to Physical Fitness Standards Questions

Table 2. shows similar levels of support for the importance of fitness and the need for agencies to provide resources to exercise. Again, low levels of support were given for the provision of healthier food and drink options by departments.

Question	Very Important	Important	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Not Important	Least Important	Missing
How would you rate the importance of fitness?	91	42	10	25	2	3
Rate the importance of your department providing you the resources to exercise.	59	51	13	30	17	3
Rate the importance of your department providing healthier food/snacks/drinks for work.	19	25	12	36	63	28

Table 2. Ratings of Physical Fitness Standards

The qualitative responses to the survey questions illustrate some of the specific beliefs about physical fitness captured by the participants. Regarding agencies providing healthy food and drinks for their officers, respondents summarized the low level of support for this amongst study participants:

“We are adults, what we eat is up to us to manage.” – Respondent 3

“Department shouldn’t be paying for food.” – Respondent 10

The large amount of support for officers being able to have time to exercise during their shift was found amongst both officers from departments with an existing shift exercise policy and from and those without. A respondent with an on-duty exercise program in place noted the importance of the policy:

“My department allows 3 hours a week of fitness time on shift in the gym. Could be home, department, or membership gym. Some use it and others don't but it has shown an improved in the physical fitness of officers who use it. I'm more likely to work out on work time than my personal time.” – Respondent 5

Barriers to working out and maintaining a regular exercise plan involved many common obstacles such as family obligations. Newer officers also noted economic concerns such as working a second job to boost their earnings. Many obstacles related to the realities of law enforcement work such as changing work schedules were also noted.

For those officers who did not support annual physical fitness standards being implemented, their concerns were larger than just their own department, as characterized by one respondent:

“Policing is an unattractive career in the current climate. Adding more requirements would make it less appealing.” – Respondent 10

Responses to the survey reinforce many of the findings of other studies and editorials on the importance of law enforcement fitness standards. While this sample is not generalizable to the larger population of law enforcement professionals, the participants mirror many of the feelings about this topic in general as well as the barriers to maintaining their own fitness and the implementation of post academy fitness standards in the profession.

Recommendation

In summation, officers should have mandates in place that keeps their physical fitness in-line with a set standard enforced by their agencies. In return, the employing agencies should have the necessary resources available so that transition to these standards can be as seamless as possible for the new officers. Legitimacy in the law enforcement field is currently facing various challenges based on negative media portrayals, excessive force incidents, and historical relations with minoritized communities. The image of unfit officers further damages police legitimacy by reinforcing negative stereotypes of overweight officers as being incompetent and unfit for duty. The recommendation for policy change is partnered with the intrinsic benefits of improved physical fitness.

A vital aspect of fitness is for an officer to be able to survive an altercation and be able to make it home safely. While unions have been an obstacle to mandatory fitness standards, even the view of unions has changed on this issue^[2]. The benefit to agencies and the unions that represent these officers is improved overall health. Standards can vary across the profession and by department. A “one size fits all” approach is unrealistic and does not reflect the reality that geographic differences alone may dictate differences in practices, as will specialized assignments (e.g. bike patrol, K-9 handler, S.W.A.T.). For example, the attention given to strength, speed, and endurance is functional for a patrol officer, but the fitness program needs to fit the line of work the officer is engaged in most frequently^[14]. The focus then for physical fitness standards should be based in job readiness which will vary around these factors as well as others.

An alternative to mandates would be to put in place pay incentives for officers who reach a certain criterion for fitness. This would be optional and would have fewer negative implications for those who do not reach those standards. Those who are in shape can be rewarded for their continued efforts, and those out of shape can use this as an opportunity to reap the benefits of a healthier lifestyle. The goal is not to add another strenuous component to their already challenging day, but to get them to and keep them at a state of readiness. An understandable critique is that most of policing is not getting into chases but doing reports and other work that can qualify as mundane, however, should the time arise that an officer needs to survive a physical encounter, being fit is one more factor that can mean an officer goes home alive. The installation of a weight room could be the simple change needed to improve officer fitness. Budgets and liability issues often play significant rolls in preventing changes in the field of law enforcement. However, there are solutions to both obstacles such as soliciting donations, grant funding, exercise routines that do not utilize equipment, and/or the use of model policies.

Various resources exist for those departments exploring the creation of fitness programs and standards. These include the Cooper Institute (www.cooperinstitute.org), and the International Association of Chiefs of Police *Fitness Program Development Considerations*. While the focus may often be on strength and speed training, making sure multiple aspects of fitness are addressed including strength, power, endurance, flexibility, speed, coordination, stamina, agility, balance, and accuracy are also essential^[15]. Exercise as a method of addressing stress and helping officers with injuries maintain their health are additional benefits of a fitness policy and standards^[16]. Consideration needs to be given to common injuries in the profession such as those of the knee and back which might require methods such as water aerobics or other low impact approaches to maintain fitness levels. Given the profession’s increased awareness of officer mental health, exercise for stress relief can include other practices such as yoga, cycling, and rock climbing. The flexibility of fitness standards will allow officers of differing fitness levels and abilities ways to maintain their health without increasing liability through a rigid policy.

Agencies may also consider investing in the training of an internal officer to become a qualified fitness instructor. Programs such as the Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers' (FLETC) *Law Enforcement Fitness Coordinator Training Program* is one such option. Other alternatives exist for training such as this, but the authors recommend the use of agency personnel who know the culture of their department, the physical demands their officers experience, as well as the individual personalities they will be working with. If outside instructors are utilized, those who are committed to working with law enforcement and understand the health challenges facing officers such as physical injuries, increased risk of lifestyle illness related to shift work, and the mental health demands are also recommended.

Utilizing qualified fitness instructors will also address liability concerns that will inevitably arise. Evidence based practices should be adopted whenever possible as they will reduce the likelihood of a successful legal challenge. Adaptation of similar policies should serve as a basis for the new fitness program/standard and the International Association of Chiefs of Police’s website (www.iacpnet.com) is a convenient resource for this reason. In combination with consultation with general counsel to examine other legal concerns, the development of these policies is achievable by any agency wishing to pursue one.

Ultimately the profession and the public deserve officers who can meet the real demands of the physical challenges involved in a career in law enforcement. Failure to address this often-debated topic only invites the potential for tragedy at the expense of either a colleague or member of the public we have sworn an oath to protect.

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