

Rethinking officer safety tactics during pedestrian stops

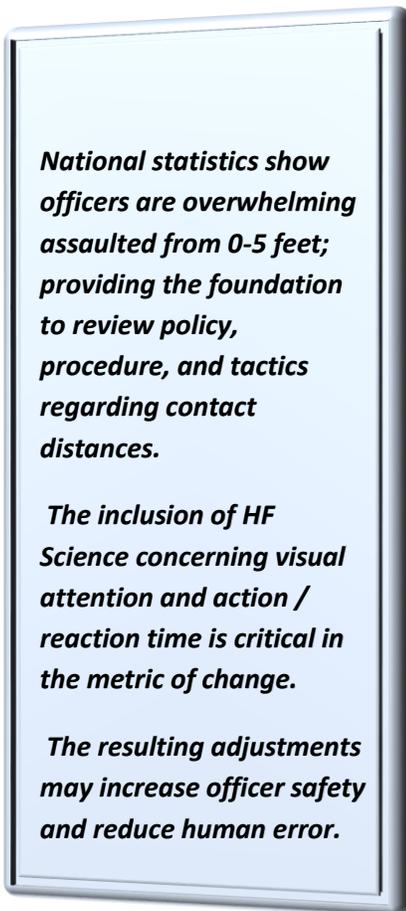
Such a stop is based on suspected criminal activity, so treat it as the dangerous situation it is

[As seen in PoliceOne.Com](#)

A pedestrian stop is a very common occurrence in police work. As described in Street Survival: Tactics for Armed Encounters, the conduct of pedestrian stops generally follows these parameters:

- Observe the subject
- Approach from the rear
- Know where cover is
- Stand at an oblique angle (with gun side away) with about three feet of distance between the officer and subject

Every officer conducts this stop hundreds upon hundreds of times with great success. The most important point to remember is the pedestrian stop (PS) is typically initiated based on criminal activity or suspected criminal activity — thereby dictating a threat by association. This is why some officers — including myself — find themselves injured or even killed as a result.



Close Quarters Danger

The 2011 LEOKA provides statistics that are directly associated with the PS that should be cause for alarm. Nine years of progressive statistics show most officers were killed within five feet of the suspect — well inside the range of a standard PS. LEOKA also provides data showing more than 80 percent of assaults on officers came from personal body weapons (hands and feet), which also indicates a close proximity to the suspect.

The statistics are problematic and require a review of standard policies, procedures and tactics in order to understand how to mitigate the risk. A review of the PS by a subject knowledgeable in Human Factors (HF) might develop potential ways to increase officer safety and reduce the statistics of injured officers provided by LEOKA.

In reviewing a PS through the lens of a Human Factors expert, we need to look at 2 pertinent aspects of human performance; visual attention and action / reaction. A HF expert will quickly see that this is an increasingly difficult task based upon the standard method of conducting this stop from about 3 feet away.

Visual Attention:

Trainers repeatedly urge officers to: “watch the hands, watch the waistband, and watch for pre-assaultive indicators” while also asking them to keep situational awareness within the environment. Dividing visual attention to all the aspects of a PS in order to be vigilant is problematic. Look at the face for pre-assaultive indicators and the officer does not see the hands. Look at your notepad to write the suspects name, and one loses all visual attention to the suspect. You get the point....

HF science tells us the best visual acuity is provided near the center of an officer’s gaze and influenced by the officer’s ability to suppress their gaze at some point. Reduced to its simplest terms, an officer’s ability to visually perceive a threat is partially limited by his ability to look directly at threat areas while

maintaining the gaze long enough to “see and register” the threat. Standing 3 feet away requires constant shifts of visual attention that may lead to missing a key piece of information in a fractionated second in time.

First Strike Ability

Visual attention will determine if an officer will perceive a suspect's assault. Action / Reaction time dictates whether the officer will be able to stop the initial threat post-visual perception. Action / reaction time literature provides empirical evidence that officers will always be reactionary to a suspect's movement and therefore will most likely be subject to a first strike when standing only 3 feet away.

This first strike ability can be devastating and deadly if the officer is taken completely unaware. This fact is the most compelling piece of evidence for a call to modify the PS tactic.

Modifying the PS

Although other factors may be relevant for consideration, for the sake of brevity we will consider modifying the PS based only on divided visual attention and action / reaction time. The quick and easy answer is to increase the distance between the officer and the suspect.

By increasing the distance, the eye can now take in a broader view of the suspect as well as the environment. The diameter of the center of an officer's gaze is larger at greater distances. Additionally, increased distance allows for additional information to be gathered through visual rapid eye movements (saccades) rather than requiring an officer's whole head movement and directed focusing. The ability to receive a “whole picture” while at greater distance allows the officer to view multiple potential threat areas (hands, waist, eyes, other body movements) from a distance.

Using Available Cover

Distance is a benefit in action / reaction time, but cover is also highly important and not used as often as it should be during a PS. Empirical evidence ([from Duane Wolfe](#)) tells us an average suspect can traverse 5 feet from a seated position in about 1.34 seconds. An officer's beginning reaction time to an attempted assault may be between 0.25 seconds and 1.5 seconds, depending on his preparedness (Lewinski & Redmann, 2009). Considering the PS is a standing stop and conducted within 3 feet (generally) the empirical evidence is cause for an officer safety concern.

Having something (police vehicle, mail box) between the officer and the suspect requires the suspect to first defeat that object, creating additional time for the officer to react. This benefit in time — although small — could make the difference in overcoming an assaultive suspect.

Summary

The concept of reviewing tactics and training using HF science, expert experience, and statistics provides a stable platform for ensuring the highest levels of officer safety.

This simplified scientific review of the PS has provided a solid hypothesis for increasing standoff distances and using cover as a way to defend against what LEOKA has provided to be a high-risk encounter. The next steps include a testing phase using reality-based training (Ken Murray style) and implementation with data collection and review.

Only after successful implementation of this type of change can we truly determine if the cover hypothesis is correct.

Seems worth it if lives are saved...

About the Author:

Dave Blake, Instructor
California Training Institute

Certified Force Science Analyst, Dave Blake, M.Sc., CCI., is currently an Adjunct Professor of Criminal Justice, a Police Academy Instructor, and a Force Options Simulator Instructor at a large regional training center. His policing experience includes positions in; SWAT, Field Training, Gangs, Narcotics, Supervision, and Use of Force Training. Dave has instructor certifications in; Force Options Simulator, Firearms, DT, and Reality Based Training. He is a published author in several periodicals and journals to include a quarterly column with PoliceOne online magazine entitled; "The Science of Training". He holds a Bachelor of Science in Criminal Justice Management and a Master's of Science in Psychology. He is a Certified Criminal Investigator with the American College of Forensic Examiners Institute. Dave owns The Blake Consulting and Training Group which provides consulting / expert witness services on police practices (use of force) and human factors.