

Death by driving?

The demands of shift patterns and long hours can result in tragedy for police officers. Una Carney looks exclusively at Federation research on road traffic incidents involving police officers which happen on their journeys to and from work

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Feature

Three officers have been killed in road traffic incidents on their way to or travelling home from duty since the start of 2009. Since 2000 road collisions have been the most common cause of deaths while officers journey to or from work.

A survey conducted by the Police Federation's health and safety sub-committee has revealed that serious measures are needed to reduce the risks faced by officers after long shifts. More training and advice for officers is essential to prevent officers getting behind the wheel when they are struggling with fatigue. 900 officers were surveyed between December 2008 and February 2009 to determine how serious the problem of driving to and from work is.

Geoff Stuttaford, deputy general secretary of the Inspectors' Central Committee, alongside colleagues working in the health and safety sub-committee were the driving forces behind the survey.

"The aim of the survey was to identify serious and minor collisions and near misses as well as the fatal collisions due to officers being too tired to fully concentrate on the roads. The Federation wants to improve the work/life balance of officers and establish how changes to shift patterns and longer hours are impacting on members' health, safety and welfare," he says.

The survey had some startling results with almost 70 per cent of officers who took part unaware if their forces recorded near misses during journeys to and from work. A further 75 per cent reported they were unsure if their force had standard operational procedures, policies or risk assessments to deal with 12-hour shifts or extended hours of duty. A fifth of those polled claimed that their force had no such guidelines or policies in place.

The survey was also initiated to highlight the pressures faced by frontline officers and the issues of work/life balance. For some time forces have been reporting that officers often work in excess of their duty times and on some occasions they work on days off but do not register for that duty nor do they claim any recompense. A third of officers who took part felt that the system used to record their working time did not accurately reflect the actual

Driving after long hours can prove fatal

number of hours spent on duty. The research also indicated that almost 65 per cent of collisions happened between 5am and 9am and when the officers lived over 25km from where they worked. Incidents were most common and frequent in rural areas such as Dorset and Avon and Somerset.

Mr Stuttaford says the survey highlighted numerous issues which need addressing. "The ways in which officers' hours are recorded and indeed the incidents when hours are not recorded accurately need to be looked at and improved."

He added: "The methods of how hours are recorded must be improved sooner rather than later. We are aiming to take the evidence we have gathered to the next meeting with ACPO's strategic health, safety and welfare working group and we hope to move forward from there."

"The health and well-being of officers is paramount and it should not solely lie on the shoulders of the shift sergeant; we need a much more commonsense approach where officers feel they can turn down overtime if they are too tired."

According to the Police Roll of Honour, road deaths whilst on duty have decreased by 60 per cent in the last fifty years but deaths while travelling to and from duty have increased by 140 per cent. Issues like bureaucracy, lack of resilience and the pressures of government targets are some of the main reasons for officers working longer hours of duty than in previous decades, according to the survey. One officer said: "Officers are required to work long hours sometimes on overtime and are required to return to work at short notice. Little regard is given to health and safety issues or quality of life issues."

Other officers claimed there was no training to use the systems therefore recordings are inaccurate: "The system takes data straight from the computer without officers being able to check if it is accurate. It also does not reflect the occasions when an officer might forget to book off duty."

Mr Stuttaford says the Federation is determined to help resolve these issues through pushing for the implementation of proper training for managers and officers to use the time systems effectively. "It is important that managers are proactive in identifying potential or recurring problems with recording systems. Officers should not feel obliged to stay behind and work longer hours due to the burdens of paper work nor should they feel that the time they spend at work is not being accurately recorded.

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officers feel they can turn down overtime if they are too tired. Equally, increased resources are needed to ensure that officers have wider access to alternative travel arrangements if they are feeling too fatigued to drive home.”

Some officers reported to be travelling up to and over an hour to and from work and believe a “concrete policy” is needed whereby supervisors intervene if an officer is unable to make a journey due to tiredness.

Mr Stuttaford said: “There is much work underway at the moment. A working group has been set up to specifically examine the distances officers have to travel when working long shifts. We agree that officers need to be sensible and rest if they feel too exhausted before driving however, the responsibility lies on the police service to manage the shifts appropriately. Our members should not be expected to work exceptionally long hours and then travel long distances.

“Today’s 24/7 policing naturally places a lot of forces and officers under increased pressure however we cannot have officers putting their own or anybody else’s lives at risk. Shift patterns should be reviewed regularly to make sure that the best possible balance of health and welfare can be achieved whilst also meeting the demands of providing a

Extracts of comments by police officers in the survey:

“Having experienced having a road traffic collision as a result of fatigue following a long journey on the way home from nightshift, the organisation was not interested at all and didn’t record the incident in any way. Very few officers have the time to complete near miss forms and most supervisors would not know what to do with them.”

“Dealing with immediate response incidents one after another increases tiredness and I have found myself almost asleep driving home on occasions.”

“Many officers feel pressured to stay after hours to finish paperwork etc because they simply haven’t had time to do it during work time.”

“It is clear that you can work nine hours or ten hours and have an easy shift, yet some shifts are more draining than others, there is no reflection on intensity of your shift. Was there a meal break? How many staff were on duty? This can all add to the way a person feels, are they ill? All these can add up to reduce the stamina of an individual which is made worse by travelling long distances to and from work.”

Blurred vision: tired officers may struggle to stay awake on their journey home

