

THE DONUT DILEMMA

The Impact of Obesity on Today's Police



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Submitted by

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Introduction

Fontana (CA) Police Officer Frank Tolerico was shot and nearly killed during the foot pursuit of a gang member on the Fourth of July 2005. Little did Frank know that making a stop for bicycle related traffic infractions would nearly cost him his life that night. After being shot once in the chest area of his bulletproof vest and once through his neck, he had to fight while bleeding profusely for several minutes with the gang member who tried to kill him. Finally, Frank was able to draw his weapon and shoot and kill the suspect before he bled out and died.

Frank is an avid exercise enthusiast and doctors attributed his survival, in part, to his excellent physical condition. Returning to work just two months after this incident, he is testimony to the relevance of health and fitness to survival and a poster child for the need for every peace officer to dedicate time and energy to their physical conditioning. His story also gives police leaders cause to pause, and reason to ask, are we doing all we can to ensure that our officers are doing everything in their power to stay healthy and physically fit to survive these types of encounters?

Obesity Trends in 21st Century

One of the most disturbing trends in the United States today is the rapid increase in the number of overweight and obese Americans. This significant health issue cuts across all segments of society regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or age. By all accounts, Americans are fatter and less fit than at any time in our history. Michael Lemonick of *Time Magazine* identified the following trends and facts in his article, "The Year of Obesity" and they help to illustrate the magnitude of the problem with which we are wrestling in American society:¹

- Two thirds of Americans are overweight (Body Mass Index (BMI) of 25-29.9)
- One third of Americans are considered to be obese or morbidly obese (BMI of 30 or above)
- Between three hundred and four hundred thousand American deaths per year can be directly linked to obesity, poor diet and lack of exercise
- Obesity is about to overtake smoking as the number one cause of preventable deaths in the United States

In developed countries such as the United States, we have evolved from prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies when we had to be constantly in motion to avoid predators and obtain food and shelter to survive, to today's sedentary, automated and computerized civilization. In truth, the greatest danger to any individual in many countries is the possibility of eating oneself to death. Nowhere is this phenomenon more pronounced than in the United States. Through modern modes of transportation, computerization and the ready availability of super-sized fast food, Americans can avoid most forms of physical activity while consuming unhealthy amounts of uniquely American meals. The high-fat, high calorie intake of kids and adults alike still leaves us starved for foods of a sufficient nutritional value to sustain what should be the healthiest society in the world.

Supersizing and the Police

In 2003, Morgan Spurlock produced and starred in the documentary *Super Size Me*.² This film documented his experiment to eat three meals a day at McDonald's restaurants for thirty days.

The toll on Spurlock's body during the test month was both amazing and disturbing. He gained twenty-five pounds over the thirty day period, his cholesterol went through the roof, he developed high blood pressure and his liver was showing signs that it could become irreversibly damaged due to processing such high volumes of fat and sugar. Doctors monitoring his progress were as shocked as the uninformed layperson at the impacts of his diet and pled with him to discontinue the experiment in the interest of his health. From this rather dismal portrait of the health and fitness of American society comes our law enforcement recruiting pool and our working law enforcement officers. As an occupational class, law enforcement professionals have well documented health risks involving obesity, lower back disorders, and cardiovascular disease.³

When one considers that many a law enforcement officer eats *at least* one meal a day at a fast food restaurant it does not bode well for the future health and fitness of our officers. Unless something is done to educate and motivate these men and women, the problem of our law enforcement officers becoming overweight and obese will grow far worse before it gets better. The ramifications of this problem are considerable as they relate to officer safety, public image, ability to do the job, career longevity, and personal health and happiness.

When we consider the fact that rates of childhood and adolescent obesity have nearly tripled since 1970⁴, we can extrapolate from this information the current problem in our ranks will continue to grow worse unless there is some type of intervention. In order to understand what we are dealing with, we must first understand what it means to be considered "overweight."

What Is "Overweight?"

The definition of *overweight* is the condition of being too heavy for good health based on specific height, build, or age. When one reaches the state of *clinical obesity* they have become so overweight that they are at risk from several serious illnesses, including diabetes and heart disease, if action is not taken to control the weight.⁵

The generally accepted standard to measure whether a person is obese or overweight is by using the Body Mass Index, more commonly known as the BMI. A person with a BMI of 25 to 29.9 would be considered overweight while a person with a BMI of 30 or above is considered to be obese. The following calculation is used to measure BMI:

$$[\text{weight (lbs.)} / \text{height (in)}^2] \times 704.5 = \text{BMI}$$

These calculations would translate to the average 6'0" tall male police officer having just reached the "slightly overweight" category at 185 pounds. He would be considered "obese" upon reaching a weight of 225 pounds. While body shapes and types are all different and there are other methods of aiding in the measurement of proper height / weight ratios, the BMI is the most commonly used.

Recruitment

It is instructive to examine some trends in the United States military as it relates to recruiting challenges resulting from obesity. Currently, two out of every ten men and four out of every ten

women of recruiting age weigh too much to be eligible for any branch of the armed forces, a record number for this age group.⁶ With similar demands for the physical nature of their work, it is logical to conclude the obesity epidemic also has the potential to impact the law enforcement recruiting pool. If two thirds of young Americans are overweight or obese, then a significant portion of the police applicant pool will have difficulty passing entry level fitness tests and medical screening for jobs with policing agencies.

If the overweight or obese applicant is somehow able to pass this process, Lemonick's findings indicate he or she will be predisposed to obesity and weight related health problems such as diabetes and heart disease throughout their career along with a decreased ability to complete basic job functions. These conditions, coupled with the general stress of the law enforcement profession, will turn many law enforcement professionals into ticking time bombs counting down to a physical breakdown or worse. A police sergeant charged with his agency's recruitment duties, also expressed concern about the professional appearance of officers who are ill-fit for their uniform. "As superficial as it may sound" he said, "one of the first things that come to mind when I interview a police officer candidate is 'How is this guy going to look wearing our uniform? Will he represent us well and present a favorable image to the public or not?'"⁷

Health, Fitness, and Retention

Once an investment of time and money is made to select, hire and train the modern day police officer on a professional level, does it not make sense for the modern day police organization to

also continue to nurture and care for that same officer's physical, mental and emotional health for as long as he or she is employed? Police vehicles are regularly brought in for service, tuned up, given oil changes, washed and vacuumed, and immediately repaired if they break down. Other than lifetime fitness courses the recruit receives in the Basic Police Academy, it is rare for any officer or deputy to receive any such preventative maintenance, advanced training or even encouragement regarding health and fitness issues directly related to their ability to do his job. In 1999, a nationwide study of state law enforcement agencies supports the finding that there are only a handful comprehensive wellness programs for peace officers in existence today.⁸ Fortunately, that appears to be changing.

We are beginning to see a few law enforcement agencies implement fitness and wellness programs for their officers. Both the Fresno and Sacramento Police Departments have hired full-time fitness and nutrition consultants for the sole purpose of counseling officers on the benefits of proper nutrition and exercise. They work with each officer to map out a diet and fitness program best suited for that individual officer.⁹ The San Mateo (CA) Police Department allows officers 50 minutes of on-duty time to work out during each shift in a state of the art fitness room, regular fitness evaluations, and corporate memberships to local gyms.¹⁰ This is a great start, as there are studies that indicate improved levels of fitness may positively influence employees' productivity, job satisfaction, and absenteeism.¹¹

The "officer wellness" trend is in its infancy and as a result, there is a lack of significant data to quantify the benefits of such programs. Intuitively it would seem to be an effective intervention to the obesity epidemic, one which is both logical and supported by research in the field.¹² Over

the long run, research reveals agencies that take a holistic approach to the individual officer and invest in the health and fitness of their officers, as well as their professional development, should expect to see thinner, fitter, happier, better adjusted officers with higher levels of self esteem and confidence.

Assessing the Future – An Expert Panel Weighs In

In March of 2005, a panel of experts convened in Fontana, California to discuss the issue of officer wellness and fitness, and how the current obesity epidemic might impact the recruitment and retention of police officers over the next ten years.¹³ This panel consisted of a city councilman and former police chief, a doctor of osteopathy specializing in public safety workers compensation cases, a police personnel and training sergeant, a human resources director, a regional representative from Weight Watchers, a basic law enforcement academy training sergeant, a middle school physical education teacher, an attorney specializing in local government representation, a nutritionist and a personal trainer. The panel concluded their work with observations and recommendations in the following subject areas:

- Childhood Obesity and Fitness and Its Relationship to Police Hiring
- The Need for Ongoing Fitness and Lifestyle Training
- Extending the Focus on Health and Fitness Throughout an Officer's Career
- Public Perceptions of Police Obesity
- Fitness Incentives for Officers to Maintain Their Health, and
- The Expected Benefits of Programs to Impact This Problem

Childhood Obesity and Fitness

Our junior high and middle school children of today will be the police applicants in the next decade. The junior high school physical education teacher on the panel noted that the majority of American children today spend far more time *sitting* in a classroom, *sitting* in front of Play Station and Nintendo (often while eating junk food), and *sitting* in front of a television set (often while eating junk food) than they spend *playing* outdoors, *training* for athletic events, or engaging in any type of *physical labor*. This trend takes place as physical education classes begin to disappear across the country in order to make room for more education in how to pass state mandated tests.

Currently only twenty eight percent of high school students in the U.S. attend physical education classes daily.¹⁴ Children need to be taught early and often through health and fitness awareness and education programs how to develop good eating habits and to appreciate the value of exercise. These types of programs on the part of schools, government, private industry, and non-profit organizations are what will turn the tide of obesity among all Americans and by extension enhance the fitness levels and health of law enforcement applicants and newly hired employees.

The Need for Ongoing Training and Awareness

The panel believed there needs to be much more ongoing training and awareness throughout the profession regarding the link between obesity and the stresses of policing. The panel viewed

overeating as just one more manifestation of a stress reaction, much like drinking too much alcohol, smoking too many cigarettes, or to the extreme, harming oneself physically.

The panel believed stress reduction training in addition to ongoing health, nutrition and fitness training should be part of any comprehensive wellness program. It was agreed officers need to be regularly reminded and encouraged to take care of themselves physically. The panel believed providing this mix of training would have a positive impact on obesity. The regional representative from Weight Watchers commented that the success of their program is based completely on the premise that their members are focused not only on losing weight but also changing their lifestyles through ongoing training, teaching, self discipline and constant reinforcement of these concepts.

Constant Focus on Fitness

Police representatives on the panel agreed there is a significant health and fitness focus during the hiring process with very thorough medical exams, often including treadmill tests to measure fitness levels. Physical agility tests are administered to all applicants in order to qualify for hire. This fitness focus is further enhanced and reinforced in the basic academy with courses on wellness and fitness along with hours spent running, working out and drilling in arrest and control techniques. Once an officer leaves the academy and begins his or her work in the field, the focus on health and fitness ceases almost immediately.

There is a corresponding increase in weight as one increases their distance from the time they were recruits. This can be seen in the number of overweight and physically unfit officers working in law enforcement agencies when compared to a basic academy class in which all participants are required to work out regularly and are given time to do so. Unfortunately for the unfit, studies show that increased fitness levels result in not only a healthier workforce, but even improve brain function in most people.¹⁵ These findings strongly support the consensus of the panel. It is well past time for the lessons of “lifetime fitness” training in academies to be translated to a peace officer’s career aspirations, and not just another class to get through.

Public Perception / Acceptance of Obesity within the Profession

As an increasing number of cops and deputies develop the same weight problems as their peers, the panel felt there would be problems with new and impressionable officers being trained by obese mentors. Seeing senior officer and managers as obese and out of shape, younger officers might misperceive this condition as a desired norm. The message this sends to the young rookie officer is that it is not such a bad thing to be overweight and out of shape in our profession - in fact it appears to be entirely acceptable. This will only exacerbate the greater weight and fitness problem we are trying to get under control. Peer pressure and leadership by example are a couple of the most important tools we have to make any type of change in the profession. Both of these tools could be negatively impacted if obesity becomes a condition that is more and more accepted in our society and our profession.

By contrast, obesity in our ranks will make it much more difficult to get over the stereotype of the “donut eating cop” with the ever present jelly donut in one hand and steaming cup of coffee in the other, enjoying another break with his partner at the local donut shop. Public perception is a critical factor in the confidence others have in our ability to fulfill our professional obligations. The attorney on the panel bluntly stated that if he and his family were involved in a critical incident in which an immediate police response was needed to rescue them from harm, he would certainly be disappointed if the responding officer did not appear to be fit enough to do the job. Society still expects their line level “warriors” to appear as such – men and women who are physically fit and physically capable of handling those situations that require not only brains to resolve, but also physical strength and stamina.

Fitness Incentives

The panel discussed the fact that monetary fitness incentives have not been effective in most agencies that have tried them and probably would not be in the future. Typically, already fit officers remain fit and earn the incentive. The monetary incentives are not usually large and enticing enough to motivate the out-of- shape officer to completely change the way he lives his life to trim into a level of fitness required to earn the incentive. The former police chief on the panel mentioned that allowing time off as a reward for achieving fitness goals may stretch the resources of already understaffed agencies allowing this type of reward. The panel concluded that health and fitness carry its own intrinsic rewards. Our job as law enforcement leaders should be to create an environment in which our officers clearly see that fitness is valued and

encouraged in the organization. They should feel it is an expected condition of employment and see concrete signs that the agency is doing something to encourage healthy and active lifestyles.

The research undertaken for this article indicates there are some very basic, common sense steps that can be implemented by any law enforcement leader looking to improve the state of wellness in his or her organization. From the work of the expert panel and all available data on the obesity epidemic, a number of core recommendations for change have emerged. If implemented, policing agencies can realize the goal of healthier officers, which, in turn, can aid in the health of the communities they serve.

Recommendations

Today's peace officer faces challenges that are physically, emotionally and mentally challenging. As seen from the research, an obese officer is less likely to cope with these stresses, and can fall victim to a number of maladies as a result. Cities and counties employing peace officers would do well to integrate some "new ways of doing business" when it comes to the health of their cops. Most prominent amongst these changes are to:

- ✓ Convene a wellness / fitness committee representing both line and management groups to brainstorm ideas on how best to develop and implement the program.
- ✓ Purchase or develop motivational posters and informational literature on the importance of law enforcement officers maintaining weight and achieving high

fitness levels. Officers should be bombarded with overt and subconscious reminders of the importance of fitness and health

- ✓ Invite nutritionist and fitness consultants from local hospitals or public health departments to speak at your next scheduled annual training date. Develop partnerships and make them available as consultants for officers on an ongoing basis
- ✓ If budgets do not allow for it, request police labor associations raise and donate money towards improving exercise facilities
- ✓ Develop and implement a *Chief's or Sheriff's Fitness Award* for achieving fitness goals – cops love ribbons and medals!
- ✓ Partner with local hospitals or workers comp providers to provide free basic annual physical checkups to all personnel so officers can monitor individual progress
- ✓ Work with local private gyms to see what they can offer personnel in the way of equipment, memberships, and training

These recommendations are very specific and require very little in the way of cost to the organization or in resources being expended to start such a program. They are, however, great first steps along the pathway to enhanced health for those charged with protecting the lives of others. Depending on the jurisdiction, success in these high-impact, low dollar programs may give impetus to more formal means of improving the health of those who face the challenge of contemporary law enforcement.

Expected Benefits

According to the research cited in this article, agencies adopting these recommendations should expect to see the following benefits as a result of their efforts:

- Improved levels of officer safety
- Improved health and fitness of sworn personnel
- Improved emotional and psychological responses to stress
- Improved morale
- Reduced sick time usage
- Increased career longevity
- Reduced workers compensation costs

Undoubtedly, other less obvious benefits would also emerge and include an improvement in the overall organizational culture as it relates to fitness and health along with improved attitudes and levels of job satisfaction.

Conclusion

Due to the fact the national spotlight is currently on this health issue, the amount of research material available for review is voluminous. The result of this research was anything but shocking, although it does confirm some unalterable facts. The majority of Americans need to

work to improve their levels of health and fitness through diet and exercise; however for the law enforcement officer of the 21st century, this is absolutely essential, possibly even life-saving.

Both the problem and the solution of obesity and fitness are equally well known. Much like the anti-smoking campaigns of the 60's, 70's and 80's and continuing up to the present day, we simply need to focus on the problem in a laser-like way. This means we must educate, train and motivate our officers to avoid the trap of fast food diets, working long hours, and making no time to exercise. This type of a campaign worked with cigarettes; it can work with diet and exercise.

Mindset and behavior can be changed. To change behavior, though, this health threat must be accepted and understood for what it is to the average cop or deputy - a path to increased numbers of on the job injuries, medical retirements, or the unspeakable event in every police officer's mind - to one day be in a fight for one's life and lose due to a failure to appreciate the value of health and fitness. It is up to law enforcement leaders everywhere to set the fitness example and deliver the critical message of the importance of health and fitness to every officer under his or her command.

Over the next decade, this issue may begin to recede in severity due to programs that are addressing childhood obesity. Many schools are developing anti-obesity and fitness programs for their students; some have banned the sale of junk foods on their campuses. There is more of an awareness that physical fitness programs cannot continue to be overlooked in the interest of budgeting or in the interest of giving children more time for classroom studies to prepare for

the many standardized tests that are considered, unfortunately, the “end all and be all” of public education today.¹⁶

The implications of doing nothing to combat this growing problem are that we can expect to see more officers becoming obese, unfit and unconcerned about being in that condition. Without a change, one of the biggest dangers is that obesity and poor fitness levels could be accepted as cultural norms. This transformation has already been taking place for decades, slowly and silently expanding the waists of unsuspecting officers. Since the fitness of our officers mirrors the physical condition of the society from which our officers are recruited, their obesity has gone virtually unnoticed. The media and government attention now being given to the issue are excellent first steps in addressing the problem. As law enforcement leaders, we should use this time to keep the momentum moving in a positive direction towards increased officer health and fitness.

Epilogue

During the meeting of the expert panel, Dr. Neal Archer of the Concentra Medical Clinic in Ontario, California, stated, “Officers need to think of themselves as pro athletes instead of blue collar or white collar workers. They need to realize that their job performance, and in some cases their very survival, is based primarily on how much they can count on their bodies to perform and they need to take care of those bodies more.” This comment, coming from a medical doctor, sums up well what needs to occur in our profession. There needs to be a change in mindset that only a massive education and awareness program can foster. In the current climate of awareness

regarding the *American Obesity Epidemic*, it would appear now is the time to get serious about lobbying for the implementation of efforts to enhance the health of peace officers. This is important not only for their longevity, but for the safety of those who rely on their service. Think about it - the next time you call the police, will you get a cop physically capable of handling almost anything thrown their way, or one brushing icing and crumbs from their uniform as they emerge, unfit for duty, from their police car. As law enforcement leaders, the choice is ours.

Endnotes

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- ¹² Ruge, R. (2002, April). The Stress of the Job Can Affect Your Health. *American Police Beat Magazine*. Pg. 43.
- ¹³ Nominal Group Technique Panel convening on March 22, 2005 at the Fontana Police Department Summit Heights Contact Station. Panel members consisted of:
- a. Dr. Neal Archer: Doctor of Osteopathy, Concentra Medical Clinic, Ontario, CA
 - b. James Barnett: Physical Education Instructor, Heritage Middle School, Fontana Unified School District.
 - c. Kevin Dale: Attorney at Law, Law Offices of Best, Best, and Krieger, Ontario, CA
 - d. Tracy Granberry: Nutritionist and Personal Trainer, San Bernardino County Department of Public Health.
 - e. Joanne Lapointe: Southern California Regional Representative for Weight Watchers weight loss programs.
 - f. Julie Mortimore: Nutritionist, San Bernardino County Department of Public Health.
 - g. Ed Raya: City of Fontana, Human Resources Director
 - h. Sergeant Robert Ratcliffe: Personnel and Training, City of Fontana Police Department.
 - i. Frank Scialdone: City of Fontana Councilmember and Former Fontana Police Chief.
 - j. Sergeant Mike Stansell: San Bernardino County Sheriff's Academy, Basic Academy Staff.
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