

Do All Those Officers Have to be There?

by Tina L. Lee

When talking with Martin police officers, they report that one of the most frequent questions they receive from citizens is: why do so many officers show up at the scene of an incident? When you see two or three officers at a traffic stop, do you ask yourself why they are harassing that person? Do you get upset and complain? You might even think your tax dollars are being wasted. The purpose of this article is to explain why multiple officers will arrive at an incident.

Something to Think About

Imagine the following situation: someone calls for help or you hear screams coming from a house. You want to help this person, but you are alone. After you decide to help, you race to the house. You are about to enter the house of a stranger. You do not know what the situation is, or what might happen upon entering the house. How would you feel, if after you enter, someone is hiding behind the door and shoots you? Even if it is not a criminal situation, would you enter the house of a stranger by yourself? I hope that you decided on the wise choice to not go into the house of someone you do not know. What would happen to you if that person was a danger and no one knew where you were? If someone did know how to locate you, what would happen if you were injured and that person could not get to you in time?

Now imagine that you are a police officer responding to a call or an emergency. Do you want to go into a house by yourself or would you prefer to have another officer backing you up? What if it was a suspicious person call or a domestic disturbance call? There are many injuries or deaths that occur when officers try to handle a situation on their own. If you would not enter a stranger's house on your own, why would you expect our police officers to do so? We should not want them to arrive at the scene of a call without having someone to back them up. Do we not value their lives enough to want them to go home safely each day? Just because an officer carries a gun and a badge, it does not decrease his or her chances of being killed or injured when he or she arrive at the scene of a potential crime. When they walk into the house of an alleged suspect, they do not know if this person is a danger to himself or herself, the officer, and/or the community. They do not know if the person has a weapon or if that person has a friend hiding inside waiting to ambush the officer. Do we truly expect our officers to go into an unknown situation alone?

Martin Police Department

Martin Police Department divides the city of Martin into three zones, and at any given time, an officer is patrolling one of the zones. This means that in a twelve hour shift, there will be three police officers patrolling their respective zones for the day. There will also be a lieutenant on duty for each shift. As part of his or her duty, the lieutenant is responsible for everything and everyone on a shift.

When there is a 911 call, the dispatcher will alert the patrol officer whose zone the call originated from to the scene. That officer will respond as quickly as possible, and typically, the lieutenant will eventually arrive to make sure everything is proceeding properly. Since the lieutenant will be patrolling all three zones, he or she might not be able to get to the scene in a timely manner. Usually, the patrol officer who is in the closest zone will arrive as backup first. The job of the second officer is to make sure that the initial officer is safe and to help control the situation if needed. Let us take for example a situation in which the initial patrol officer has to arrest three suspects. That officer will have to search the three individuals for guns, knives, evidence, etc. Do you believe that one officer can handle the searching and arrest of three individuals by him or herself? What if one person had a gun, and as the officer is searching and putting the first individual into handcuffs, the suspect with the gun and the other person kills or injures the officer? It would decrease the likelihood of death or injury if the officer had adequate backup.

Now you may be asking yourself: "Why didn't that officer ask for backup from the beginning if he or she knew the situation was dangerous?" What I would ask you is how would that officer have known these people were a threat? What if it was a routine traffic stop? How would the officer know that he would be stopping a car with three people on their way to a drug sale carrying five guns, \$5,000 in cash, and \$25,000 in cocaine? Would it not be better if for all calls, the officer had backup instead of the officer getting into a situation that could put him or herself in danger without having backup? Martin Police Department takes a proactive approach to officer safety, and this is much better than having to be reactive after an officer is killed or injured.

Now you might be asking yourself how many times a small town like Martin has dangerous situations that could put an officer's life in jeopardy. My answer to that is it only takes one incident where an officer dies as a result of being alone to justify the existence of such a

precaution. Are we willing to risk an officer's life because we think that there are too many officers at the scene of a call? So the next time you see two or three officers at one house or a traffic stop, and you begin to ask yourself why this is occurring, do not get upset and immediately call Chief Moore demanding that something be done. Think about the dangers to police officers while they perform their duties to the community.

National Data of Officers Killed or Assaulted

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports compiles information on crime in the United States that is reported to the police (Department of Justice, 2006). In addition to crime data, the Uniform Crime Reports obtains information on the number of officers killed each year.

Officers Killed on the Job

1. Between the years 1995 and 2004, there were 594 police officers killed.
2. 30% of officers killed (the most in the groups provided) were patrolling in cars alone.
3. In terms of regional breakdown:
 - a. 9% of officers were killed in the Northeast
 - b. 18% were killed in the Midwest
 - c. 47% of officers were killed in the South
 - d. 20% were killed in the East
 - e. 6% were killed in U.S. territories
4. 38% of officers were killed between 8:01 p.m. and 2:00 a.m.
5. 64% of officers were killed between Wednesday and Saturday.
6. 68% of the officers killed were over the age of 31.
7. In terms of circumstances in which officers were killed:
 - a. The highest number of officers (26%) was killed in arrest situations.
 - b. 18% of officers killed were in ambush situations.
 - c. There was a tie between the numbers of officers killed in domestic disturbances and traffic stops or traffic pursuits at 96 officers each.
8. 92% of officers killed died from firearms.
 - a. 69% of these officers were shot at close range (0-10 feet).
 - b. 30% of officers were shot in the front of the head, and 29% were shot in the front upper torso or chest.

9. 53% of officers killed between 1995 and 2004 were wearing body armor.
10. In terms of known assailants, there were a total of 696, with people between the ages of 18 to 24 more likely to kill an officer.
11. Officers are more likely to be killed by white males.
12. 77% of assailants had a prior criminal arrest, and 56% had a prior criminal conviction.

Officers Assaulted on the Job

1. In 2004, 59,373 officers were assaulted.
2. 49% of these assaults were in the South.
3. 31% of officers assaulted were responding to disturbance calls.

What do all these statistics mean?

Law enforcement is a dangerous field. Officers usually cannot predict what type of situations they will come across. This is why you see more than one officer at the scene of an incident. Like the saying goes “It is better safe than sorry.” In other words, it is better to be safe and have backup than to become one of these statistics. If you want to read more about events surrounding the officers who have been killed, based on states, the following website will provide a summary: <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/killed/2004/section1summaries.htm>.

References

Department of Justice (2006). Law enforcement officers killed & assaulted 2004.

Retrieved May 16, 2006, from <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/killed/2004/openpage.htm>