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On-duty police deaths may hit 70-year low in 2013

Dan Freedman

Updated 9:26 am, Sunday, December 22, 2013

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Jan. 6, 2013: An SFPD car in 2013. Photo: Ben Margot, Associated Press





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In the 1968 movie "Bullitt," actor [Steve McQueen](#) plays a police detective who floors his Mustang GT in a tire-screaming car chase up, down and over San Francisco's hills.

Fast-forward to the 21st century: Traffic accidents have exceeded gunfire as the leading cause of police on-duty deaths for 14 of the past 15 years.

A 2011 [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) study of 733 fatal police crashes found half involved only the officer-driven vehicle. Forty-two percent of the officers who died didn't have their seat belts on.

"It's ironic that police officers present the greatest dangers to themselves as they try to help the public," said [Pat Tobin](#), a retired San Francisco police motorcycle supervisor who lectures on officer safety. "But honestly, that is the case."

The good news is years of trainers' attempts to break through the pedal-to-metal, no-seat-belt police culture appear to be paying off. There's a chance that nationwide on-duty deaths for 2013 will total fewer than 100 for the first time since World War II.

'Historic moment'

Among the primary reasons for the drop is safer driving. Vehicular-related deaths have accounted for 43 of 99 on-duty deaths so far this year, according to the Officer Down Memorial Page, an online site that tracks officer deaths. That's five fewer traffic deaths than in 2012 and a drop of 19 since 2011.

"This is a historic moment for law enforcement," said [Dale Stockton](#), a retired Carlsbad (San Diego County) police captain who heads Below 100, which offers safety training to police departments nationwide. "Barring a catastrophe, we'll come in at a level as low as anyone has seen since 1944, when most every crime-demographic male was out of the country. No one wearing a badge today has ever experienced a year with a loss level this low."

With guns proliferating nationwide, gunfire remains a major concern and is the No. 2 cause of officer deaths, with 29 recorded so far in 2013. But that's an improvement over 2012, when 47 died from shootings, and a big reduction from the 67 officers shot and killed in 2011.

California deaths

In California, nine officers have died so far in 2013, four from vehicular accidents and five from gunfire.

Among those felled by bullets: An officer in Galt, south of Sacramento, killed by a burglary suspect, and two Santa Cruz police officers killed when a subject of a sexual assault investigation answered their door-knock with gunfire.

The 2,197-officer [San Francisco Police Department](#) has not had an on-duty death since 2006 when it lost two officers, one to gunfire and one to an auto accident.

Below 100 training stresses simple things officers can do to improve their odds on the streets and highways: Wear seat belts and body armor, reduce speed and avoid complacency.

For decades, officers have resisted seat belts and body armor as restricting their ability to exit vehicles quickly and maneuver. Police drive fast to actual emergencies but sometimes officers speed "because they can," Stockton said.

Officers who wear seat belts or don't speed in nonemergency situations often feel they have to explain themselves to eye-rolling colleagues.

Technology is helping







But police training increasingly emphasizes anticipating danger in seemingly routine situations such as serving warrants and making car stops. Technology is helping police departments monitor police-cruiser speed remotely, and research is under way into disabling getaway cars without police chasing them.

The San Francisco Police Department now requires officers to wear seat belts and follow strict rules about high-speed chases, confining them to pursuits of drunken drivers or suspects in felony or domestic violence cases.

Of "Bullitt" and its depiction of heavy-metal cars cresting hills airborne, Officer [Albie Esparza](#), an SFPD spokesman, said: "Those days are over."

"It's not that we don't ever chase, because we do," Esparza said. "But it has to be a violent felony. It's all for public safety as well as officer safety."

Dan Freedman is a reporter in the Hearst Newspapers Washington bureau.

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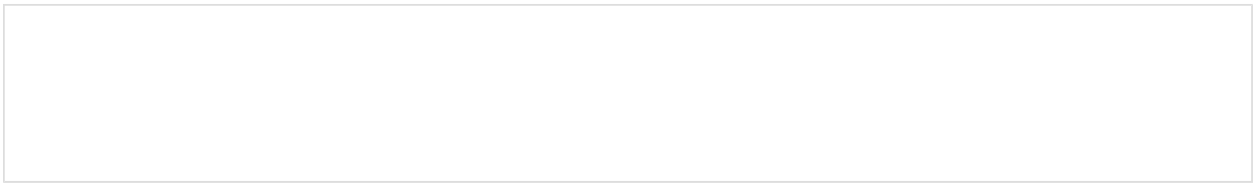
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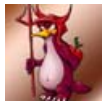


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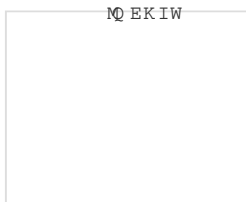
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