

The Alarming Consequences of Police

Working Overtime

Research shows long hours as well as off-duty work can negatively impact officers' performance, but most departments don't seem to care.

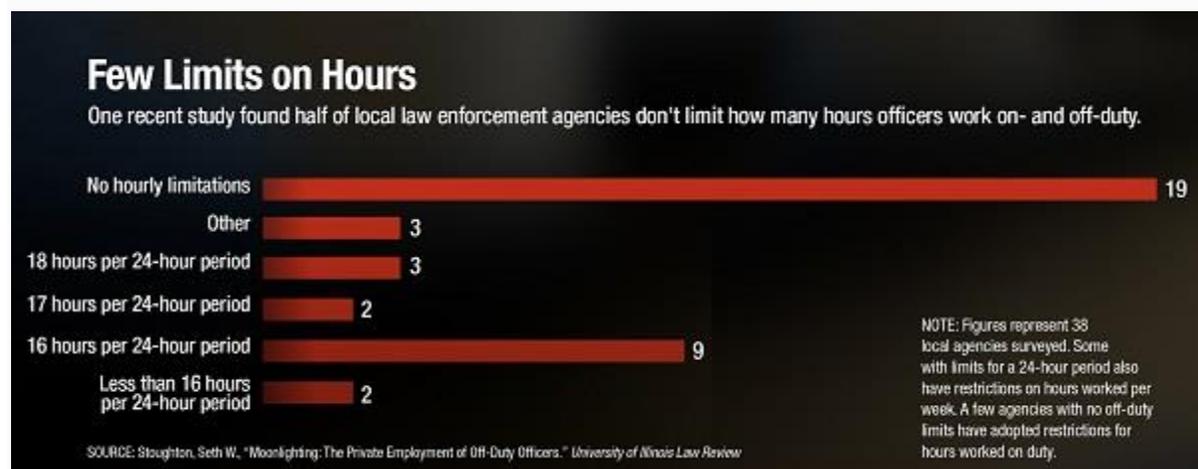
By Mike Maciag Oct 2, 2017 Calibre Press



Fatigue is bad for any work environment. But for police, the stakes are much higher. Officers have to respond to late-night calls, make split-second decisions and de-escalate tense situations — sometimes in the middle of a 16-hour shift.

A small but growing body of research links long hours and officer fatigue to a host of public safety issues. Fatigue may do more than affect the way officers perform routine tasks such as maneuvering a patrol car — recent evidence suggests it can influence their ability to exercise good judgment. Yet many law enforcement agencies maintain lax policies governing just how long officers can work, and some fail to track extra hours at all. Only a third of law enforcement agencies in the most recent federal Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics survey reported limiting how many overtime hours sworn personnel could work, and barely half placed a ceiling on off-duty employment. That's a big problem, says Karen Amendola, the Police Foundation's chief

behavioral scientist. “If you put a lot of tired cops into a very sensitive situation, a lot could go wrong.”



Fatigue's effects are most prominent in routine situations that otherwise aren't stressful for police, according to Lois James of Washington State University, who studies sleep deprivation and policing. “From an officer safety perspective, there are serious consequences of fatigue,” James says. One such result might be impaired performance while driving late at night. But **researchers at Washington State** also found that inadequate sleep may heighten pre-existing implicit biases. They monitored the sleep of 80 police officers and presented them with a series of tests. Officers who slept less were significantly more likely to associate African-Americans with weapons.

A **study** of the Phoenix Police Department, published in *Police Quarterly*, compared officers working 10-hour shifts with those who worked more than 13 hours. Longer shifts didn't result in fewer arrests or field interrogations, nor did they hinder pass rates on shooting tests. But the number of complaints made against those in the 13-hour group was significantly higher than for the 10-hour officers.

A **recent audit** of the King County, Wash., Sheriff's Office further associated overtime with a litany of personnel problems. Working only one additional hour of overtime per week increased the chances that an officer would be involved in a use-of-force incident the following week by 2.7 percent, and increased the odds of ethics violations by 3.1 percent.

These issues certainly aren't unique to police — a large body of research has noted that safety risks and health problems are worsened by long working hours for truck drivers, pilots and other professions.

But current pressures mean some police officers are working increasingly longer hours. Some agencies face staffing shortages resulting from budget cuts or baby boomer retirements. An **audit** of the San Jose, Calif., Police Department, for example, found average officer overtime had doubled since 2008 as the agency struggled to fill vacancies. Additionally, a large number of law enforcement agencies have received funding allocated for overtime to combat the opioid epidemic.

Scheduled shifts are lengthening, too. Police Foundation surveys suggest most departments still utilize eight-hour shifts, but more are moving to longer ones. A **study** by the group found that 10-hour shifts yielded the highest quality of work life, and officers slept a half hour longer than those on eight-hour shifts. But police on 12-hour shifts were shown to be sleepy on the job, with lower levels of alertness.

Some overtime work is unavoidable. Officers need to make off-duty court appearances, complete arrests late in their shifts, fill in to cover absences or assist with crowd control. But the extra hours aren't usually distributed evenly among the entire workforce. News reports frequently single out individual officers who've accumulated staggering amounts of overtime, sometimes more than doubling their salaries.

Overtime restrictions that do exist are often lenient — some departments allow 18 work hours over a 24-hour period. Many don't even monitor overtime at all. Amendola of the Police Foundation recommends that law enforcement agencies limit officers to no more than 14 hours per day and mandate rest periods between long shifts. “The policies are generally about what unions want or what agencies want, but it's not based on science,” she says. Another recommendation from a National Institute of Justice-funded study calls for agencies to incorporate officers' input into shift scheduling. Older officers in particular have been found to be less fatigued when they're able to choose their own shifts.

Off-duty employment can take a further toll on officers, but most police departments don't track basic information about that either, says Seth Stoughton, a University of South Carolina law professor and former police officer who recently surveyed **departments' practices**. Most departments permit police to work for private employers in a law enforcement capacity, which provides them additional income at a rate often exceeding what they're paid as public employees. Half the local departments Stoughton reviewed, though, lacked any limits on how many hours officers could work on- and off-duty. And of those with policies, few restricted officers to less than 16 hours a day. “It's very easy for agencies to underestimate the risk of officers working long hours,” Stoughton says.

There are no state or federal mandates regarding police work length, and police associations mostly haven't adopted model policies. Part of that likely stems from

different needs and capabilities of departments, as smaller ones with fewer officers may find it more difficult to fill shift absences without imposing significant overtime. In any case, unions generally oppose restrictions on hours worked. (The Fraternal Order of Police did not respond to requests for comment on this issue.)

Dangers are especially apparent for cops working graveyard shifts. A few years ago, in Henderson, Nev., police officers crashed their patrol cars in three separate overnight accidents during a relatively short period. That prompted Wade Seekatz, now a captain with the department, to explore potential solutions. The result was four quiet rooms scattered around the city, outfitted with hand-me-down recliners from the fire department, where officers are permitted to nap on their lunch breaks. (They are required to keep their cellphones turned on.)

“We expect officers to come to work rested and prepared,” Seekatz says. “But there are those times outside of our control when they hit a wall.” The rooms afford officers some privacy and may prevent the kind of adverse publicity that the Richmond, Ind., police department saw earlier this year when photos of a pair of officers sleeping in their cruiser went viral on social media. “If you have a 24-hour operation, then you have officers who are sleeping on duty,” Seekatz says. “They’re human beings.”

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