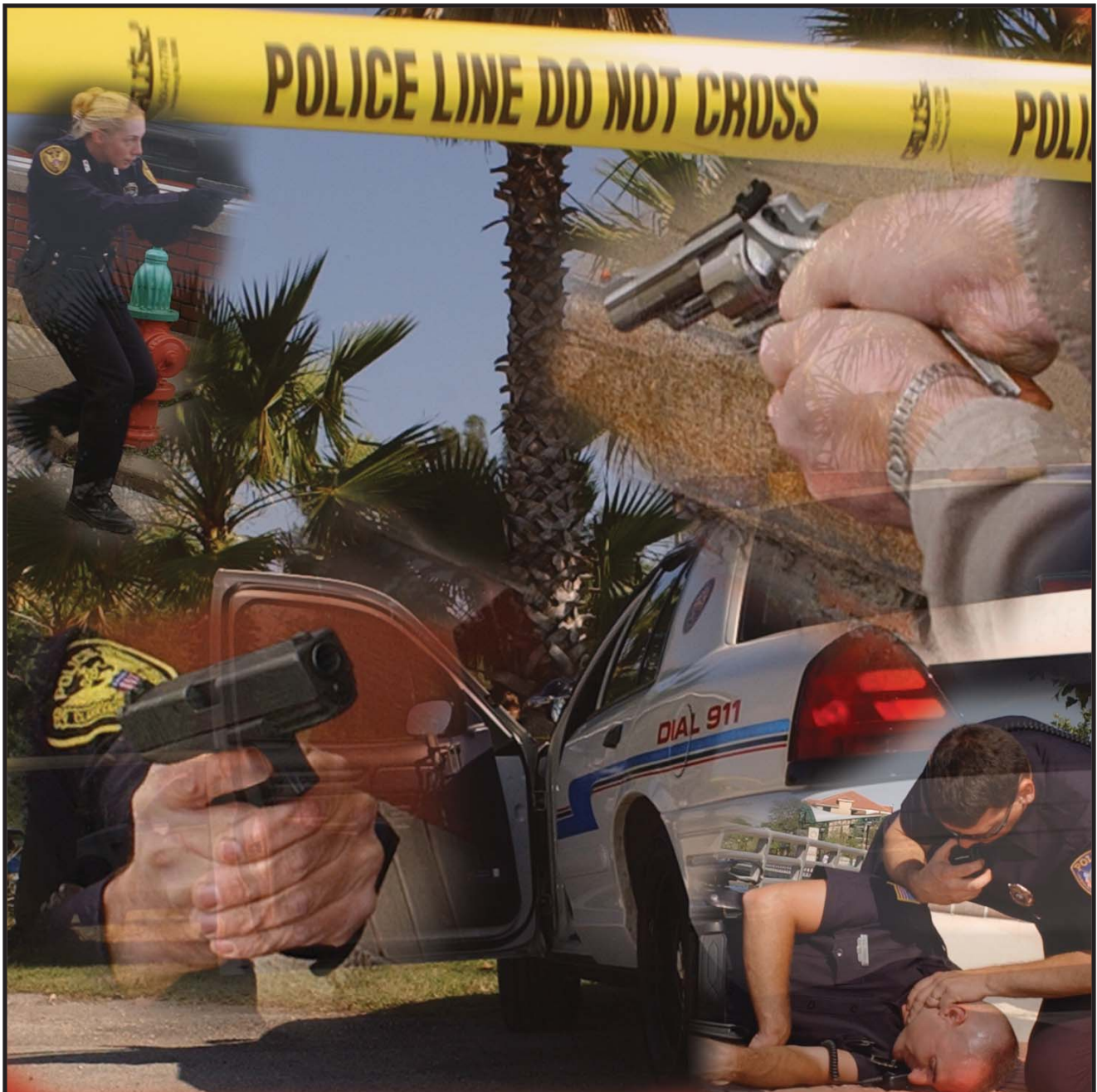




January 2007

# FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin



## The Deadly Mix

---

# *The Deadly Mix*

## *Officers, Offenders, and the Circumstances That Bring Them Together*

By ANTHONY J. PINIZZOTTO, Ph.D., EDWARD F. DAVIS, M.S., and CHARLES E. MILLER III



“He wouldn’t give me a good shot. He stood too far back. I had to stretch around to fire. Because of that, my shots went low, and I missed,” said an offender as he related why he had failed to shoot an officer in the head.

“I could jump through cuffs before your mind could think about what happened. I used to put my gun on the coffee table, stand 4 or 5 feet away, jump up in the air through the cuffs, come down, grab the gun, and

bring it back up in seconds,” advised an offender who had attacked an officer while handcuffed.

“It’s a cost-benefit question. Is the cost of catching this person at this time worth risking my life?” asked an officer as he stated his views on pursuing suspects.

“Retreat was my only option. The subject had a rifle, and I wasn’t sure where in the home he was located. Obviously, I did the right thing because no one got hurt,” explained an officer

concerning an encounter he had with an armed subject.

These actual statements graphically illustrate the real-world experiences of law enforcement officers and the offenders they interact with on a daily basis. The authors interviewed these individuals and many others for the third and final installment in their trilogy on law enforcement officer safety.<sup>1</sup> *Violent Encounters: Felonious Assaults on America’s Law Enforcement Officers* concludes an arduous yet rewarding journey



undertaken for the sole purpose of saving the lives of law enforcement officers so they can continue to perform their sworn duties, protecting and serving their communities. During this sojourn, the authors witnessed transitions and various emphases in types of tactical training, physical conditioning, and mental preparedness. As researchers and law enforcement officers, they hope that their efforts will point to ways that help officers patrol more safely.<sup>2</sup>

### THE DISCOVERY OF THE DEADLY MIX

One question remained during these years of inquiry into law enforcement safety. With all of the modern developments in technology and training, why do the numbers of officers killed

and assaulted each year remain, on average, the same? The law enforcement community knows many of the tactical problems and issues facing officers on the street. Instructors and agencies continue to redesign training to reflect this ever-increasing knowledge. Officers themselves have sought additional training in street tactics and survival at their own expense. And, yet, these numbers of killings and assaults remain somewhat constant. Why?

Perhaps, a significant part of the answer to this question lies in understanding the deadly mix as developed and explained in the authors' first study, *Killed in the Line of Duty*. The deadly mix consists of three components: 1) the officer, 2) the offender, and 3) the circumstances

that brought them together. However, it often remains difficult to determine the specific role and amount of influence each of these played in a particular assault. To further complicate quantifying these factors, elements within each component are affected by changes within each of the other two. As a way to better understand this, the authors present two incidents involving the same offender interacting with two different officers.

### Assumptions and Perceptions

A lone officer stopped an offender for speeding but did not check the license plate number of the vehicle or the violator's name in NCIC. Although he normally followed this procedure in every traffic stop, he



Dr. Pinizzotto is the senior scientist and clinical forensic psychologist in the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy.



Mr. Davis, a retired police lieutenant, is an instructor in the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy.



Mr. Miller, a retired police captain, heads the Officer Safety Research and Training Program of the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division.

---

planned to meet a fellow officer for lunch in 5 minutes. The officer obtained the driver's license and registration and returned to the rear of his patrol unit to write the traffic citation. The offender, wanted for a felony violation in a nearby jurisdiction, remained in his vehicle and closely watched the officer in his side-view mirror. At that point, the officer received a radio transmission from the officer he was meeting for lunch. He answered the radio, confirmed that he was on his way to the restaurant, and then approached the offender who shot him several times with a handgun and drove away.

Although seriously wounded, the officer survived. Authorities captured the offender 2 days later in a neighboring jurisdiction. When asked about the incident, the officer replied, "I wasn't aware at any time that I was in danger. The offender appeared very cooperative and polite." When asked what prompted him to attack the officer, the offender said, "It was nothing personal. The officer seemed like an okay guy. I was willing to take a traffic ticket for speeding; that was the least of my worries. But, when I saw the officer talking on the radio, I thought he discovered I was wanted on a felony warrant. If he had not gotten on that radio, I would have thought everything was okay, taken the ticket,

and left." In this incident, the perceptions of both the officer and the offender proved incorrect. The offender perceived the officer's acknowledgment of the lunch appointment as a threat, assuming that the officer was talking to the dispatcher retrieving information regarding his felony warrant status. Conversely, the officer perceived the offender's courteous and cooperative behavior as posing no threat to him.

***How each component (officer, offender, and circumstances) of the deadly mix interacts with the others represents the heart of the authors' research.***

In contrast, this same offender advised that under a similar set of circumstances in the past, another officer had stopped him. In that situation, the professional manner of the officer (i.e., the officer focused directly on him and the movements he made in the vehicle) impressed the offender so much that he did not use the weapon he had under his seat. The offender watched the officer in

his side-view mirror and, at one point, made eye contact with him. He saw the officer touch the back of his car, look in the rear passenger area, and take a position slightly behind the center post of the car. The offender decided, "It wasn't worth taking the chance that I might get over on him. He had his stuff together. I didn't feel I'd be able to get my gun without getting hurt."

How each component (officer, offender, and circumstances) of the deadly mix interacts with the others represents the heart of the authors' research. By altering only one aspect of only one component in an event where an officer and offender come together, the outcome can change dramatically. In the two incidents presented, it was the offender's *perception* of both officers' behaviors and the *assumptions* that he made that significantly altered his actions and resulted in the attack on the one officer and not on the other.

After examining the officer's behavior in the first situation, some may conclude that he made what could have been a fatal error. But, looking at the incident on three levels—the officer's view, the offender's impressions, and the context in which they came together—can reveal critical implications. The officer failed to notify the dispatcher of the license plate number and his location,

---

certainly an important consideration. However, stopping at that point will dilute the meaning of this encounter and miss a significant training principle: the perceptions and assumptions of the offender and the officer and how they affected the outcome of the situation. Instead, a reexamination of the scene would show that what eventually became an assault on the officer began in the offender's mind. His assumption that the officer received a broadcast that would lead to his arrest, *combined with* what he perceived about the officer's inattentiveness, resulted in the attack. The inaccurate meaning the officer gave to his perceptions of the offender heightened the threat level. Although the officer accurately perceived the courteousness and cooperation of the offender, he believed that this indicated a lack of dangerousness.

In this offender's past, a similar situation had arisen. Stopped by an officer for a traffic violation, he perceived that the officer was too professional for him to attempt any offensive action even though he feared arrest and jail. He quickly evaluated the officer's abilities and matched them with his own and determined that this situation did not indicate a favorable outcome for him.

The aspects within each of the components of the deadly mix that result in an officer's

death or injury are fluid and dynamic. Misperceptions and inaccurate interpretations of perceptions continue to affect how officers and offenders react.

“

***The aspects within each of the components of the deadly mix that result in an officer's death or injury are fluid and dynamic.***

”

#### **Officers**

In all three of the authors' studies, the officers generally had been raised in warm, caring, and stable environments by their biological parents. Most experienced relatively little, if any, exposure to violence in their childhoods. They chose the law enforcement profession because they wanted to better the communities they served.

Some of the descriptors developed for the officers remained constant. In particular, the term *hardworking* seemed to apply to every officer interviewed. Hardworking usually has positive connotations. In law enforcement, however, some possible negative consequences can result. Hardworking officers effect more arrests,

write more traffic citations, respond to more calls for service, and initiate more interactions. Because they have more contact with members of both the general public and the criminal element, they become the target of more complaints. These officers also appear more likely to get involved in incidents where property damage and injury to the officer and offender may occur. When their agencies review these complaints and injuries, they may see the same officers' names emerge, causing them to punish, rather than reward, the officers.

On the other hand, potentially serious administrative and safety issues can arise with hardworking officers. Some may take unnecessary safety and procedural shortcuts to increase their levels of production. They may rush into a building totally engulfed in flames to save a family pet; they may continue a pursuit that could increase their chances of being injured or killed; they may charge headfirst into a situation where, logically and tactically, most officers would retreat. The community and the media often consider these as acts of heroism and applaud an officer for taking needless and, perhaps, irresponsible risks. This kind of reaction can send a harmful message to other officers, “If I work hard and get too many complaints, I may be

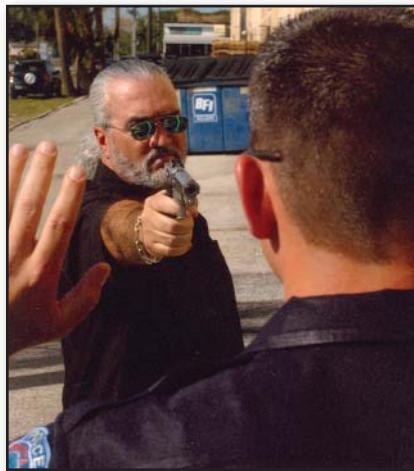
---

disciplined or possibly lose my assignment. But, if I take unnecessary and foolish chances, I may be rewarded.” Where this occurs, supervisors should recognize this dynamic and take the necessary steps to correct it.<sup>3</sup>

Another descriptor of the officers that remained constant throughout all three of the authors’ studies was the ability to “read” people and situations. This belief, rarely found in relatively inexperienced officers, usually was held by veteran officers. The amount of street time needed to lose the rookie status varies from agency to agency. Many officers expressed that this generally occurs after spending 5 years on patrol and becoming comfortable with their position in the law enforcement profession, feeling that they can deal with anything from a traffic violation to a homicide. They have successfully handled so many intoxicated individuals, so many disorderly incidents, and so many domestic disputes that they believe that they can accurately read people and situations and predict the successful outcome of an incident before it actually happens. They begin to depend on experience to get them through situations because it always worked in the past. This can result in officers walking a dangerous tightrope. They become complacent, thinking

that they can shortcut a thorough examination of a situation. Complacency, however, is the worst enemy of the veteran officer.

An example shows how this belief can become dangerous. An officer encounters an individual who fits a certain pattern of behavior that he has seen



many times.<sup>4</sup> He feels comfortable with this person because he *knows* how the subject will react. The officer tests his theory. After giving several commands and seeing that the individual complies, the officer’s level of caution begins to wane. With the person’s increased compliance, the officer now makes a fatal error: he drops his guard. Although previous subjects followed the officer’s commands, this one does not. This suspect waited for an opportunity to take the advantage away from the officer, and the officer gave it to him.

## Offenders

What qualities, aspects, preconceived notions, and emotions does the offender add to the other two components (the officer and the circumstances) that can result in an assault or death of a member of the law enforcement profession? The authors determined from their research that no clear profile of an offender who assaults or kills a law enforcement officer exists. And, yet, many officers continue to possess a picture of this imaginary offender. Many anticipate a physically dominating individual who exudes danger from every pore. Research, however, does not support this image.

Overall, some offenders had criminal records; some had psychiatric histories; some belonged to gangs; some consistently carried weapons; and, yet, many defied placement in any category. The only well-defined characteristic the offenders shared was that they assaulted or killed a law enforcement officer.

Some qualifying aspects of these offenders, however, frequently reoccurred. In *Violent Encounters*, for example, the authors noted that a number of offenders were affiliated with gangs, many more were exposed to violence at a much earlier age than their counterparts, and most abused alcohol and other drugs. Most of all, the



---

authors found that an analysis of these officer-offender encounters offered some lessons. Not unlike anyone who interacts with another person, offenders assess people, including law enforcement officers. This interaction may involve an exchange of money or drugs or an interview by an officer. The higher the stakes in the encounter, the greater and more extensive the assessment.

Most dangerous in such situations are the offenders often described as predatory or as psychopaths or antisocial personalities. Even in life-and-death circumstances, these types of offenders can coldly calculate their chances of survival. Because they do not experience the same levels of anxiety as most people, they are less distracted by either internal or external factors. Quickly and decidedly, they weigh their chances and options and make a choice. Where they believe that they can overcome an officer, they attempt an assault or murder. In circumstances where they feel that an officer has the edge, they respond as one such predator advised, “I just sit back and wait, somebody gonna make a mistake. That’s when I win.”<sup>5</sup>

Only the offenders know how high the stakes are in a particular situation. They have more information—or believe they do—than officers. This

puts officers at a disadvantage from the beginning of the encounter and greatly increases it when they judge dangerousness based on the erroneous belief that offender risk is displayed by physical characteristics. In several incidents, officers, by their own admissions, missed obvious danger cues because

“

***Do hardworking, dedicated, and service-oriented officers also project the image of being attentive, vigilant, and professional?***

”

they viewed the offender as safe. They based these judgments on assessing physical characteristics without giving any thought to what might be the offender’s emotional state or possible mind-set.

What, then, is known about offenders who have assaulted or killed law enforcement officers? Because offenders cannot be described by their physical characteristics and do not meet any profile, this apparent dearth of information paradoxically brings to light the most salient fact regarding individuals who might assault or kill an

officer—it can be anyone. Whether they chose to assault an officer came from their assessing a significant number of items in an astonishingly short amount of time. Although some assaults occurred during an extended interaction with an officer, many were more impulsive and reactive.

Because the deadly mix always involves an officer, an offender, and the circumstances in which these two individuals meet, the way in which that encounter begins and develops has a dynamic effect on the offender and the choices that person makes. Those decisions will have an important effect on the way the officer acts. And, so, the dynamic continues and changes.

Constant assessment and reassessment on the part of the offenders, although at times rapidly accomplished, determine their next move. Their internal environment, including their thoughts, feelings, expectations, fears, hopes, and experiences, interacts with their external surroundings, which, of course, include the officer.

### **Circumstances**

In the majority of cases in the authors’ research, the hardworking officers initiated contact with the offenders who subsequently attacked them. In other instances, dispatchers sent officers to the scene of the

### **An Overview of Violent Encounters: Felonious Assaults on America's Law Enforcement Officers**

The authors examined 40 cases selected from over 800 incidents of felonious assaults supplied by the law enforcement community nationwide. They visited the crime scenes, reviewed all case data, and conducted in-depth interviews to obtain, in detail, pertinent information concerning the interaction of 43 offenders with 50 officers.

The report includes a chapter on how the offenders acquired and used their weapons, how often and where they practiced with them, and why they believed that they could successfully defeat the officers. It also identifies the commonalities and traits of armed offenders, including similarities and differences between males and females, who attempted to or did kill law enforcement officers.

The study points to the need for nationally accepted definitions and reporting procedures regarding the phenomenon of suicide by cop and includes recommended guidelines. The effects on officers, families, and local communities following incidents where offenders have deliberately compelled officers to use deadly force are both traumatic and long lasting. Officers involved in these tragedies reiterated the necessity of additional training, an increase in conscious awareness of these incidents within their communities, and greater interaction with the media to correctly and adequately cover these occurrences.

A chapter on how officers and offenders acknowledged the details of their encounters covers perception, memory, and retrieval of information, all dynamic processes. After reviewing one theory of how humans perceive their environment, it goes on to examine and explain how officer and offender perceptions at the crime scene may have affected their actions, as well as their recollections of what transpired, during their encounters. The chapter ends with a discussion of the implications of these findings for law enforcement training.

Through the interview process, both officers and offenders identified what they considered as important training issues or how the lack of training resulted in the outcome of their encounters. Case examples supplement a discussion of these training issues, which also identifies implications for administrators, trainers, supervisors, and officers.

---

*Source: Anthony J. Pinizzotto, Edward F. Davis, and Charles E. Miller III, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Violent Encounters: Felonious Assaults on America's Law Enforcement Officers (Washington, DC, 2006).*

encounter. Those who initiated contact with the offenders generally chose an environment that they believed was tactically advantageous to them. In some cases, offenders did not stop at a location of the officers' choosing but attempted to find

a spot where they felt they held the advantage. For example, an officer attempted to make a stop in a well-lit area. However, the offender did not comply but, instead, eventually pulled over at a place that provided much less light.

When dispatched to a location while answering a call for service, officers had no control over the site of the encounter, only their approach. Of course, in any situation, officers and offenders cannot control certain elements, such as weather



---

conditions, pedestrian and vehicular traffic, natural lighting, availability of cover, and the distance of backup units from the scene.

Any encounter where an officer was assaulted or killed transpired as an evolving scene that included the perceptions and interpretations of the officer and the offender. These perceptions and the concomitant interpretations were altered by the actions of each person as they interacted. And, based on those assessments of each other's behaviors, each acted accordingly. At that point, the participants had set the potential of a deadly mix in motion.

## **THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE DEADLY MIX**

Understanding the deadly mix can offer many benefits for use-of-force investigators, academy and in-service trainers, first-line supervisors, law enforcement managers, and officers. By evaluating all three components (officer, offender, and circumstances), they can more clearly grasp some of the dynamics that result in serious assaults or deaths.

### **Officers**

Do hardworking, dedicated, and service-oriented officers also project the image of being attentive, vigilant, and professional? Their appearance and the verbal and nonverbal messages they communicate

can potentially protect them as much as their weapons and body armor. Officers always must be alert, attentive, and professional. Their demeanor must convey that, if necessary, they can become a formidable opponent. Although officers cannot control certain elements of a deadly confrontation, they can greatly influence others.

“

***...a complicated issue compounded further by an officer's actions or the decision not to act that may affect the safety of other officers and the public.***

”

### **Use-of-Force Investigators**

Investigators should remain aware of the components, interactions, and implications of the deadly mix. Understanding the complexities of perception and memory, including sensory distortions and information storage and retrieval by both officers and offenders, can assist those charged with investigating use-of-force incidents.

### **Trainers**

Understanding the concept of the deadly mix and incorporating these principles into

realistic training can better prepare officers for potential violent encounters. This training can bring together the multiple tasks of report writing, handcuffing, and defensive tactics in the same scenario. Altering just one element of the deadly mix can provide a multitude of changing circumstances and outcomes with which to challenge each officer. Law enforcement training must teach officers to be vigilant, attentive, and mentally prepared to deal with ever-changing circumstances on the street.

Field training officers need to observe the behaviors and messages that recruits project as they interact with the public. They must ensure that their trainees never evaluate individuals based solely on physical characteristics. They must instill the knowledge that part of being a professional law enforcement officer is to remain mentally focused for the unexpected during the entire tour of duty.

### **First-Line Supervisors**

Supervisors should monitor officers constantly to ensure their compliance with departmental safety policies and practices. They should scrutinize their officers' interactions with citizens and evaluate the messages these officers project. Supervisors should not commend officers for inappropriate risk-taking behaviors that place them, their fellow officers, or

citizens in danger *regardless* of the outcome.

## Managers

Managers set the tone for the entire agency. They must ensure that easily understood written policies and directives that clearly outline safety policies and procedures exist and that supervisory personnel enforce them. Executive officers should not limit their training programs to their specific state's established minimum standards but ensure that personnel continually receive timely, updated in-service training. They should meet regularly with members of the local media and explain such matters as suicide by cop and policies and procedures regarding the use of force, including the use of deadly force. Managers also should interact frequently with civic groups and provide citizen academies with relevant safety training information so that members of the general public can better understand law enforcement safety matters and issues regarding the use of force. Executives should ensure that local citizens are educated on how to conduct themselves during situations, such as traffic stops, where they may encounter sworn personnel in their official capacity.

Law enforcement managers should recruit the best available applicants based on job-specific criteria. A major component



includes safety, a complicated issue compounded further by an officer's actions or the decision *not* to act that may affect the safety of other officers and the public.

## CONCLUSION

Violent encounters between officers and offenders will continue to plague America, sometimes resulting in serious injury or death to those charged with safeguarding its citizens. Only by examining the various components of the deadly mix of officers, offenders, and the circumstances that brought them together will a greater understanding of these encounters occur. Only by this kind of careful and complete review of each event will the facts of the case surface and an objective assessment be made.

It is in the best interest of all law enforcement agencies, officers, communities, and

citizens to take the time to fully and impartially examine these events. In this way, America's law enforcement officers will continue to ably protect and serve their communities and their brothers and sisters in the law enforcement family. Most of all, they will survive these encounters, return home to their loved ones each day, and continue to fulfill their roles as society's guardians. ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In their first study, *Killed in the Line of Duty*, published in 1992, the authors presented the results of their interviews with offenders convicted of killing law enforcement officers. In the second, *In the Line of Fire*, published in 1997, they provided the findings from their interviews with offenders who had assaulted law enforcement officers and those with officers who had survived felonious attacks.

<sup>2</sup> *Violent Encounters: Felonious Assaults on America's Law Enforcement Officers* is available from the UCR Program Office, FBI Complex, 1000 Custer Hollow

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the inappropriate actions and overly aggressive behaviors of a very small percentage of officers have brought disgrace to all who have worn a law enforcement uniform. These few compromise the integrity of all dedicated and professional officers who, finding such behavior repugnant, would favor

<sup>4</sup> For illustrative purposes and to promote clarity, the authors refer to officers as males.

*The authors gratefully acknowledge all of the individuals who have assisted them throughout their research.*

*Most of all, they thank the officers who agreed to reveal their personal experiences, private reflections, and occasional demons associated with these violent encounters. As with all of their previous works, the authors dedicate this article to all law enforcement officers who serve and protect their communities without regard for their own safety and comfort. They also honor the quiet heroes—the parents, siblings, spouses, and children of these brave officers—who willingly share the burdens and sacrifices of their loved ones and anxiously await their safe return each day.*

## Subscribe Now



Order Processing Code:

\* 5902

☐ YES, please send \_\_\_\_\_ subscriptions to:  
**FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin**

The total cost of my order is \$ \_\_\_\_\_.

Name or title (Please type or print)

Company name	Room, floor, suite
--------------	--------------------

Street address

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip code+4 \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime phone including area code \_\_\_\_\_

Purchase order number (optional)

Fax orders: (202) 512-2250

Phone orders: (202) 512-1800

Online orders: [bookstore.gpo.gov](http://bookstore.gpo.gov)

(FBIEB) at \$36 each (\$45 foreign) per year.

Price includes regular shipping & handling and is subject to change.

**Check method of payment:**

☐ Check payable to: Superintendent of Documents

<input type="checkbox"/>	GPO Deposit Account	<input type="text"/> - <input type="text"/>
--------------------------	---------------------	---

☐ VISA    ☐ MasterCard    ☐ Discover

[illegible]

(expiration date)

--	--	--	--

Authorizing signature \_\_\_\_\_

1/2001

Mail to: Superintendent of Documents, PO Box 371954, Pittsburgh PA 15250-7954

**Important: Please include this completed order form with your remittance.**

**Thank you for your order!**