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Press On -- Seat belts work for the police, too

by Gary Dickson -- Publisher

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I remember when I was a child there were times when my parents, one or the other, would handle a situation involving my questions or my discipline by resorting to the centuries old, but nonetheless confusing and frustrating, "Do as I say, not as I do." I would imagine most people have encountered or used this approach at one time or another in their life.

I recently read a report that reminded me of my childhood experiences. I learned that in many places across the country law enforcement officers are exempt from wearing seat belts while operating their patrol vehicle. And, supposedly many of the departments that do have a seat belt rule for officers, don't seriously enforce it. So, even though an officer can write a ticket to John Q. and Jane Q. Public for not wearing their seat belt, that officer can return to the cruiser and drive down the road unbelted.

The most common excuses provided by law enforcement agencies to exempt officers from wearing a seat belt are that the belt gets tangled up in all the gear they have to wear, that it is more difficult to control violent prisoners with a seat belt on and that they may have to exit the car very quickly to apprehend someone or to help a citizen, and wearing a belt slows them down.

If you ask most people how the majority of in-the-line-of-duty law enforcement officer deaths occur, you're likely to get the response that they are shot in confrontations with bad guys. While that does happen much more frequently than it should in a civilized society, in most time periods tested around the country more officers are actually killed in car crashes than in shootouts.

One of the reports I read was from Buffalo, New York and one was from Houston, Texas. In Texas, 13 law enforcement officers have been killed in police cruiser crashes since 2007. Five of the 13 were not wearing their seat belt. In one case, a 25-year-old Corpus Christi officer was responding to a call at 107 mph. He lost control of the vehicle, hit a concrete barricade, was ejected from the car and run over by another vehicle. He was not wearing his seat belt while driving more than 100 mph. The loss of that officer caused the Corpus Christi Police Department to get very serious about officer seat belt use.

In the study from the University at Buffalo School of Medicine, which used national statistics, a surprising result was reported. Just like most of us would guess incorrectly about how officers are killed while on duty; most of us would also be likely to wrongly guess the percentage of accidents involving emergency calls verses non-emergency calls when it comes to officer deaths in car crashes. The answer is that 60 percent of the nation's law enforcement officers killed in vehicle crashes died while responding to non-emergency calls. The study went on to point out that, "40.4 percent of the unbelted occupants died, compared to 15.5 percent of those wearing seat belts."

I have no idea what the local law enforcement agency rules are on officers wearing seat belts. I do know that the general public here can be ticketed for not wearing a seat belt, and I believe that, for our own safety, that is a good law. For the safety of all law enforcement officers, regardless of why they may not like wearing a seat belt, I believe they should "do as they say" and always wear a seat belt.

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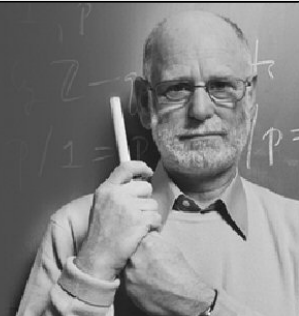


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