

# A Life in The Night's Watch

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Examining the Physical and Mental Effects of  
Officers Working Night Shift Patrol

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## Introduction

I learned a hard lesson about fatigue from working night shift as a police officer very early into my career. In 2003, I was a 23 year old brand new police officer with the Fayetteville Police Department, assigned to the night shift patrol. At that time, my department worked 10 hour shifts, with night shift running from 9 pm until 7am. I was the youngest and most junior person on my shift, eager to prove myself. In those days, it was a frequent occurrence for one shift to have to hold over an officer to work part of the next shift, due to manpower issues. This was especially painful for night shift officers held over to work morning shift for several hours.

On one such night, I received the news around 6 am that I would be held over to assist morning shift because they were a man short. I was assigned to a beat on the north side of town and took up a position there in my patrol car. As the sun rose into the sky, I quickly began to feel the effects of having been up all night and started getting sleepy. I parked the car in a large parking lot and tried to occupy myself to keep my brain active and awake. After an hour of this, I had still nearly fallen asleep in the car several times. I made the decision to drive to the police department to speak with a supervisor about the possibility of leaving early. I turned the car south and headed out. A short time later I was involved in a near head on collision with another vehicle after falling asleep at the wheel. I don't remember any of the drive to be able to pinpoint when it was I fell asleep, but will never forget the look on the face of the citizen that I ran into. Fortunately, neither the citizen nor I was injured.

As my time with the department went on, I would experience and also hear of other occurrences of officers experiencing issues with fatigue from night shift work. I was fortunate enough to get a break from shift work when I went to an assignment at the Drug Task Force. After 4 years though, I returned back to night shift patrol, this time with a wife and young child. Further, the department had, in my time away from shift, switched to 12 hour shifts working 7pm to 7am. When I returned to working this schedule, I began to notice changes in my health and mood. Discussion with other officers and supervisors in my situation led me to research more into what exactly my body and mind were experiencing, and how best to adapt to maintain my health.

There have been numerous studies regarding the effects of law enforcement careers on the people that pursue them, some of which have specifically focused on night shift work. I hope to examine some of these studies to discuss some of the risks to and effects on the health of the men and women who choose to work in law enforcement and stand guard over the world at night, as well as discuss some possible ways departments and officers can mitigate the risks and damage that night shift police work can incur.

### **Shift Breakdowns and Sleep Patterns**

Typically, shifts at police departments are worked in twelve, ten, or eight hour blocks. For the purpose of this paper the focus will be on twelve hour shifts, specifically a night shift that runs from 7pm to 7am. The nature of this shift requires the officer to sleep during the day, which is the opposite of the way the human body is designed. The Circadian Rhythm, commonly referred to as the “body clock,” is described as a “physical, mental, and behavioral

change(s) that follows a roughly 24-hour cycle, responding primarily to light and darkness in an organism's environment." (National Institute of General Medical Sciences, April 2016)

Essentially, it is the body process that tells us when to eat, sleep, and get up, as well as regulating many of the body's processes. As it is affected by environmental cues like sunlight and temperature, when disrupted, it can cause sleeping or eating patterns to go awry.

During my first "tour" on night shift I was younger, and had fewer outside responsibilities. I found it easier to adjust my personal schedule to accommodate my work schedule to ensure that I was getting sufficient sleep. During my second "tour," however, I have had more issues, largely due to increased demands of my work schedule and more responsibilities outside of work. Typically these days, I am able to sleep from 8 am to around 2 pm on days that I work, if the best case scenario works out. More often, I find myself sleeping from 8:30 am to 1 or 1:30 pm. Either way, it usually ends up that I average around 5 hours of sleep, which can also hardly be called GOOD sleep.

Sleep patterns for officers working night shift are further affected by a number of environmental factors. Like me, some officers have family responsibilities like dropping children off or picking them up at school or daycare. Some may even suffer through circumstances where, when they get home from work, THEY are the childcare for their children and have to scrape together time to get their sleep. I suffered through this circumstance for a short time and can attest to the EXTREMELY negative effect it had on me and my quality of work.

Even if officers can make arrangements to where they can block off the daytime to sleep, they can be interrupted. Court appearances, meetings with prosecutors, training classes, and various meetings with employers all get scheduled for daytime hours when it is more convenient for the court system and trainers. Night shifters frequently have to change their schedules for their work obligations, which can affect the time they have to take off work as well as their health and mental well-being. Even the most mundane of day to day occurrences, such as package deliveries, solicitors, neighbors doing yard work, etc. can affect the night shifter's attempts to sleep, because the majority of society is up during the day and thinks nothing of it. Many times have I settled down and gotten a solid hour or two of sleep only for the neighbor to decide that the middle of the day is the best time to mow the lawn.

Last but not least, is the psychological stress and fatigue that is consistent with police work. Officers spend their shifts dealing with a variety of calls, from mundane tasks like patrolling neighborhoods, to high risk calls with armed suspects. They must also maintain a state of alertness during their shift to maintain their officer safety. Maintaining this alert state, and then the constant up and down of the stress on the body from the calls and situations that they face can lead to tremendous mental fatigue as well as the physical. Many officers will say that once they are off shift and arrive home, they will turn off their brains and "veg out." Despite these attempts to let go of their day, however, they will frequently be unable to "turn off" their brain as it processes the shift they just worked and continues to be active, despite their level of fatigue. Officers will occasionally need several hours to "decompress" after a particularly stressful shift, cutting even further into the time they have to sleep.

## Sleep Disorders

A 2007 study published in the American Academy of Sleep Medicine documented that “a sampling of police officers shows a high incidence of sleep disorders among the members of this professions...Unrecognized sleep disorders adversely affect personal health and may lead to chronic sleep loss, which, in turn, increases the risk of accidents and injuries. These problems are exacerbated in shift workers such as police officers, who may experience chronic sleep loss due to their schedules.” (American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 2007) The study utilized self-report surveys with screening for various sleep disorders, including obstructive sleep apnea, insomnia, restless legs syndrome, shift work sleep disorder, and narcolepsy. The study found that over 38 percent of officers surveyed screened positive for a sleep disorder.

Obstructive Sleep Apnea is a serious condition that is associated with hypertension, cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, and an increased risk of motor vehicle crashes. The disorder is marked by pauses in breathing of ten seconds or more during sleep, causing unrestful sleep. (National Library of Medicine, 2016) However, it is also involves some mechanical factors with the body and respiratory airways, which are not entirely exclusive to police officers.

Insomnia is generally described as a sleep disorder that can make it hard to fall asleep, hard to stay asleep, or cause you to wake up too early and not be able to get back to sleep. It is also recognized as a risk factor for hypertension, as well as for depression and an increase in daytime functional impairments. If an officer is not getting enough sleep, it can begin to affect their physical health, mental abilities, emotions, productivity, and performance. A study from

the University of Iowa found that “officers working the evening or night shifts were 14 times more likely to get less restful sleep than day-shift officers, and also were subjected to more back-to-back shifts, exacerbating their sleep deficit.” (University of Iowa, 2012) Frequently officers will have to work a night shift and then manipulate their schedule to attend court or training the next day, sometimes with only a few hours in between. Or, they will have to do the opposite, and sacrifice their sleep time during the day to attend the training, court, or meetings, and then go directly into their overnight shift with no time to sleep in between. The University of Iowa study further found that officers working the evening or night shifts were more likely to get fewer than six hours of sleep, and that police who slept fewer than six hours were twice as likely to sleep poorly. This poor sleep can lead to chronic fatigue, which can then lead to additional health problems. (University of Iowa, 2012)

Shift work sleep disorder is a broad term used to encompass mental and physical ailments associated with upsetting the body’s Circadian Rhythm. As previously discussed, the Circadian Rhythm is the body’s system for telling us when to eat, sleep, and get up, among other bodily processes. Its main influence is environmental factors like light and temperature. By the very nature of having to work at night and sleep during the day, police officers have to make their bodies function opposite of the way they are designed. While some people have different peak functioning hours, the majority of humans are designed to sleep when it’s dark. Changing this system around often leads to lights and more easily interrupted sleep, for both the environmental factors we discussed previously as well as the simple difficulty of the body to adapt.

## Health Risks

In 2015, the FBI reported that during the previous year 45 law enforcement officers had been killed in line of duty accidents. Of that number, 28 had been killed in automobile accidents. (LEOKA, 2014) The statistics do not clearly point out the cause of each accident, but many of the accidents officers are involved in are either directly or indirectly their fault. The lack of sleep and sleep disruption that many officers suffer from can directly impact their mental abilities, possibly leading to poor decision making that ends up causing the involvement in an accident.

Police officers working night shifts also have a higher number of responses to fights in progress and disturbances, situations where an officer's mental abilities and decision making may mean the difference between life and death. "Sleep disturbance and fatigue-related impairment provoked by circadian disruption have been reported in previous studies of night shift workers, and have been found to affect the kind of decision making that is required in fast-paced, ambiguous, high-risk police situations." (University of Buffalo, 2014) If their mental abilities are impaired by fatigue it could lead to them making a decision that could end their career or even their life.

A 2016 study by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine takes this idea one step further, and examines how fatigue associated with shift work influences how officer interact day-to-day with the public. "Results show that experienced police patrol officers who worked day shifts were significantly more likely to manage simulated encounters with the public in ways that resulted in full-on cooperation—and significantly less likely to have encounters

escalate into violence.” (American Academy of Sleep Medicine, 2016) If an officer is fatigued, he or she is more likely to be irritable, which can be a tremendous weakness when that officer is further put into a stressful situation where they have to keep a situation from escalating.

One of the most used tools on the tool belt for the patrol officer is their ability to utilize “tactical” social interaction to ensure both their safety and the best quality of service.

Officers are not only at risk associated to their actions and the actions of others, but also to interior physical health risks. As previously reported, disruptions to the circadian rhythm and sleep disorders can be risk factors for the development of hypertension and other cardiac issues. These cardiac issues can be exacerbated by officers’ use of caffeine-laden energy drinks to make it through their shifts, on top of the cardiac demands of the stressful situations they may face.

The officers’ metabolism can also be affected by the disruption to the circadian rhythm. The body is used to working on a schedule designed around the circadian rhythm, and is more efficient at metabolizing foods during the daylight hours. The body’s process for metabolizing foods slows down and doesn’t work at the same rate while they are up all night. Also, officers are at a disadvantage when it comes to eating healthy meals. Generally, they have to resort to eating wherever is open during the middle of the night, which is most often fast food and is not usually full of healthy options. Some officers also utilize sugary snacks and the aforementioned energy drinks laden with sugar to assist them in staying awake and alert throughout the night. This reliance on unhealthy food combined with the body’s slower metabolism rate can result

in weight gain. This weight gain can further affect the officer's health by leading to gastrointestinal and/or digestive problems, which can then further impact sleep issues.

Weight gain also has an effect on the body by leading to joint issues in the ankles, knees, and hips, as well as lower back issues. Officers already have to conduct their work wearing 10-20 pounds of gear with the duty gear, uniform, and vest. Adding more bodyweight to that only further stresses the officer's body and his overall mobility. Officers will likely see problems begin to develop with their lower body joints as the extra weight and decreased mobility impacts their ability to physically do the job.

The most worrisome aspect of weight gain is the increased risk of cardiovascular issues, including increased blood pressure and a higher risk of stroke and heart attack. Violanti found that officers, regardless of age, were at an increased risk for all these health effects when working night shift hours and seeking sleep during the daylight hours. (Archives of Environmental and Occupational Health, 2009) This is especially concerning, because traditionally, the newest and least experienced officers are assigned to night shift out of the field training program. If they are subjected to the risk of these negative health effects when they are just starting out, this will only compound the effects they would encounter as they regularly age. Especially if they are not educated as to the specific health risks.

### **Testimonials**

During the process of writing this paper, I sought out several of my coworkers who have worked nights and now work day shift. I solicited feedback from them about their experiences on both shifts and asked them to describe for me, in their words, how they were affected by

the work schedule on both shifts. I ended up getting twelve officers to respond with their experiences. All currently work day shift but had previously worked the night shift schedule for at least a nine month period. Of the twelve, three are single and the rest are married with children. All of the officers asked said they preferred the actual work on night shift, but several did note that slow nights can make the shift agonizing. The nine married with children officers all stated that they would adjust their schedules in some way or another to spend time with their families while on nights. This would cause their sleep patterns to be even more “wrecked” as one officer reported.

Several of the married officers reported that one of the deciding factors for their move to days had been the stress placed on them by their spouses. The physical stress is mainly carried by the officer, but the psychological and mental stress of working nights is felt by the spouse as well. As one officer stated, “On days I worked, I would come home from shift, take my kid to school, then go home and sleep. I got up before she was done with school and would be there to pick her up. We’d come home and spend some time together then I would leave for work again as my wife got home. It was like players substituting for each other during a basketball game. Most of our conversations were carried out over text. I finally got tired of her jokes about being a single parent.”

Eleven of the twelve stated that they physically felt better working a day shift schedule. This included being sick less, having more energy, a better appetite, and feeling mentally sharper. Seven of the twelve mentioned a frequent complaint of night shifters of feeling less focus or as one put it, “the four o’clock brain fog.” All seven said that this was not an issue

working days. The one outlier officer reported that they actually had been more “sickly” since moving to days. He/she reported actually getting less sleep working a “normal” schedule, but attributed it to their own fault of not wanting to be in bed asleep at a reasonable hour.

### **Offsetting the Risks**

Having looked at the risks and effects of working nights, I would now like to discuss some ways that officers and departments can work to minimize those risks. The first would be to have more education about the effects. During my twelve week police academy I was taught defensive tactics, firearm use, basics of patrol techniques, criminal law and procedure, and other day to day items that I would need to be proficient on. What was never discussed, outside of anecdotal advice, was how to prepare my body and mind to work nights. There was no discussion of how to combat the risk of weight gain, proper nutrition, exercise, or any other health risk of night shift. Since most new recruits out of the academy will end up on nights as their first posting, even a small block of instruction could be beneficial in at least exposing those young officers to the risks so that they could then further educate themselves if they wanted. The way it is now, if they are not made aware of the issue, then they may do as I did and end up nearly 10 years into a career before they learn anything.

Departments should also encourage exercise among their night employees. Regular exercise can help stave off the weight gain and fatigue that officers can be at risk for and the nature of most night shifts could allow for the periodic ability to exercise while on duty. Officers could simply take 30-45 minutes during the early morning hours when call volume is at its lowest and use that time to exercise. This would enable them to fight off fatigue and

tiredness during this lull in the shift, while also freeing up time during their off hours to ensure they get better quality sleep. For example, on the schedule I keep now, if I want to work out on a day that I work, that means one less hour of sleep I'll get that day. If I were able to use that workout time during a shift, I would likely arrive for work fresher and better rested, and produce an overall better quality of work.

Another incentive that could be looked at is what is referred to as shift-differential pay. This would mean that officers working nights would be paid more than those working days, as a way of offsetting some of the risks they encounter, while also possibly having the effect of keeping officers with experience on nights. As it stands now, officers work 1-3 years on nights shift and then become tired of the grind, moving on to days. This means that night shift is constantly getting the newest and youngest officers, creating a dearth of experience on these shifts. This can put even more strain and stress on the shift elders and supervisors, as they are constantly dealing with young and inexperienced officers that require more supervision and assistance. The issue even extends to the supervisor level. It can be somewhat traditional for newly promoted supervisors to go to nights, for the same reasons new officers are assigned there. Now the problem can be compounded, with new, untested officers being led by new, untested supervisors. If there was an incentive for officers to stay on nights, such as shift-differential pay, departments might be able to better utilize the experience of its officers and divide that experience more equally among the ranks.

Finally, departments should work with local courts and judges to determine better court times, as well as schedule training and department meetings at more opportune times for night

shift officers. Frequently, night shift officers are “out of sight, out of mind” to command staff and supervisors that work day schedules. As such, little consideration is often given to scheduling court or training. If prosecutors and court staff want a well-rested, prepared officer for court testimony, they have to take into account that officer’s schedule. At my department, it is a common occurrence for an officer to work 7pm to 7am on shift, and then have to be back at court at 1pm for court testimony. Factoring in travel time to and from home, this gives an officer maybe 4-5 hours to rest before possibly testifying in a criminal trial. When it comes to training classes, the issue can be even harsher. While a day shift officer scheduled for a day of training on his regular work day can simply trade that time for the training, a night shift officer may have to trade the night before the class and then also the night after. The alternative is for the officer to work the night before, struggle through the class on no sleep, and then take the night off, or take the night before off, go to the class, and then work the night after without getting any rest. Either way is far less than ideal and makes it harder for night shift officers to fit training classes and training days into their schedule.

## **Conclusion**

During my research I found that nearly all the studies I could find had a common theme. Officers working night shift for any length of time can be expected to suffer from some form of sleep disturbance, sleep disorder, or chronic fatigue. With the trend becoming that more and more young officers are working nights, there is a troubling number of these officers beginning to show the physical effects related to night shift work. The continued lack of education for these young officers puts them on the path to develop health complications that will affect

them and also their quality of work for possibly many years to come. These officers also receive nothing but anecdotal advice from others about how to adjust their schedules and bodies to the new schedule. If an officer already has a spouse or family this problem becomes compounded.

If police departments want to ensure that they are looking after the health and safety of their night shift workers, then they need to consider beginning more formal education for the risks and dangers to their officers. Night shift officers should be given more consideration when scheduling training and court appearances. Departments should also look into incentive programs to keep officers with experience on night shift, so that the ranks at night are not constantly filled with newer and inexperienced officers that are not up to the task of dealing with some of the incidents that they might encounter. Incentive programs could range from shift differential pay to fitness programs that enable the officers to exercise on duty.

Education and monitoring of the health of these officers could help increase not only the overall quality of life of these officers, but also help mitigate accidents, deaths, or even bad responses to critical situations. All because the officers are getting the proper rest and are physically, mentally, and tactically ready for shift. The lesson in the dangers of night shift work that I learned early in my career is one that I hope to pass on to the younger generation of officers, in a much less dramatic fashion than I experienced.

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