

# Study finds that police work, like many other jobs, is mostly sedentary

February 18 2014, by Richard C. Lewis

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Are you active at your job? If you're like most workers, you probably aren't. And the consequences could be deadly.

A team of researchers at the University of Iowa measured [physical activity](#) in police, whose jobs are presumably predicated on movement. Yet the group found that [police officers](#) burn as much energy on the job as someone sitting while holding a baby or washing dishes.

"We find that police work is primarily sedentary," explains Sandra Ramey, assistant professor in the UI College of Nursing. "The public view, how the media portray it on shows like 'Hawaii Five-0,' it's just go, go, go – it's an intense, high-activity profession. But it's not. It's more like bursts of energy, with long periods of little activity."

The findings are important, because workers—no matter the occupation—are increasingly employed in mostly sedentary settings, says Ramey, corresponding author of the study, published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

"The police are not alone," says Ramey, who has studied officer habits and stresses for years, "in that most jobs are associated with using higher technology at the expense of physical activity in the workplace. And, so what it means is that other occupations, like police, should increase movement on the job."

It's no secret that we move less in our jobs—and don't make up for that

inaction in our off hours and days. In 2000, four in 10 American employees worked in low physical-activity occupations, double the percentage a half-century ago, according to a 2005 study published in the journal *Annual Review of Public Health*. Ominously, one quarter of U.S. adults don't exercise in their leisure time, either, reports the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

The societal impacts are great: Lack of physical activity increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the United States, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Treatment costs can reach as much as \$76 billion per year.

Moreover, [police departments](#) nationwide are struggling with spiraling health-care costs of its membership, some of it undoubtedly caused by high rates of obesity caused by inactivity at work.

Ramey's team measured physical activity in 119 university campus and municipal police officers in six departments in the Midwest and Hawaii. Officers wore armbands that monitored their activity continuously for 96 hours, which included three work days and one day off. Physical activity was determined using a formula that incorporated step count and energy expenditure per hour, measured in "metabolic equivalents." It was the first time physical activity in police had been directly measured, rather than relying on surveys, the authors say.

No matter the department, officers expended, on average, 1.6 metabolic equivalents per minute during their shifts, roughly equivalent to the amount of energy needed to wash dishes while standing, reclining while holding a baby or ironing while standing, the researchers note.

"In other words, the physical demands of police work are generally comparable to sitting or standing," the team writes.

Higher-ranking officers moved less than rank-and-file officers, and university police were more active, generally, than those in municipal departments, the authors note.

"The take-home message is police officers are in a sedentary profession, and we now have something beyond self-report that shows that," Ramey says.

But she is quick to note that [police](#) work mimics many other present-day jobs. And, like other occupations, she stresses that workplaces should encourage employees to move during the workday. Some low-cost aids would be to have standing computer workstations and to introduce regular computer prompts to alert workers to leave their desks and move around.

"We need to encourage movement," Ramey says.

Provided by University of Iowa

Citation: Study finds that police work, like many other jobs, is mostly sedentary (2014, February 18) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-police-jobs-sedentary.html>

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