

Study: COVID-19 accounted for 62% of duty-related law enforcement deaths in 2020

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COVID-19 accounted for 62% of the 295 duty-related law enforcement deaths reported in 2020 to the National Law Enforcement Officer Memorial Fund database, which tracks law enforcement officers who

died in the line of duty, according to a new University at Buffalo study.

The study, published last month in *Policing: An International Journal*, also found that COVID-19 accounted for 82% of deaths among Black members of [law enforcement](#) and 77% of deaths in Latinx officers, far higher than the 48% of deaths among white police officers.

These figures align with CDC data finding that race and ethnicity are risk markers for higher COVID-19 [death](#) rates, along with socioeconomic status, access to [health care](#) and exposure to the virus related to one's occupation.

While the study looked specifically at COVID-19 deaths among members of law enforcement in 2020, there are important lessons for police and other first responder organizations going forward, said John Violanti, Ph.D., the study's first author and research professor of epidemiology and environmental health in UB's School of Public Health and Health Professions.

It's the first study to examine law enforcement deaths from COVID-19 on a national level, demonstrating the widespread risk from COVID that officers face in their work.

Moreover, Violanti says, COVID has proven to be another source of stress for an occupational group that already faces numerous stressors that affect job performance and overall health. (Gunshots, automobile crashes, and physical stress were among the leading causes of death among law enforcement other than COVID-19.)

"The study's finding that the majority of law enforcement deaths in 2020 were from COVID-19 reveals the added danger that law enforcement face during this pandemic," added Violanti, a retired New York State Trooper and expert in police stress.

"Law enforcement were continuously exposed to the disease and were mandated to assist others in prevention and cure. The study should prompt police and other organizations to make informed decisions about preparation for any future disease outbreaks," he said.

COVID-19 also accounted for deaths among corrections officers, Violanti and co-authors from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reported. Overcrowding in jails could be one possible explanation for COVID deaths among corrections officers given that incarcerated people are at higher risk for COVID-19 due to their proximity to one another, the researchers write. Another factor is the alarmingly high rate of corrections officers refusing to get vaccinated.

The majority of the [law enforcement officers](#) who died from COVID-19 were men (94%) over the age of 50 (61.6%) with more than 20 years of service (54%) and resided in Southern states.

In addition, the national rate of death due to COVID-19—12.8/100,000 officers—for law enforcement officers was higher compared to all other causes of death combined, at 8.0/100,000.

Given the complexity of personal exposures to COVID-19, the researchers point out that the percentage of COVID deaths attributed to duty may actually be higher or lower.

While this particular study looked only at law enforcement officers, the results suggest that other first responders, such as fire and EMT personnel, may also be disproportionately impacted, the researchers note.

"To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration recommends that organizations implement

multiple layers of controls including vaccinations, mask wearing, distancing, and increased ventilation in situations where police, first responders and other at-risk workers are more likely to be in prolonged, close contact with the public," Violanti said.

More information: John M. Violanti et al, Proportionate mortality and national rate of death from COVID-19 among US law enforcement officers: 2020, *Policing: An International Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.1108/PIJPSM-02-2022-0022](https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-02-2022-0022)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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