

Posted 7/4/10

WHAT'S MORE LETHAL THAN A GUN?

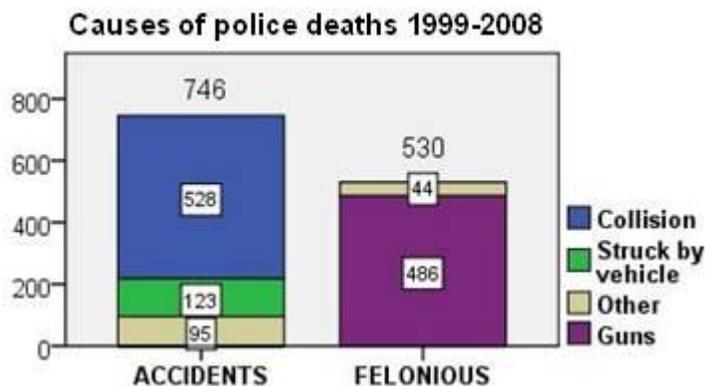
Officers have more to fear from accidents than from criminals



[Click here to link to video](#)

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. May and June were terrible months for the California Highway Patrol. On May 7 Officer [David Benavides](#) lost his life when his patrol aircraft crashed. One month later, on June 9, motorcycle officer [Phillip Ortiz](#) was on a freeway shoulder writing a ticket when he was struck by an errant vehicle; he died from his injuries two weeks later. On June 11 CHP motorcycle officer [Tom Coleman](#) was killed when he collided with a truck during a high-speed chase. On June 27 the toll reached five when two officers, [Justin McGrory](#) and [Brett Oswald](#) were struck and

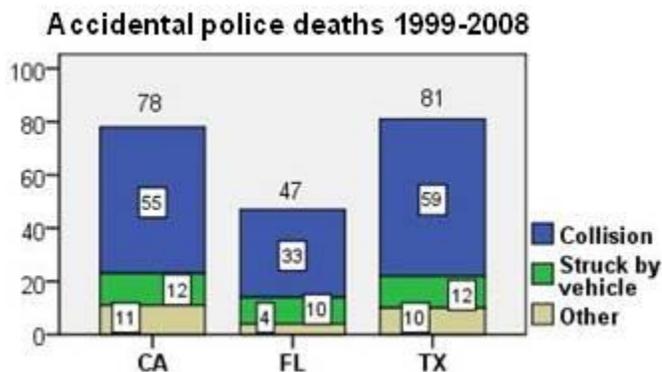
killed by vehicles in separate incidents, McGrory while citing a motorist and Oswald as he waited for an abandoned car to be towed.



Accidents kill many more cops than gunplay. According to the [FBI](#), 530 officers were feloniously killed in criminal encounters between 1999-2008, with ninety-two percent (486) shot to death.

But nearly half again as many (746) perished in accidents. Seventy-one percent (528) died in auto, motorcycle and aircraft wrecks (including pursuits, responding to calls and ordinary patrol, all under "collision".) Sixteen percent (123) were on foot, ticketing motorists, directing traffic and investigating accidents when they were fatally struck by a vehicle. Thirteen percent (95) were killed in other mishaps, including accidental shootings, falls and drownings.

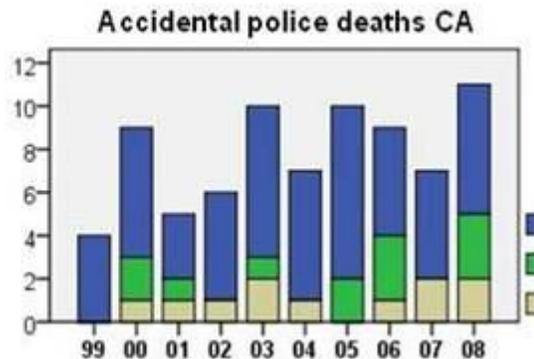
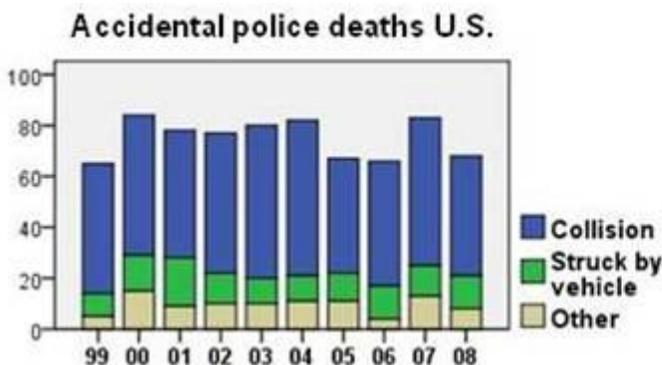
Texas led in both accidental and felonious deaths (81 and 52, respectively). California was second in both (78 accidental and 46 felonious). For both the causes of accidental death matched those of the U.S. as a whole. Seventy-three percent (59) of officers accidentally killed in Texas died in collisions, 15 percent (12) when struck by a vehicle, and 12 percent in other ways.



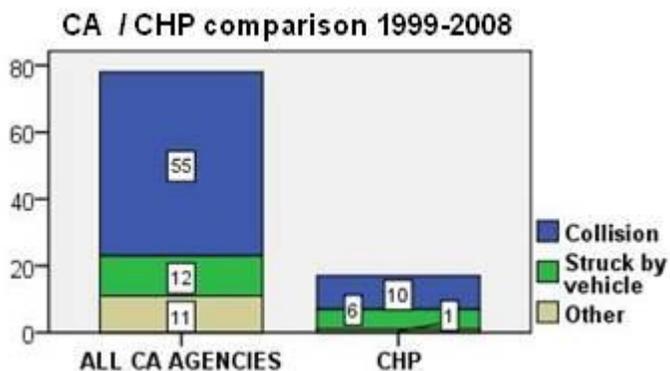
California's proportions were 71 percent, 15 percent and 14 percent.

Florida was third in accidental deaths (47) and fourth in felonious (22). But its proportion of struck by vehicle deaths was considerably higher, with one officer killed while on foot for every three who died in collisions (in Texas and California it was about one in six.)

Five dead CHP officers in less than two months is an appalling number, whatever the cause. That three were struck and killed by errant vehicles seems particularly noteworthy. As these two charts demonstrate, the incidence and distribution of accidental police deaths in the U.S. has been relatively stable over time. But while the numbers are small, California has seen an uptick in deaths of officers struck by vehicles.

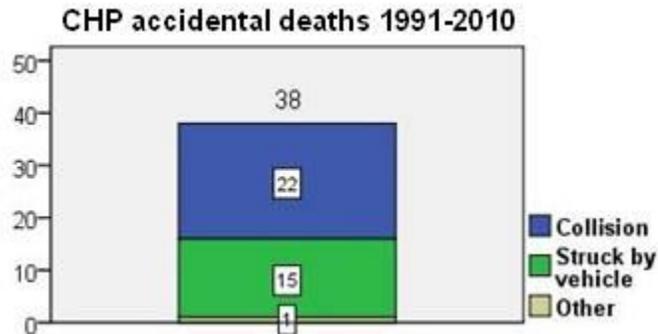


According to the [FBI](#) 17 CHP officers lost their lives in accidents between 1999-2008. Ten died in collisions, six when struck by cars, and one in an accidental shooting. Referring to the chart on the right



(again, keep in mind the low numbers) it seems that CHP officers are somewhat more likely to be fatally struck by a vehicle than the California norm.

CHP over-representation in the struck-by-vehicle category becomes more evident when we expand the timeline. [Online CHP accounts of officer deaths](#) reveal that 38 officers were accidentally killed between 1991 and July 2010. Twenty-two (58 percent) lost their lives in collisions, 15 (39 percent) when struck by vehicles, and one died in an accidental shooting.



(Overlapping FBI and CHP data were reconciled except for one case in 2000 and one in 2003.)

Considering where CHP officers spend their time that's hardly surprising. Making stops on freeways and interstate highways exposes them to high-speed traffic, where there is little opportunity to correct one's mistakes or accommodate errors made by others. All bets are off when drivers are tired, distracted, intoxicated or driving faster than conditions warrant.

Police are well aware of the dangers. In 2003 the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) and NHTSA formed a committee, [LESSS](#), to study ways to mitigate the hazards of traffic stops. Its [initial recommendations](#) suggested enhancing police car resistance to rear-end crashes, packing trunks to avoid the penetration of fuel tanks and passenger compartments in rear-end collisions, improving the visibility of officers and vehicles, widening traffic lanes and building shoulders, enacting ["move over" laws](#) to slow oncoming traffic and keep it away from stopped police cars, and devising best practices for safely positioning officers and vehicles. An appendix listed traffic stop procedures in use by a dozen law enforcement agencies, including the CHP. In [a related article](#) the IACP's *Police Chief* magazine, while conceding there were differences in opinion, recommended, among other things, that officers "minimize their...time in cruisers and prepare citations and other documents outside their vehicles whenever feasible."

In 2005 LESSS issued a roll-call video, ["Your Vest Won't Stop This Bullet"](#). Reproduced in print by *Police Chief*, it offered tips to enhance the safety of traffic stops. Suggesting that insofar as possible officers stay out of their cars until ready to leave, it suggested that if they had to use a radio or such they strap in to avoid becoming a projectile should the vehicle be struck.

Why abandon a metal container to take one's chances on foot? Thanks to the [Arizona DPS](#), which documented the risk in 2002, word spread that Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptors were susceptible to catching fire in high speed rear-end collisions. Taken on (some say, reluctantly) by [NHTSA](#), the vulnerability led to a number of recommendations, including the suggestion that officers carefully pack their vehicle's trunk. LESSS didn't come out and say so, but the risk of these fires (about a dozen cops had already perished in them) undoubtedly influenced their recommendation that officers on traffic stops keep out of their cars.

Traffic stops aren't the only hazard. Eight of the fifteen CHP officers struck and killed by cars between 1991-2010 weren't ticketing anyone: two were investigating unoccupied cars, three were at an accident site, and two were directing traffic. Standing on a roadway is risky, and particularly so when motorists are impaired (intoxicated drivers were involved in at least a third of the officer deaths.) Being under the influence, though, doesn't fully explain why someone would veer into a traffic stop. One possible explanation well known to driving instructors is [target fixation](#), the tendency to steer in the direction where one is looking rather than where they intend to go. Suppose for example that emergency lights catch the attention of a drunk, sleepy or unskilled driver. Depending on the circumstances, their impairment might keep them from correcting in time to avoid running into the scene. To that extent bright warning lights could actually be counterproductive.

Clearly there's a long way to go to make cops safe. One hopes that the CHP's recent tragedies spur renewed efforts to counter the plague of accidental deaths that beset law enforcement. It's the least we can do for our police.