



## FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION OFFICE OF PARTNER ENGAGEMENT

### **The Assailant Study – Mindsets and Behaviors**

#### **Introduction**

The FBI Assailant Study – Mindsets and Behaviors was initiated to analyze attacks against law enforcement officers in 2016. Sixty-four officers were killed in 53 incidents, but for the purpose of this study only 50 of the 53 incidents were examined considering three of the assailants are being charged as minors and two assailants are unknown. The FBI accomplished this by studying information about the assailants' mindsets and behaviors to determine what may have influenced the assailants and contributed to the attacks. Over the course of this study, law enforcement command staff and officers were interviewed from 13 departments where an officer was killed in the line of duty in 2016. The FBI analyzed an additional 37 incidents in 2016 through open-source information and law enforcement databases. In total, the FBI examined 50 incidents that occurred in 2016.

#### **The Assailants**

The 50 assailants examined in the study had several common characteristics. Eighty-six percent (43/50) of the assailants had prior criminal histories, and 56% (28/50) were known to the local police or sheriff's department. The assailants in these incidents had access to firearms, whether obtained legally or illegally, with several of the stolen weapons changing hands multiple times before coming into the possession of the assailant. The assailant had diagnosed mental health issues in 18% (9/50) of the fatal encounters; however, mental health concerns were anecdotally identified as a contributing factor in 40% (20/50) of the cases.

Head injuries, post-traumatic stress, schizophrenia, and paranoia were all cited anecdotally by individuals who knew the assailants, and in half of those cases, the assailant was also under the influence of methamphetamines, marijuana/THC, prescription drugs, and/or alcohol. Overall, 60% (30/50) of the assailants had a history of drug use, with 32% (16/50) confirmed to have been under the influence at the time of the incident. Forty-six percent (23/50) of the assailants' toxicology was unknown at the time of the study.

All of the assailants were male. Their ages spanned from 14 to 68 years old, including three juveniles who were not included in the 50 assailants examined due to their age. Forty-eight percent of the assailants were white, 36% were black, 14% were Hispanic, and 2% were Alaska Native. Approximately 24% (12/50) had known gang affiliations. Forty-four percent (22/50) of the assailants had a known history of domestic violence. Twenty-six percent (13/50) of the assailants had active warrants, and 32% (16/50) were on probation or parole.

#### **Assailant Commonalities**

The case studies shared commonalities in regard to the attacks. The majority of assailants attacked law enforcement for one of two reasons: 1) they expressed a desire to kill law enforcement, or 2) they felt as if they were going to lose their freedom by going back to jail or prison.



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#### *Expressed Desire to Kill Law Enforcement*

Twenty-eight percent (14/50) of the assailants expressed a desire to kill law enforcement officers prior to carrying out their attacks. The main reasons expressed by assailants as to why they wanted to attack law enforcement officers were for social and/or political reasons or they had a hatred of law enforcement. The assailants in this category posted their beliefs on social media and/or informed their friends and family of their intentions prior to ambushing or initiating violence against law enforcement.

The assailants inspired by social and/or political reasons believed that attacking police officers was their way to “get justice” for those who had been, in their view, unjustly killed by law enforcement. These assailants expressed that they were distrustful of the police due to previous personal interactions with law enforcement and what they heard and read in the media about other incidents involving law enforcement shootings. Specifically in the Dallas, TX, and Baton Rouge, LA, attacks, the assailants said they were influenced by the Black Lives Matter movement, and their belief that law enforcement was targeting black males.

The assailants who had a hatred of law enforcement informed their friends and/or family that they intended to kill a police officer or that they wanted to “shoot it out with police.” Of the 14 assailants who ambushed law enforcement, 10 of them (71%) had a prior criminal history. Additionally, 10 out of the 14 assailants were under the influence of narcotics or had a history of drug use at the time of the incident.

#### *Attacks Motivated for Desire to Remain Free*

An assailant’s desire to remain free and not return to custody was the main commonality shown in a majority of the fatal attacks. These attacks took one of two forms: 1) drug use that led to a heightened sense of desperation to avoid arrest and incarceration, and 2) the assailant’s desire for freedom.

Law enforcement officials noted an increase in the number of subjects using drugs and being in a drug-induced psychosis when contacted by police. Many law enforcement personnel are seeing an “escalation towards violence” by those who abuse drugs. A high percentage of assailants were under the influence during these incidents or had a history of drug use. Officer interviews highlighted the assailants’ skewed “decision-making matrix” when contacted by law enforcement while under the influence of a narcotic, compounded with the thought of not wanting to return to custody. Instead of complying - as they typically had in the past – they, instead, attacked. Multiple agencies expressed surprise that the fatal encounters occurred because the assailants had no prior history of violent attacks against police. This is consistent with the fact that prior to fatal encounter, only a quarter of the assailants had expressed on social media or to friends and family that they would do anything not to go back to jail.

In approximately 40% of the incidents, the assailant fled before they turned and shot at the officers. Law enforcement personnel described the circumstances that led to these foot chases, and they ranged from the officer verbally identifying the assailant, consensual contact, attempting to arrest, and serving a warrant. In all



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of the cases, it was clear to the law enforcement officials that the assailants were attempting to avoid being taken into custody. Specifically, police officials believed that the assailants perceived that the officer who was attempting to make contact with them knew their history prior to the encounter.

### Contributing Factors

#### “Chill Wind” on Law Enforcement

Since 2014 multiple high-profile police incidents across the country have occurred that law enforcement officials believe influenced the mindset and behaviors of the assailants. Specifically, the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, MO, in 2014, and the social disturbances that followed, initiated a movement that some perceived made it socially acceptable to challenge and discredit the actions of law enforcement. This attitude was fueled by the narrative of police misconduct and excessive force perpetuated through politicians and the media.

Nearly every police official interviewed agreed that for the first time, law enforcement not only felt that their national political leaders publically stood against them, but also that the politicians’ words and actions signified that disrespect to law enforcement was acceptable in the aftermath of the Brown shooting. Police officials across the country agreed that while the majority of Americans still support law enforcement, this change in social mores allows assailants to become more emboldened to question, resist, and fight law enforcement.

Due to the coverage of the high-profile police incidents, it appears that immediately following the incidents, assailants were constantly exposed to a singular narrative by news organizations and social media of police misconduct and wrong-doing. In many cases, this singular narrative came from the subject’s friends and family, and witnesses to the incident who often knew the subject, long before law enforcement provided their findings to the public. Without law enforcement and elected officials providing an alternative narrative, assailants developed a distrust of law enforcement, and felt emboldened and justified in using violence against police.

#### “Turnstile Justice System”

Law enforcement officials across the country stated that justice reform acts, especially laws de-criminalizing drugs and reducing penalties for narcotics offenses, have the effect of releasing criminals at a faster and higher rate than ever before. Assailants who experience this “turnstile justice system” know they are going to receive a lighter sentence than they would have in the past and will be released early, if incarcerated at all. This may lead to a belief by the assailant that consequences no longer exist for criminal acts, especially drug offenses. Due to both of these factors, upon release, assailants with a history of drug offenses were more prone to be non-compliant while under the influence. In addition, police officers stated that an assailant who has entered into a “drug-induced psychosis” that causes desperation and paranoia is more willing to shoot an officer to stay out of jail. Multiple law enforcement officials believed that the assailant in their specific incident would not have used



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deadly force against the officer if the assailant was sober. Across the country, law enforcement officials link the de-criminalization of drugs to the increase in violent attacks on law enforcement.

### **Effects on Policing**

The above-referenced factors have had the effect of “de-policing” in law enforcement agencies across the country, which the assailants have exploited. Departments - and individual officers - have increasingly made the conscious decision to stop engaging in proactive policing. The intense scrutiny and criticism law enforcement has received in the wake of several high-profile incidents has caused several officers to (1) “become scared and demoralized” and (2) avoid interacting with the community. This was highlighted when a police officer was beaten and slammed to the ground by a subject, and the officer was afraid to shoot the subject because of the fear of community backlash. The officer informed the superintendant that the officer chose not to shoot because the officer didn’t want his/her “family or the department to have to go through the scrutiny the next day on the national news.”

Law enforcement officials believe that defiance and hostility displayed by assailants toward law enforcement appears to be the new norm. For example, in the past, pretext stops have been used successfully to prevent crimes associated with gangs, guns, and narcotics. One officer explained that 10 years ago if a suspect was stopped in a high-risk neighborhood, that person either ran or complied. Now, suspects are refusing to comply with lawful orders believing that law enforcement can’t or won’t do anything about it. Defiance appears to be the rule. In communities where law enforcement’s community relationship is poor, officers are more likely to be purely reactive. Assailants understand that officers are less willing to escalate force, and therefore have become bolder and more brazen in their attempts to resist.

### **Conclusion**

The Assailant Study identified mindsets in common with each of the assailants. The discussions with law enforcement command staff and officers identified common trends and contributing factors that had the greatest impact on the assailants’ mindsets and behaviors. The common trends identified were (1) the expressed desire to kill law enforcement, and (2) the desire to remain free. The contributing factors identified were (1) the singular narrative that portrays the officer involved as guilty in traditional and social media and the subject as the victim, and (2) the recent criminal justice reform initiatives that reduce prosecutions and incarceration of criminals, specifically drug offenders, which has the effect of putting criminals back on the street with an attitude of “beating the system.”

### **Acknowledgement**

The FBI would like to thank all of the law enforcement agencies which participated in this study. We would also like extend our condolences and support to all of the law enforcement departments and agencies whose officers were killed in the line of duty.