

Officer down

Figures show violent assaults on officers are on the increase, Tina Orr Munro talks to some of the people behind the statistics.

Being assaulted may be considered an occupational hazard for a police officer, but research shows it is increasingly becoming a certainty rather than an outside chance that frontline officers can expect to be attacked on duty more frequently and often more violently.

Research carried out by Grant Shapps MP in 2006 found that an officer is assaulted every 20 minutes. One in six officers has been assaulted while on duty.

Since then the problem has worsened further; a total of 37,500 officers were assaulted last year, an increase of 15% on the previous year, according to statistics published in January 2008.



Photography: Paddy McGuinness / Alamy

Alan Gordon, vice chairman of the Police Federation, says the figures demonstrate the mounting pressure and increased dangers officers are facing in the work they do.

"The figures clearly highlight the very urgent need for the government and chief officers to ensure the right allocation of resources, training and equipment are available," he adds.

Police magazine interviewed a number of officers about their own personal experience of being violently

attacked. As experienced officers, each was attending a routine call or incident that they had dealt with many times before. None of them could have predicted that the outcome would completely alter the course of their lives.

While their injuries were quite different to one another, the one common denominator among the officers we interviewed was their desire to return to the frontline as quickly as possible and to just get on with the job that they are paid to do. Sadly for some that is not the case.

PC Sarah Collins is an experienced frontline officer with Essex Police with 15 years to her credit. In August 2006, she attended an illegal rave as part of a police operation, which resulted in an injury that ended a long-held ambition to train as a dog handler.


As a veteran of many raves, the officer who has a commendation for tackling, along with her colleague, 95 Reading football supporters, says she had never experienced the level of violence that occurred that night. At one point a colleague told her he thought they were going to die. Ironically the rave had all but ended and she was about to go off duty when she was attacked.

"I had got through the night and looked at a colleague and asked if he was injured. He replied, no, and then this male approached me and struck me with a lump of wood. It hit my thumb embedding it in my wrist. I had survived the night to end with this. The pain was excruciating, but despite this I just thought that it would be bruised and then it would be fine."

PC Collins attended hospital, only to be told that she had just bruised her thumb. When it didn't improve she was ordered back to hospital where it was discovered that she had broken the trapezen bone in her wrist. Her injury has failed to heal properly and she is unable to carry out simple household tasks such as peeling potatoes. Moreover, she is also unable to join the dog section. After completing the first stages, she was unable to continue because of the grip test.

"They are leaving my options open for two years in case I get better," she adds.

In the meantime she has returned to work in ISU as an investigator in case files, but in the CID. It has been a difficult transition.



“I tried to cuff him, but either he punched me or his friend kicked me in the head because the next thing I knew he was on top of me and was pummelling my chest. I couldn’t move.”

“I feel my career died that night and I am faced with the difficult transition from operational to restricted duties.

“Uniform is my style of policing, and I have had the choice of going into CID, but now this is possibly my only option left for any future career. I could have opted for this a long time ago, but now my change of career direction has been changed for me.

She also asks that others show more understanding. “The point I would like to get across is anyone could end up like me. I was working with a fantastic team only for this to happen and to be left with a possible permanent injury.

“Because my injury isn’t visible, it doesn’t mean it isn’t there. People look at me as if to say ‘there’s nothing

much wrong with her’ without understanding the pain I have been and still am going through. I would give anything to fulfil my ambitions.”

Cases where vehicles are used as a weapon against officers are becoming all too frequent, so much so that the Federation has lobbied for changes in the law to reflect their increasing incidence. PC Mick Lingard knows only too well what it feels like to be deliberately mown down.

In May 2007, the Humberside police officer, with 20 years experience, 10 years of which have been spent with the traffic division, was attempting to stop a vehicle involved in a burglary. The driver mounted the pavement to evade capture. PC Lingard decided to try and stop it using a stinger device.



As he walked across the road in full uniform the driver altered his course and hit him full on at 30 to 40 mph. PC Lingard bounced off the car's bonnet and was thrown against another vehicle. The driver then made off.

"I saw a brilliant white light and, to be honest, I thought I was dead," he says.

He was taken to hospital where he was treated for multiple cuts and bruises. He had several haematomas in his chest and upper arms. His right knee was ruptured and his shoulder was dislocated, but then relocated with the second impact, causing damage.

"I was released from hospital the same day and my first thoughts were to get back to work, but then the full extent of my injuries hit home and I have been off work ever since."

PC Lingard says he finds being off work difficult to cope with, as he has not been kept informed of his case.

"The monotony is frustrating as I still can't drive and have to rely on others for lifts. I'm out of the loop and that's difficult. I didn't even know the man had been convicted until the press office rang me up for a quote. I would have liked to have been in court; I think that could have helped me come to terms with what has happened."

In March, PC Lingard is due to have surgery on his knee and his specialist believes he should be able to work eventually which he says has been a real boost to him, although it is still a long road to recovery. He remains angry at the sentence the driver received.

"The driver got 18 months and will probably be out in 12. He was convicted of a Section 20 wounding which I'm angry about. He deliberately aimed the car at me, as the road markings show, and, as far as I'm concerned, it should have been an attempt murder charge. Using a car as a weapon is like having a tonne bullet coming towards you," he says.

He believes assaults on officers are getting worse as

people are much more willing to take the police on.

PC Mick Finch, an Essex police dog handler, with 18 years experience, including nine years as an authorised firearms officer, agrees that people are much more willing to attack police officers.

In 2005, PC Finch carried out a routine stop at 4.00am in Basildon. Two youths had removed road signs from a hole in the road. They were both very drunk with the assailant having consumed 10 pints of beer and up to 10 shots of vodka.

"They were walking down the centre of a dual carriageway, so I pulled up and ask them to put the signs back. One of the youths then let out a barrage of abuse, the like of which I have never experienced before. I got out of my car and walked towards him, explaining their actions could cause an accident. He carried on being abusive and then from nowhere he smashed me across the face, fracturing my cheek bone. I went down and took him down with me. I tried to cuff him, but either he punched me or his friend kicked me in the head because the next thing I knew he was on top of me and was pummelling my chest. I couldn't move."

It eventually took seven officers to restrain the offender. PC Finch suffered a detached retina and fractured cheek which is still damaged. He also still suffers migraines and now has to wear glasses.

"What really got to me was that he was originally just going to receive an £80 fine until I complained. It finally went to Crown Court where he said he had used the sign to help him walk as he had hurt his foot. I had apparently turned up and rugby tackled him. He got off, even the judge held his head in his hands and apologised to me."

The incident has changed the way PC Finch polices. "I'm much more wary. I stopped someone the other day

and he body charged me. He then got his hand inside my body armour. My first thought was he was going to stab me, so I punched him. I'm currently facing a complaint over that."

The officer has been assaulted three times since February 2005 because he says he's paid to catch criminals. Last week a stolen vehicle rammed his police van and he and his dog had to be cut free. On the same day, he received a commendation

"The reason is I stop and search those who I believe could be law-breakers, and not just anyone in order to get my figures up."

For him, the worst part of being assaulted has been the effect it has had on his children.

"They worry about me when I go to work and they see my injuries. There is no way they will join the police."

PC Finch also believes assaults are getting worse and part of the reason is that officers don't tackle low-level anti-social behaviour that is directed at them.

"It is getting worse. Young officers don't seem to challenge behaviour. Kids walk passed their car and they spit and swear at them and they don't do anything. Then the person comes across someone like me who won't tolerate that and they are surprised to find they are in trouble with the law. That experience in policing has gone," he says.

PC Jimmy Lloyd from Merseyside Police was stabbed in March 2007 after attending a domestic violence incident. His colleague had entered a living room to take witness statements for criminal damage when the offender returned and attacked PC Lloyd, who was standing in a doorway, from behind.

"He stabbed me in the neck and the head, and I realised that he thought I had a vest on. In fact, I didn't and I knew that if I turned around and faced him, he would see that my jacket was open and I wasn't wearing a stab-proof vest, so I had to sort of hold on to him because if I pushed him off he might attack the others in the room too."

The knife was finally knocked out of the man's hand. He was also sprayed with CS spray as well as being hit with a baton, but with little effect. In the end the man left the scene, but was later arrested.

The officer had several stab wounds to the head and neck and was extremely fortunate not to have been killed. He was off work for three months, but has since returned to work on the front desk.

"I've got nearly 30 years in, so I could have retired after the attack, but I have decided that it is important that I'm the one that says it's time to finish, not the person who attacked me."

Unlike the other officers we interviewed the offender was charged with attempted murder, but PC Lloyd says he remains bitter about the sentence he received.

"I went to the court because I thought it would give me some kind of closure of on what happened. He got life, but with a recommendation to serve eight years. I was



Photography: Essex Police

PC Finch has been assaulted four times in three years

really angry and upset about that. Life should mean life. He wanted to kill me."

PC Lloyd also agrees with other officers that sentencing is too lenient.

"There's just no deterrent. This guy had attacked officers before, but was out on the streets. Offenders are being bailed for crimes they should never be bailed for; it's as simple as that. You see them coming out of the court laughing and joking. It's clear to me that magistrates are being told not to give custodial sentences. The system lets us down."

PC Lloyd is now due to retire at the end of the year. He says his recovery has been made easier by the tremendous support he has received from his force. "It's been great. It's really helped me through it."