

Law Enforcement  
Management Institute of Texas

# Chief Perceptions of Fitness



MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM™

## Police Chief Perceptions of Officer Physical Fitness and Barriers to Better Fitness

**January 24, 2022**

Michael Harper, M.Ed., Texas Department of Public Safety

Matthew Wagner, Ph.D., SHSU, Department of Kinesiology

William Wells, Ph.D., SHSU, LEMIT

Alexis R. Rockwell, M.S., SHSU, LEMIT

### Introduction and Purpose

As stated in the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015), the wellness and safety of law enforcement officers is critical not only for themselves, their colleagues, and their agencies, but also public safety. Maintaining fitness and a healthy bodyweight can enhance officer readiness, safety, and survivability; improves overall health and wellness, and can facilitate the primary goal of every officer: to go home safe at the end of every shift.

Previous research has demonstrated numerous health benefits that are derived from physical activity and maintenance of a healthy bodyweight. This is especially important for law enforcement officers because the occupational fatality rate for law enforcement is three to five times that of the national average for the working population (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2018). According to research from the Buffalo Police Department, the average life expectancy of law enforcement personnel is 22 years less than their civilian counterparts (Violanti, 2013). Heart disease, the number one killer of both males and females in the United States (Herron, 2021), is also heavily prevalent in law enforcement. Research examining law enforcement in the United States over a 22-year period (1997–2018) concluded that nearly 82 percent of circulatory–related deaths were from a heart attack, with an average death age of 46.5 years (Violanti, 2020). Two of the eight risk factors for heart attacks include lack of physical activity and unhealthy bodyweight.

A large proportion of officer injuries and deaths are not the result of interaction with criminal offenders but the outcome of poor physical health due to poor nutrition, lack of exercise, sleep deprivation, and substance abuse (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Most of the daily work within law enforcement is sedentary in nature. However, situations may still arise when it is necessary for officers to possess an appropriate level of fitness and healthy bodyweight. Officer safety, use of force, and de-escalation can all be impacted by an unhealthy bodyweight and lack of physical fitness (Pinizzotto, 2007). Community perceptions of officers and public perceptions of personal safety decrease when the public sees an officer who is obese or extremely overweight (Martin & Martin, 2019).

The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, the IACP, and numerous studies have emphasized the importance of prioritizing health and fitness within law enforcement agencies. Recommendation 6.2 from The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing states "Law enforcement agencies should promote safety and wellness at every level of the organization."

Promoting safety and wellness through physical fitness and maintenance of a healthy bodyweight can be difficult within an agency. Choices and daily actions are often impacted by beliefs, values, and mindset. Thus, in order to effectively promote safety and wellness, it is important to first understand the beliefs, values, and mindset of police agency leaders to identify potential barriers to implementing and continuing physical fitness programs for officers.

A 2019 study of 36 police chiefs in Florida and South Carolina addressed this issue (Martin). The police chief respondents indicated a lack of education and training, and a lack of sufficient funds to assist in curbing the weight problems of officers. The most common responses to open ended questions regarding the impact of obesity and being overweight on performance included: impaired movement and inability to defend oneself; slower response rate and burden on joints; negative impact on overall job performance; more prone to injury; appearance; lack of stamina resulting in the use of excessive force; and inability to deal with demands of job.

The purpose of the current project is to understand police chiefs' perspectives on multiple aspects of police officer physical fitness and bodyweight. This study focused on two topics:

- perceptions regarding impact of excess bodyweight and lack of fitness on police officer performance and
- perceptions regarding potential barriers to physical fitness and maintaining healthy weight and fitness levels.

Perceptions of police leaders were measured because these individuals are responsible for policy development and overall focus and direction for their respective department. Therefore, their perceptions on this topic are important to understand. Their perceptions provide reinforcement for areas in need of program development and insights into potential barriers to health and fitness initiatives.

## Methods

A survey consisting of 22 questions was distributed to 1,179 police chiefs in Texas via email (see Appendix A). Respondents completed the survey using Qualtrics, an online survey platform. The survey questions measured perceptions about how officer weight and physical fitness impact job performance and chiefs' perceptions about barriers to greater degrees of physical fitness.

The research team distributed the survey to the current list of police chiefs throughout Texas who participate in state-mandated professional developed programming with the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMITE) at Sam Houston State University (SHSU). Surveys were distributed via email within Qualtrics's internal distribution channel. As part of the first wave of survey distribution, 1,179 surveys were sent via email on March 23, 2021. Two reminder emails were sent to those respondents who either had not started the survey or started the survey but had yet to finish it. The reminder emails were sent out in 2-week intervals, on April 6th and April 23rd. Data collection closed on May 7, 2021, two weeks after the second reminder email. After the data collection period ended, 511 chiefs and executive leadership personnel had started the survey with 446 completing the survey. In some instances, respondents did not respond to all questions on the survey, so there is some missing information for some survey items. The survey completion rate was 91% (511 surveys started/446 completed) with an overall response rate of 39% (1,179 total surveys distributed/446 surveys completed).

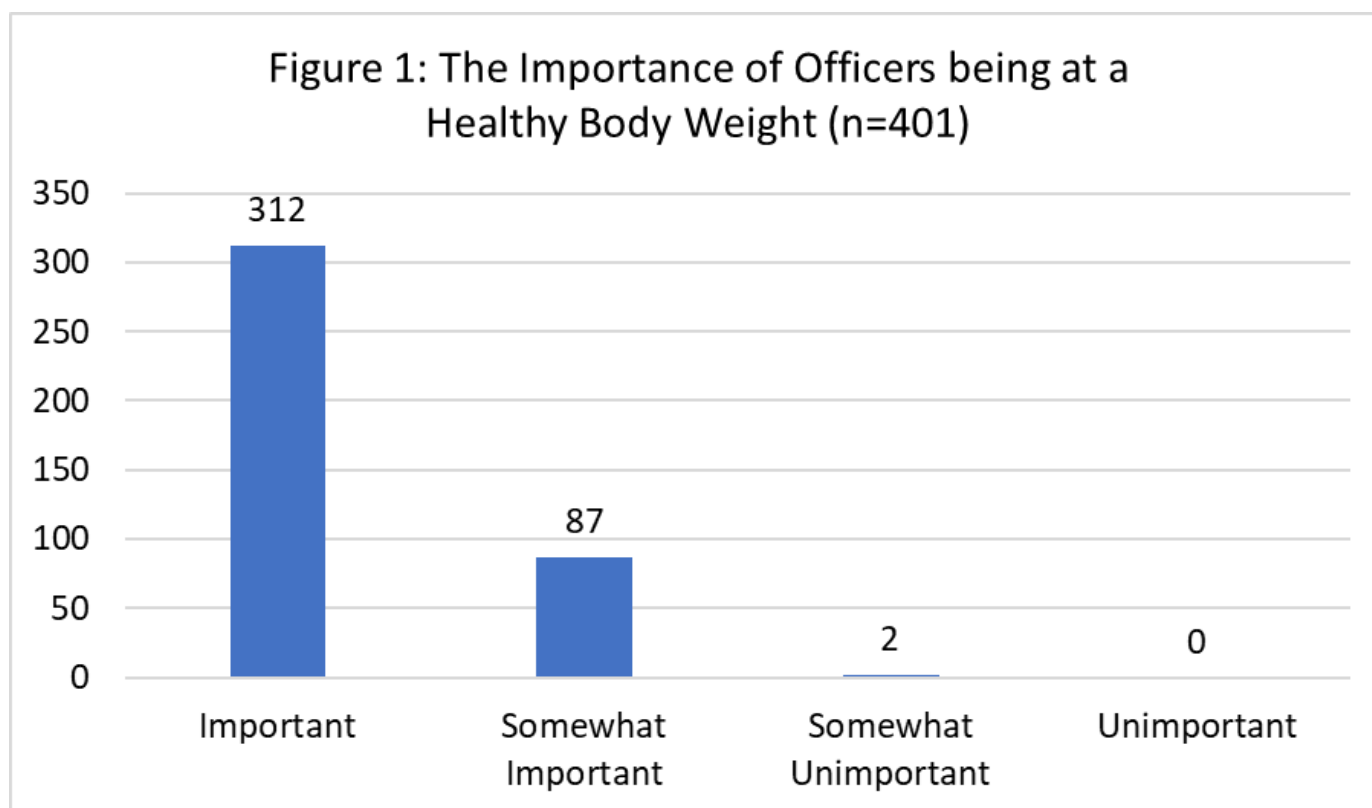
## Sample

The characteristics of the respondents and their agencies can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Respondents mainly consisted of police chiefs (95%) with an average 27 years of law enforcement experience. The average age of agency leadership personnel was 53 and 92% of respondents were male. The research team utilized the Bureau of Justice Statistics' agency size categories to group the respondents' departments. While the agency sizes saw a wide, evenly distributed variety, the most common agency size was 10-24 officers. Results are most representative of agencies with fewer than 100 officers. The agency types mainly consisted of city/municipal (63.5%) and special jurisdiction (31.5%) agencies.

**Table 1: Demographics N=446**

Variable	N	%	Mean	S.D.
Position	441			
Chief	425	95.3		
Assistant Chief	5	1.1		
Major	1	0.2		
Captain	3	0.7		
Other	7	1.6		
Number of Years in LE	440		27.3	8.8
Age	439		53	8.0
Gender	436			
Male	411	92.2		
Female	24	5.4		
Other	1	0.2		

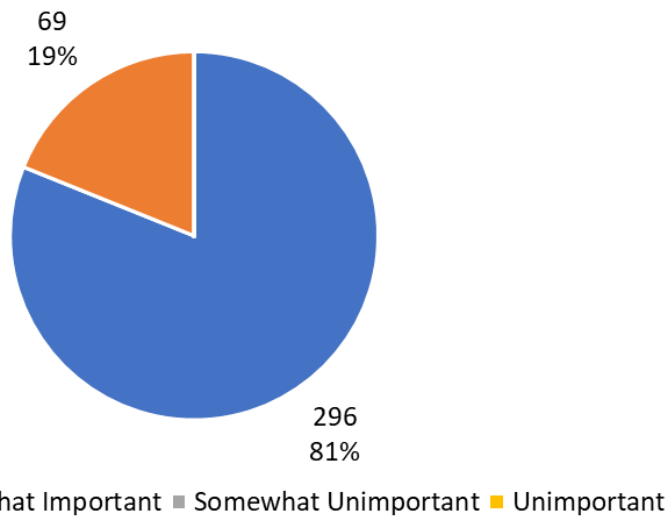
Figure 1 shows that nearly all respondents (99.5%) indicated that it is important or somewhat important for officers to be at a healthy bodyweight. Only two of 401 respondents indicated that it was somewhat unimportant that officers be at a healthy body weight. All respondents (100%) indicated it is either important or somewhat important for officers to be physically fit (Figure 2). Of those, 81% stated it was important for officers to be physically fit and 19% stated it was somewhat important.



**Table 2: Department Characteristics N=446**

Variable	N	%
Number of Officers	442	
0-1	30	6.7
2-4	64	14.3
5-9	70	15.7
10-24	131	29.4
25-49	74	16.6
50-99	39	8.7
100-249	28	6.3
250-499	5	1.1
500-999	1	0.2
1000+	0	0.0
Agency Type	438	
Federal	0	0.0
State	19	4.3
County	3	0.7
City/Municipal	278	63.5
Special Jurisdiction	138	31.5
Fitness Requirements for Incumbent Officers	442	
Mandatory with Incentives	30	6.8
Mandatory without Incentives	29	6.6
Voluntary with Incentives	39	8.8
Voluntary without Incentives	63	14.3
No Requirement	263	59.5
Other	18	4.1

**Figure 2: The Importance for officers to be physically fit**



## Results

Table 3 describes police chiefs' perceptions of the impact that being overweight has on aspects of job performance.

**Table 3: Weight Impact *N*=446**

Variable	N	Mean	S.D.
Indicate the degree to which you feel each of the following are impacted by a police officer being overweight or obese on a scale of 1 (no impact) to 5 (strongest negative impact).			
Burden on joints	399	4.0	1.0
Stamina	400	3.8	1.1
Defend and protect oneself	401	3.6	1.1
Confidence from the public	398	3.6	1.2
Assist other officers when requesting backup	401	3.6	1.1
Command presence	399	3.6	1.2
Movement ability	400	3.6	1.0
Susceptibility to injury	400	3.6	1.0
Confidence from colleagues	399	3.4	1.1
Arrest control tactics	398	3.3	1.1
Response time	400	3.2	1.1
Perform all required job components	399	3.2	1.0
Protect the general public	399	3.2	1.1
Sick leave	401	3.0	1.2
Promote/advance in career	399	2.6	1.1
Other	21		

Respondents reported that 14 of the 15 work-related issues were impacted by being overweight to a degree greater than a mean of 3 on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represented a strong negative impact. Command staff believed that increased burden on joints was most impacted by a police officer carrying excess weight. Stamina was the second most impacted factor, followed by the ability to defend and protect oneself, and confidence from the public. Promotion or advancement in career was perceived to be least impacted by being overweight.

**Table 4: Weight Barriers *N*=446**

Variable	N	Mean	S.D.
Importance of possible barriers to commissioned law enforcement personnel's abilities to maintain a healthy weight on a scale of 1 (not a significant barrier) to 5 (an extremely significant barrier).			
Unwillingness/Laziness	398	3.7	1.1
Shift Worked	398	3.4	1.2
Time	397	3.3	1.2
Other	29	2.9	1.6
Options/Equipment Available	395	2.9	1.3
Lack of Resources	398	2.8	1.2
Lack of Knowledge	396	2.7	1.1
Cost	396	2.6	1.2

The survey measured perceived barriers that limit officers' ability to maintain a healthy weight and physical fitness, along with perceived barriers to implementing fitness requirements for incumbent officers. Command staff believe there are several barriers that limit officers' ability to maintain a healthy weight, the most significant perceived barrier was unwillingness or laziness (Table 4). This was followed by shift worked and time. The least impactful barrier was cost.

Variable	N	Mean	S.D.
Indicate the degree to which you feel each of the following are impacted by a police officer being unfit or physically inactive on a scale of 1 (no impact) to 5 (strongest negative impact).			
Stamina	361	3.8	1.0
Burden on joints	362	3.8	1.0
Defend and protect oneself	366	3.7	1.1
Movement ability	363	3.6	1.0
Susceptibility to injury	361	3.6	1.0
Assist other officers when requesting backup	366	3.6	1.1
Confidence from the public	363	3.6	1.1
Command presence	363	3.6	1.1
Arrest control tactics	364	3.5	1.0
Confidence from colleagues	363	3.5	1.1
Protect the general public	365	3.4	1.1
Perform all required job components	365	3.3	1.0
Sick leave	360	3.3	1.1
Response time	361	3.2	1.1
Promote/advance in career	364	2.9	1.1
Other	25		

**Table 5: Fitness Levels N=446**

Table 5 describes the impact police chiefs feel various tasks are impacted by officers being unfit or physically inactive. Police chiefs reported that 14 of the 15 work-related issues were impacted by being unfit to a degree greater than a mean of 3 on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 represented a strong negative impact. Chiefs felt stamina was most impacted by officers being unfit or physically inactive. Increased burden on joints was the second most impacted factor, followed by the ability to defend and protect oneself and the ability to move. The three areas most impacted by an officer being unfit or physically inactive were also among the top three areas most impacted by an officer being overweight.

The survey also measured perceived barriers to officers' physical fitness and departments' physical fitness requirements (Table 6). Police chiefs identified multiple barriers that limit officers' ability to maintain physical fitness: unwillingness or laziness was the top barrier. Comparable to barriers regarding weight, this was followed by shift worked and time. The least impactful variable was lack of knowledge.

Table 2 shows that 59.5% of the responding agencies had no requirement for fitness for incumbent officers. Agencies with mandatory fitness programs for incumbents were represented by 13.3% of respondents and 23.1% indicated some form of a voluntary fitness requirement for incumbent officers. The survey measured perceived barriers to implementing fitness requirements for incumbent officers. Responding police chiefs indicated cost as the most significant barrier to fitness requirements. This was followed by legal concerns and legal precedence for implementation. The least significant perceived barrier was union or association.

**Table 6: Fitness Barriers N=446**

Variable	N	Mean	S.D.
Possible barriers to commissioned law enforcement personnel's abilities to maintain the minimum fitness levels to perform the requirements of their jobs on a scale of 1 (not a significant barrier) to 5 (an extremely significant barrier).			
Unwillingness/Laziness	355	3.7	1.2
Shift Worked	356	3.2	1.3
Time	353	3.1	1.2
Other	28	2.8	1.5
Options/Equipment Available	355	2.7	1.2
Lack of Resources	356	2.6	1.2
Cost	357	2.6	1.2
Lack of Knowledge	356	2.6	1.1
Possible barriers to implementing fitness requirements for incumbent officers within your agency on a scale of 1 (not a significant barrier) to 5 (an extremely significant barrier).			
Cost	362	3.0	1.3
Legal Concerns	361	2.8	1.3
Legal Precedence for Implementation	362	2.8	1.2
Other	29	2.7	1.6
Administration/City Council/City Manager	361	2.3	1.2
Union or Association	361	2.0	1.3

## Conclusion

Command staff believe that it is important for officers to be at a healthy body weight and to be physically fit (Figure 1 and 2). Responses to questions related to the impact of officers not maintaining a healthy weight or being unfit or physically active provide insight into why chiefs feel weight management and physical fitness are so important. Officer safety is heavily impacted in six of the top eight areas identified as being most affected by not maintaining fitness or a healthy weight. The other two items represented in the top eight are related to command presence, which can impact officer safety as described in FBI studies (Pinizzotto, 2007).

Command staff also identified potential barriers to officers' physical fitness: individual unwillingness or laziness was the most significant perceived barrier. Providing encouragement, motivation, and reminders of the importance of physical fitness may be needed to mitigate this barrier. One strategy to provide feedback to individuals in an agency may be to connect the importance of fitness to the term "Complacency Kills." This term is well recognized in law enforcement as it relates to avoiding the mindset of a routine traffic stop. However, it may be valuable to ensure this is also connected to important items including physical fitness and maintenance of a healthy bodyweight. Whether it is non-recognition of danger, failure to physically prepare, or denial of health, these all require vigilance to avoid the potential negative impact on officer mortality and morbidity. Time and the shift worked were also perceived to be barriers officers face. Agency leaders should consider these elements when designing programs or initiatives to enhance physical fitness. Initiatives may include time management programs, education on the benefit of short activity sessions, and sleep environment education.

Furthermore, the low prevalence of fitness requirements was in stark contrast to the importance that most police chiefs place on the value of physical fitness and a healthy weight. While respondents indicated cost was not a relatively important barrier to maintaining fitness and a healthy weight, it was the greatest barrier to program requirements.

Many fitness requirements can be done via viable options that have minimal to no costs. Fitness assessments can be conducted utilizing bodyweight activities or low-cost assessment tools, such as a rower. Program support can also be provided using available resources from partnering law enforcement agencies, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Officer Safety and Wellness tools, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Preventing Violence Against Law Enforcement and Ensuring Officer Resilience and Survivability (VALOR) Initiative, or other reputable sources.

As law enforcement leadership continues to stress the importance of physical fitness, healthy weight, and overall wellness, the attitudes and behaviors of agency employees may reflect this orientation. A continual emphasis, especially by leadership, on the importance of physical wellness may impact habits and ultimately influence daily choices officers make. As police leaders look to develop a culture of officer safety, reminding individuals of the influence, impact, and importance of a healthy weight and being physically fit may help to positively encourage these components at every level within organizations.

## References

- Gu, J.K., Charles, L.E., Burchfiel, C.M., Andrew, M.E., Ma, C., Bang, K.M. & Violanti, J.M. (2013). Associations between psychological distress and body mass index among law enforcement officers: The national health interview survey 2004-2010. *Safety and Health at Work*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5491/SHAW.2013.4.1.52>
- Heron M. (2021). *Deaths: Leading causes for 2019*. National Vital Statistics Reports, 70(9). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:107021>
- International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2018). *Officer Safety and Wellness. Practices in Modern Policing*. Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police.
- Jackson, S.E., Beeken, R.J., & Wardle, J. (2015). Obesity, perceived weight discrimination, and psychological well-being in older adults in England. *Obesity*, 23, 1105-1111.
- Martin, T.K. & Martin, R.H. (2019). Psychological and physical problems of being overweight or obese in law enforcement and the impact on the job performance and personal lives: Control, perception, and assistance. *EC Psychology and Psychiatry* 8(3), 158-164.
- Pinizzotto, T., Davis, E., Miller, III, C. (2007). *The Deadly Mix: Officers, Offenders, and the Circumstances that Bring Them Together*. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin: January 76(1).
- President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. (2015). *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.
- Violanti, J. M., Fekedulegn, D., Hartley, T. A., Andrew, M. E., Gu, J. K., & Burchfiel, C. M. (2013). Life expectancy in police officers: a comparison with the U.S. General population. *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health*, 15 (4), 217–228.
- Violanti, J.M., Fekedulegn, D., Shi, M. and Andrew, M.E. (2020). Hidden danger: A 22-years analysis of law enforcement deaths associated with duty-related illnesses (1997–2018). *Policing: An International Journal*, 43(2), 330-344. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-07-2019-0109>

---

**For further information, please contact:**  
**William Wells, [wmw004@shsu.edu](mailto:wmw004@shsu.edu), Sam Houston State University**