

Protecting Sheriffs; What Body Armor Can Do For You

Law Enforcement is a difficult role that requires Officers to deal with a wide variety of threats. It is unreasonable to expect these brave men and women to fulfil these roles without adequate protection, and yet many do not consider the specific challenges facing Sheriffs. Body armor manufacturers are keen to address the difficult tasks facing Law Enforcement and the various roles they have to fill, but none have specifically spoken about the Sheriff's Department. Law Enforcement Officers undertake a challenging and unique job, and the Sheriff's Department has to face its own challenges and rigors in addition.

Sheriffs are unique in the width and breadth of their jurisdiction and in the wide variety of roles they have to fill. The Sheriff Department is a unique branch of American Law Enforcement that nonetheless needs full and proper protection. Sheriffs are likely well aware of the dangers that he or she will face, and will hopefully be aware of the benefits of wearing body armor, such as a dramatic decrease in the risk of injury and death. However, they may not be aware that body armor covers a wide range of protective clothing, and that within each product there are different levels of protection available in different styles. It is important therefore that Sheriffs are aware that one piece of body armor may not be suitable for every situation, and the various roles Sheriffs are expected to fill will require different body armor.

Wearing Body Armor

Sheriffs are figures of authority, and the public do not need to be reminded of this. Nevertheless, wearing [body armor](#) can be an important part of displaying this authority. A Sheriff's authority should be absolute at all times, from the investigation and apprehension of suspects, to the transport and security of prisoners from jail, through the legal process, and eventually to prison. Until an individual is transferred into a prison's custody, it is often the responsibility of the Sheriff to ensure their safety, security, and movements. Having a clear and visible statement of their authority will be of great benefit therefore, and body armor worn as part of a uniform will help to emphasise this. Wearing an overt bullet proof vest demonstrates a preparedness that can help deter any potential attackers and continually represent the authority of the Sheriff's Department.

Sheriffs are often required to serve an area that is geographically much wider than the jurisdictions of local Law Enforcement. This means that some Sheriff Departments may find it difficult to establish close ties with communities. This is only made more difficult by the wide range of duties they are expected to perform, many of which may paint them as villains. Police may already be distrusted in certain areas, but the nature of a Sheriff's work in jails, courts and prison transport may make them more of a target. This means that Sheriffs may be more of a target than other branches of Law Enforcement when in certain areas, and this affects the type of body armor they should be wearing. This does not mean that an overt vest worn as part of a uniform is no longer appropriate, and may still be the best choice. These serve as a statement of preparedness and authority, and can be

augmented with specific logos and insignia that can further highlight a Sheriff's role as protector and law enforcer. Conversely, some argue that overt body armor further sets Law Enforcement in opposition to the public, and breeds hostility and resentment. Some argue that body armor can highlight officers negatively, making them into easy targets for attack. It is impossible to say which style is preferable, as the circumstances surrounding each individual Sheriff differs greatly. This is why an awareness of the environment you will work in is so important, as it will allow you to prepare accordingly.

Different Types of Body Armor

It is vital that Sheriffs prepare properly before they choose body armor in order to choose the most appropriate style and the proper level of protection. Many do not realise that body armor is available in multiple levels according to the threats it is designed to protect against. This includes the size of ammunition used by firearms, but also the weapon itself, and a bullet proof vest for example will not protect against knives or spiked weapons. This is why it is so important to prepare and be aware of the most likely threats you will face, as a bullet proof vest will not only be the most appropriate type of protection. Sheriffs are of course a branch of Law Enforcement, and so have the right and indeed the duty to uphold the law. Sheriffs must be protected while doing so, whether or not an attack is likely. Handguns are the most common weapons used in crime, and it is recommended that Sheriffs are protected against handgun ammunition at the very least. Vests that can protect against handgun ammunition are tested and standardized by the US National Institute of Justice (NIJ). A vest at NIJ Level I-IIIa will protect against the most common ammunition used in handguns. Sheriffs must also ensure that their body armor is at a level capable of protecting against the ammunition used in their own weapon; the FBI reports that 33 Officers were killed with their own weapon over the last decade. It is vital therefore that your body armor can protect against your own weapon.

Not Just Guns

As mentioned above, a bullet proof vest will not always be adequate depending on the situation a Sheriff finds him or herself in. Guarding prisoners in a jail, for example, will carry little to no threat of attacks involving firearm, yet the overall threat of attack may still be high. All body armor can provide some protection against trauma caused by force, making it very useful in a Jail environment. Interestingly, this also applies to car crashes; wearing a bullet or stab proof vest will help mitigate the injury caused in these accidents. Indeed, DuPont- the makers of Kevlar- hold an annual ceremony for Officers whose lives have been saved by body armor, and a significant proportion of these incidents occurred in automobile accidents.

Shivs and Shanks

While the threat of firearms in a Jail environment may not be particularly high, attacks involving weapons are, and improvised weapons in particular are a big threat. 'Shivs' and 'shanks' may be much more prolific in Prisons, but are still the weapon most likely to be encountered in Jail environments. While a bullet proof vest will mitigate the injury caused by brute force, it cannot protect against edged or spiked weapons. This is because edged weapons will simply cut through the protective fibers in a bullet proof vest, while spiked weapons can pass through the minute gaps in

the fabric. Stab proof vests therefore use additional layers of chainmail or laminate, and spike protection can only be achieved with adequate layers of laminate to provide a tough surface a weapon cannot penetrate. It is important that Sheriffs have vests with spike protection, and it is possible to wear multi-threat vests that can protect against ballistics, edged weapons and spiked weapons.

High Risk Scenarios

Sheriffs may be required to work in environments where handguns and knives are not the main threats, and particularly high risk scenarios will require increased protection. Sheriffs may find themselves facing high powered weaponry that uses high caliber ammunition or even armor piercing rounds. Body armor can only protect against the threats outlined in its level, and for protection against these higher caliber rounds a Level III or IV vest is required. These are known as 'hard armors', because instead of utilising materials like Kevlar they will use plates of Ceramics or Polyethylene. While these are naturally heavier than lower levels of protection, they are still thin and light enough to be worn in even covert armor, meaning protection does not have to be sacrificed for discretion. However, these 'hard armors' will hinder movement and drain stamina much faster than their 'soft' counterparts, and so are therefore only recommended for appropriate, high risk situations. In these situations it may be necessary to have additional protection, covering the head, neck and groin for example.

Things to Remember

Sheriffs are required to work in a variety of different situations, all of which come with their own challenges and dangers. Dealing with often dangerous scenarios requires the proper protection if it is to be done confidently and safely. Choosing body armor is a matter of personal preference; armor issued by departments may be second-hand and not under warranty, and so many Sheriffs will wish to supply their own. An awareness of the most likely threats facing you is of the utmost importance, and understand that body armor is available for any situation and will not hinder your ability to properly fulfil your duties will make the choice easier.