



**A column
exploring the
real-life
details of
police work.**

Working the Holidays: An Emotional Roller Coaster for Law Enforcement

Most people enjoy holidays, the days when family and friends get together for good food, fun, and appreciating the company of loved ones. For some, these special days are a celebration of faith or tradition. But no matter the reason to rejoice, holidays are usually the times when fond memories are born and forever cherished, be it a night of happy children gathering candy in plastic jack-o-lanterns; celebrations to usher out an old year and bring in the new; or a family gathering to share a feast of turkey, ham, or goose, and all the fixings.

In many instances, though, there's a father or mother or brother or sister or grandparent who's noticeably absent from family get-togethers, leaving an empty seat at the dinner table and an unwrapped present beneath the holiday tree. They won't be around to enjoy the drumsticks, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie, or to hear the giggles and squeals of their happy kids as they travel from house to house collecting treats while dressed as their favorite superheroes or cartoon characters.

Instead, they're away because their duties as law enforcement officers require them to be at work patrolling neighborhoods, investigating crimes, arresting robbers and thieves, and responding to vehicle crash scenes. Some leave for work during early morning hours while others dress in their uniforms and head out into the night while their spouses and children are snuggled into their beds drifting off to sleep.

Working a holiday shift taxes the emotions, with the two most predominant causes of distress likely being the loneliness associated with separation from family at times when togetherness is vital and witnessing and experiencing the pain and suffering of victims of crime, crashes, fires, suicides, and other tragedies that often go hand-in-hand with holidays. For example . . .

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New Year's Eve and Day

New Year's Eve is the night when partying is at the top of list for many people, and the fun times regularly involve nightclubs or private parties where alcoholic beverages are consumed. Then, when the clubs close for the night, it's time to go to after-hours socials where drinking more alcohol is characteristically part of the agenda.

At some point, though, the merriment stops and the intoxicated and judgment-impaired individuals must go home. Unfortunately, many do not take advantage of designated drivers, Uber, or taxis, opting instead to get behind the wheel of an automobile.

The combination of inebriated drivers and vehicles places New Year's Day at the top of the holiday list for the chance of a fatal crash involving alcohol and/or drugs. New Year's Day is also the most dangerous holiday for pedestrians due to drunk drivers.

A mix of fights, assaults, domestic abuse, shootings, and robberies are a typical group of routine crimes committed on New Year's Eve. Home burglaries are also among the mix since residents are out and about at parties, leaving their homes unguarded, and burglars take full advantage of the situations.

Officers spend a large portion of their New Year's Eve shifts handling calls related to alcohol-induced incidents, a common thread in many holiday crimes. Unfortunately, many of the people who are typically calm when not drinking are uncharacteristically violent when they do. It's a busy night for DUI enforcement and for patrol officers responding to domestic violence calls.

"Every day, about 32 people in the United States die in drunk-driving crashes—that's one person every 45 minutes. In 2020, 11,654 people died in alcohol-impaired driving traffic deaths," according to the US Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Celebratory gunfire is a typical occurrence at or around midnight on New Year's Eve. The practice is extremely dangerous and deadly. A round fired into the air can remain in flight for more than sixty seconds and reach a height of thousands of feet. And, as the saying goes, what goes up must come down. But where? Well, no one knows where the wayward bullet will land. What is known is that as the unaimed round descends it can reach speeds far greater than 200 feet per second, and a projectile traveling 200 feet per second can easily penetrate a human skull.

New Year's Day sees a high number of assaults. In fact, more assaults occur during the winter months than any other time of the year.

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4th of July

Independence Day is typically marked by backyard barbecues, concerts, festivals, boating, and fireworks. The festivities habitually involve the overindulgence of alcohol and drugs, often resulting in arrests for underage drinking, public intoxication, disorderly conduct, assaults, and driving or boating while under the influence (DUI/DWI).

Driving while intoxicated can result in deadly car crashes, leaving officers to deal with horrific accident scenes and delivering death notifications to family members. Delivering a death notice is one of the most heartbreaking and dreaded duties of a police officer.

According to the US Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "From 2014 to 2018, 812 people died in crashes involving impaired drivers during the Fourth of July holiday period."

Excessive alcohol and drug consumption frequently lead to fireworks-related injuries and sometimes fatalities caused by unsafe practices. An example of a fatality caused by the precarious handling of fireworks occurred in 2022, when a California man attended a holiday gathering and was killed when an illegal, high-powered aerial firework exploded in his hands.

In addition, shootings occur regularly each 4th of July, such as the 108 people shot in Chicago over the 2022 holiday weekend. At least 17 of those shot between the hours of five P.M. Friday to just after one A.M. Tuesday died from their injuries. Also in 2022, in New York City, from Friday through Sunday, there were 24 shooting incidents resulting in 31 victims, including a man who was shot in the face at a bar.

Shortly after ten A.M. on July 4, 2022, Robert E. Crimo, III, began firing from atop a building into a downtown crowd of Highland Park, Illinois parade-watchers. He killed 6 people and wounded 40 more.

With all the 4th of July celebratory gunfire and fireworks booming and banging nonstop in practically every town, city, and rural neighborhood, it's difficult for law enforcement to distinguish between gunshots and the other explosions occurring around them as they patrol. This is especially frightening, and dangerous, considering over 60 officers were shot and killed in 2021, and nearly 50 in 2022, so far.

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Halloween

In addition to missing the experience of spending quality time with their kids as they go from house to house to collect treats while dressed as their favorite superheroes or cartoon characters, law enforcement officers who work the evening and night shifts during Halloween are faced with many troubles that are unique to the holiday. After all, the rate of crimes committed, especially property crimes, greatly increases during Halloween. The reasons for the uptick are likely related to nightfall coming earlier in the evening, people are away from their homes for extended periods, and it's a holiday where shenanigans are the norm.

Car crash fatalities increase by as much as 40 percent on trick or treat night, over half the property crimes involve theft, and the daily percentage of violent crimes often doubles.

In a world where someone wearing a disguise is often thought to be up to no good, on Halloween officers encounter scores of masked citizens. Children are out and about, darting in and out of traffic. They're excited and may not listen to instructions from parents as well as they normally would or should. Sexual predators may be on the prowl for young targets. And practical jokes often go dreadfully wrong.

Halloween is a popular night for troublemakers to bombard police cars

with bricks, rocks, pipes, pumpkins, and sometimes gunfire. Overpasses are frequently used for dropping or tossing heavy objects onto passing cars, including police patrol vehicles.

And, of course, there are people who center their ritualistic crimes, such as grave robbing, around Halloween.

It can be a wild and trying night for cops.

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Thanksgiving

Typically, Thanksgiving is a family holiday. Fall is in full swing, homes are warm and cozy and filled with the delicious scents of pumpkin pie, cinnamon, apple cider, and turkeys roasting in the oven.

Family and friends catch up with events and news that occurred since the previous year's get-together, while children run and play and laugh and squeal and sneak snacks of homemade cookies. Some gather in front of the television to watch sports and cheer on their favorite teams.

Thanksgiving is the start of the winter holiday season that continues through Christmas. It's likely the busiest travel time of the year. The day before the holiday, Thanksgiving Day, and the day after, highways and roads are packed full of cars with people traveling to and from their destinations. Speeding, road rage, carelessness, sleepiness, recklessness, and drivers distracted by cell phones are the cause of numerous crashes, many of which are fatal.

The night before Thanksgiving is a busy time for bars, and the number of parties increase during the stretch between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Again, alcohol and drug use contribute to drunk driving crashes and assaults. Thefts, shoplifting, scams, and domestic violence are also on the rise.

The Thanksgiving holiday period is a time when becoming a victim of crime committed by a family member rises substantially. There is also an upsurge in thefts, shoplifting, scams, and domestic violence.

It's also a stage when depression becomes a factor in the lives of some people. They may feel despondent because they're alone and far away from family, are under financial stress, or suffered the loss of a loved one and the holiday is a painful reminder of those losses. Sadly, like other times of the year, some people see suicide as their only way to deal with their pain.

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Christmas

It's long been said that Christmas is the season to be jolly. Unfortunately, it's also the time of year when criminals begin to work almost tirelessly, with shoplifters wreaking havoc on businesses, burglars breaking into homes to steal valuables, including gifts from beneath holiday trees, thieves and robbers targeting package-carrying shoppers, purse snatchers are out in force, porch pirates stealing packages left at homes by delivery services such as UPS, FedEx, and Amazon, online shopping scammers selling stolen

goods, and cyber criminals stealing identities and committing theft and fraud, among other crimes.

There's often an increase in arson cases during Christmas. In addition, fires caused by dry holiday trees and faulty wiring occur each year. The aftermath includes the loss of gifts and other property, the partial or complete destruction of homes, and sometimes the loss of life.

It's devastating at any time for officers, firefighters, and EMS to respond to a house fire, but to do so at Christmas, knowing that a family has lost so much at what should've been a special time, well, it's gut-wrenching.

To combat the potential increase in law-breaking, police departments sometimes make overtime mandatory to increase the number of officers patrolling the streets and responding to calls. The same is so during other holidays.

Forced overtime means more time away family as well as a lack of rest/sleep and proper nutrition. Having regular mealtimes, if they get a meal break at all, is not the norm for officers working holiday shifts. Working extra hours and long shifts are an added stress to an already demanding and often dangerous job.

But working the Christmas shift isn't all about arrests and solving crimes.

For instance, the homeless, the elderly, and other people in need are a concern at Christmas due to frigid temperatures, lack of food, heat, and safe sanctuary. Therefore, officers frequently help the homeless locate shelters and hot meals. Many times, officers use their own money to purchase food, blankets, coats, socks, and hot coffee for people in the areas they patrol. They sometimes purchase gifts and clothing for children who are in need, and they buy food for their families. They check in on the elderly who live alone and potentially need someone to help with a small chore or simply to chat for a few minutes.

Then, when their shifts are finally over, officers head home to hug their loved ones and to enjoy a plate of leftovers, because it will soon be New Year's Eve, when the holiday cycle begins again.

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Holidays can be lonely for law enforcement officers and other first responders. They're away from their families while dealing with the unhappiness, hurt, and sufferings of others. Experiencing such grief, misery, and injury takes its toll on the emotional well-being of officers and can lead to their own depression, which can be cumulative over time. Unfortunately, some turn to alcohol and even drugs to help cope with the sadness and feelings of hopelessness. Thus, making them a part of the very societal tribulations they've worked so hard and so long to improve.