

Behind the Badge

Law Enforcement Units, Ranks, and Roles

Television and movies make the lives of law enforcement officers look fast-paced, action-packed, and dramatic, but the reality is often different. This fact sheet provides a general introduction of the typical duties of most law enforcement officers. However, each police department is unique and may use different names and terms for their units, ranks, and roles.

Types of Patrols

Law enforcement officers may receive several types of assignments, with varying duties and responsibilities. Patrol units exist at agencies with primary law enforcement responsibilities; patrol officers are typically assigned to a geographical area and receive calls for service from a dispatch center during their shifts. Their standard duties include quick response to emergencies, investigating crime, administering aid, and serving as a crime deterrent. They may also engage in community-policing initiatives by visiting local schools, businesses, and other community groups. There are a variety of patrol modes:



Vehicle Patrols: These patrol officers will typically be in vehicles during most of their shifts. Vehicles are used for traffic enforcement, prompt response to calls for service, and transport of arrested persons. Officers may perform some or all of their regular duties in a vehicle.



Bicycle Patrols: Bicycles provide law enforcement officers with unique mobility and opportunity for community engagement. Bike units are often used for routine patrols in parks or densely populated areas, as well as for special events and public demonstrations.



Foot Patrols: This type of patrol is a mainstay of traditional policing. Officers in large cities may initially be assigned to primarily patrol an assigned area of a city on foot. Patrol officers in vehicles may also patrol an area on foot and engage with their communities on an individual basis.

Specialized Units

Typically, officers begin their careers assigned to patrol duties. After they gain patrol experience, they may have the opportunity to apply for other career advancement opportunities. Here is a small sample of units a department may have. Depending on the size and location of their department, officers may be involved in specialized police services. These officers may be part-time, on-call, or full-time for these units. They perform specialized duties, such as the following:



Traffic Safety Units: These units perform traffic safety functions in their communities, such as traffic enforcement, investigations of serious motor vehicle crashes, and traffic control during special events. Officers in these units may perform their duties in vehicles or on motorcycles.



Motorcycle Units: These are especially useful for getting to incidents quickly, enforcing traffic laws, special events, motorcades, and increasing the department's visibility in the community.



Mounted Patrol Units: These horse units tend to assist with crowd control at special events and public demonstrations, patrol of parks and other natural areas without easy road access, and search and rescue operations.



School Resource Officer Units: These units are usually found at local police or sheriff's offices, with officers assigned to one or more schools to provide law enforcement services, mentor and build positive relationships with youth, deter crime, and generally provide a safe environment. They may conduct security inspections, investigate allegations of criminal incidents, and monitor crime statistics.



Canine (K-9) Units: These units consist of officers working with dogs that are trained to perform a variety of functions, such as locating illegal narcotics, firearms, explosives, or missing persons using their sense of smell.

Law Enforcement Ranks

Duties and Responsibilities by Rank

Law Enforcement duties and responsibilities differ by rank and assignment. Depending on the size of a department, roles and responsibilities at each rank may vary. Lower ranking officers generally spend their days patrolling, coordinating traffic, and responding to calls for service; middle ranks supervise staff, implement new policies, and ensure cohesion between department objectives and personnel; and the executive rank of Chief or Sheriff oversee operations, budgeting, staffing, developing policies and regulations, and serving as the public face of the agency.

Education and Promotional Requirements by Rank

Each law enforcement agency has different requirements for each rank. These requirements may include level and diversity of experience, time spent in an agency, and level of education. For example, many agencies require applicants to have a high school education or equivalent, and some require at least some college coursework. Officers go through intensive training before receiving their first assignments.

Then, when opportunities are available, and if they meet requirements and expectations, they may be eligible and choose to move to specialty positions or advance to a middle rank. For promotional opportunities, candidates typically must score well on written examinations and aptitude assessments, in some cases completing simulation exercises, panel reviews, or interviews with leadership. Higher-ranking commanders have spent many years cultivating their career, attending leadership programs, furthering their education, and developing expertise in investigations, administration, and law enforcement operations.

Every department has a chain of command or authority structure but may have a different way of referring to the same rank. For example, one department might use the title Assistant Chief and another might use Deputy Chief.

The law enforcement profession can be a rewarding and exciting career option. It offers individuals an opportunity to serve their communities as well as a diverse range of professional growth opportunities. Learn more about law enforcement and the requirements to become an officer at the International Association of Chiefs of Police's **Discover Policing website**.



Log on and learn more at:
DiscoverPolicing.org

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