

A Guide to Body Armor for Law Enforcement

Understanding body armor is difficult for a number of reasons; the individual requirements, coupled with the wide variety available, can be enough to intimidate and deter many. It is confusing at the best of times as body armor refers to a range of different products, all of which are applicable for different situations and environments. Police Officers are required to work in a range of environments and deal with enormous responsibilities, all of which carry with them their own threats and dangers.

Whatever the situation, it is vital that Officers have protection and can keep themselves safe in the face of any dangers. Every Officer will surely know the benefit of body armor, but some may not know exactly what is most applicable for them. This guide will therefore explain exactly what Law Enforcement Officers need to know about body armor, and what they should look for in protective clothing depending on their situation.

The Different Types of Protection

All Officers will understand the importance of having body armor, as reports of attacks on Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs) [continue to occur](#) regularly. The majority of these attacks involve weapons, and in the case of firearms, certainly require protection. Firearms are a serious threat to LEOs, and are all too commonly used in attacks. Not only do firearms make up the vast majority of weapons used in crimes in the US, but among these handguns continue to be the most prevalent.

Soft Armor

Having protection against handguns is of the utmost importance for Officers, as they continue to take the lives of Officers every year. Protection against handguns can be afforded by a bullet resistant vest, but just as handguns come in different shapes and sizes, so too do bullet proof vests. Ballistic protection can be split largely into 'hard armor' and 'soft armor', with the latter covering handgun ammunition.

Ballistic protection is tested and graded according to the standards set by the US National Institute of Justice (NIJ), which is widely recognized as the world leader in ballistic testing. The 'NIJ Levels' it applies to bullet proof vests come as a result of this testing, and reflects the size and velocity of



An example of the layers and materials used in a vest.

ammunition that a vest can protect against. For example, the highest level of soft armor, NIJ Level IIIa, can protect against nearly all handgun ammunition, including .44 Magnums and .40 S&W.

It can be difficult to know exactly what level of protection is needed as an Officer, even if you can decide between hard and soft armor. A good starting point is to ensure that your body armor can protect against the ammunition you will be using in your weapon. This not only provides a good starting point, but is a sensible precaution; the FBI reported that 33 Officers have been [murdered with their own weapon](#) in the last ten years.

Hard Armor

For most Officers, soft armor is the most appropriate protection they will need. While it seems prudent to have protection against any and all firearms, choosing hard armor when it is not necessary will only drain your energy and prove to be a burden. Nevertheless, hard armor will be necessary for those Officers facing particularly high threats, such as Firearms Officer or even SWAT teams.

Hard armor usually uses the same materials as soft armor, but with added rigid panels of Ceramics and/or Plastic. These materials allow for increased protection, and can stop rifle rounds and even armor-piercing ammunition. For extreme situations, they are invaluable. These rigid panels are usually inserted into vests, and are increasingly lightweight and thin, meaning they can be utilized even in covert armor. Even so, unless there is a clear threat from high-powered weaponry, hard armor will only be a drain on your resources.

The Different Types of Vest

It is possible to have protection at the highest levels even in covert vests; you can stop a high powered rifle without needing riot gear. However, this does not mean that it is appropriate for your situation, and body armor is available in a variety of different styles that you need to understand in order to choose the right one.

Covert armor has already been mentioned, and for good reason; the ability to have complete protection in a discreet style is something that is very important to many. This is less true of Law Enforcement, but for Officers working Undercover or in sensitive environments, having a vest that can be worn comfortably under clothing is still a benefit. Many of these vests are also made with temperature control in mind, utilizing new materials to help keep the wearer as cool as possible.

However, the vast majority of Officers will likely want an overt vest. These are designed to be worn over clothing, and come with their own advantages. They are available in the same protection levels



Overt Armor can be outfitted with pockets and logos to make it a useful part of a uniform.

as covert vests, but come with the added benefit of displaying an Officer's authority. This is further compounded by the possibility of pockets and radio clips for example, as well as logos and insignia, making an overt vest a useful part of a uniform.

On the other hand, overt armor may not be enough for some Officers, and for those working as Riot Police or in SWAT teams complete protection is required. Tactical armor provides all the benefits of overt armor, and can easily accommodate rigid plates at the highest NIJ Level. These [Tactical Vests](#) have the advantage of being customizable with protection for the entire body, including neck, throat, groin, and upper arm protection. With pockets, radio clips, and logos available, Tactical armor can be invaluable for LEOs working in the most extreme environments.

The Different Types of Threats

Ballistic protection should be considered a necessity for all Law Enforcement Officers, as firearms continue to be a common threat. However, they are not the only threats that need to be considered, and there are other weapons available to the public which can be just as deadly. Indeed, there may be situations where firearms are not the main threat, and may not be present at all. For some Officers the threat of knives or needles will be far higher, and can be just as serious. These weapons require different protective clothing, and should be considered seriously.

A bullet resistant vest that does not use rigid plates cannot protect against anything other than a bullet. While it will absorb impacts, and can mitigate the damage caused by things like [traffic accidents](#), it cannot protect against edged and spiked weapons. For weapons like knives, screwdrivers, axes, and needles, additional materials are required to form a stab or spike proof vest. These will often use Kevlar to help absorb the impact from an attack.

The Kevlar used in a bullet proof vest is made from plastic fibers woven into a fabric, which will not stand up to edged and spiked weapons. Edged weapons can cut through the fabric, whereas spiked weapons will pass between the minute gaps between the fibers. Stab proof vests therefore require materials like chainmail to protect the fabric, whereas spike proof vests use layers of plastic laminate to create a tough surface to protect the fibers.

Body armor is not only easily accessible, but lighter and stronger than ever, and can provide a great deal of protection to an Officer. However, it can only protect against the threats it is specifically designed against, and so it is vital that LEOs understand the different options available to them. More importantly, it can only protect an Officer if it is worn regularly; far too many Officers are injured or even killed while not wearing their body armor. It is critical that these brave men and women keep themselves safe, in order to continue servicing our communities.