

# PLAINCLOTHES PREPAREDNESS

## 8 tips for staying safe out of uniform

Story & photos by Brian Parsi Boetig

### >> LATE ONE AFTERNOON WHILE SITTING AT MY DESK,

gazing over the mounds of paperwork I had to review, approve, and push forward to my supervisor's Inbox, I heard the pleasing and familiar sound of a short air-horn burst. I quickly directed my attention to the activity and excitement five stories below, just in time to observe a developing police foot chase. While I was unsure why the local police were chasing the suspect, my adrenaline began pumping as I watched the events unfold. It was exciting because I was once one of them: a uniformed police officer.

I spent six years as a patrol officer before becoming a state police investigator and ultimately a federal agent. As a uniformed officer, I would have been considered negligent and unfit for duty by my supervisor and peers if I reported for duty without wearing my sidearm. The last 11 years of my law enforcement work have been in plainclothes, and I've witnessed something most people would find amazing: A lot of plainclothes officers don't wear their guns.

The excuses for this appalling phenomenon are plentiful. Plainclothes officers can get lulled into a false sense of security because they don't respond to calls for service. Some officers claim it's no longer as comfortable to wear a sidearm sitting behind a desk all day (as though driving in a cramped patrol car was a really luxurious alternative). Others fall victim to peer pressure when complacent coworkers encourage them to relax and not be so "tactical" because the job is administrative, not operational. Whatever the excuse for not carrying a sidearm, it just is unacceptable.

As it turned out, the suspect in the foot chase temporarily avoided police capture. Because the vantage point from my office window offered a better view of where the suspect was heading, I summoned the assistance of the first two agents I saw as I ran out the door. As luck would have it,

we, the plainclothes agents, ultimately encountered the suspect, engaged in our own brief foot pursuit and took him into custody. The local police were thankful for our assistance, and I was glad to have helped without anybody getting hurt. Furthermore, we all were able to safely and effectively provide assistance to our uniformed counterparts because we were tactically prepared.

There are eight cardinal safety rules for working plainclothes assignments. All too often, sadly, officers are reminded of the dangers of their profession only when a colleague is killed. The tragedy of a line-of-duty death often serves as a safety rejuvenator to many who have inadvertently let their guard down about the inherent dangers of this job.

While none of these rules will teach you something new, they serve as a reminder to reinvigorate your safety mindset so you don't make a tragic sacrifice that serves as a reminder to the rest of the law enforcement community to always be prepared.

### 1. WEAR YOUR SIDEARM

You're still a law enforcement officer even when not in uniform. A sidearm is part of the job, not the uniform. You're not only authorized to carry a weapon but probably required to by your agency. I was proud I did not hear the sounds of desk drawers opening, dress belts unbuckling, slides slamming forward or the ever popular "My gun is in my car/at my house," when I summoned my unit's agents to assist the uniformed police in the foot chase.

Even if you plan on working in the office all day, you should realize that gunmen do strike at law enforcement facilities. Two federal agents and a Washington (D.C.) Metro Police sergeant were killed by a gunman who walked into their office. A police corporal, officer and dispatcher in



**Plainclothes officers must always be prepared for violent confrontations and arrest situations the same way their uniformed colleagues are.**

Fayette, Ala., were also killed inside their police department just a few years ago. Police facilities are not always the safest place.

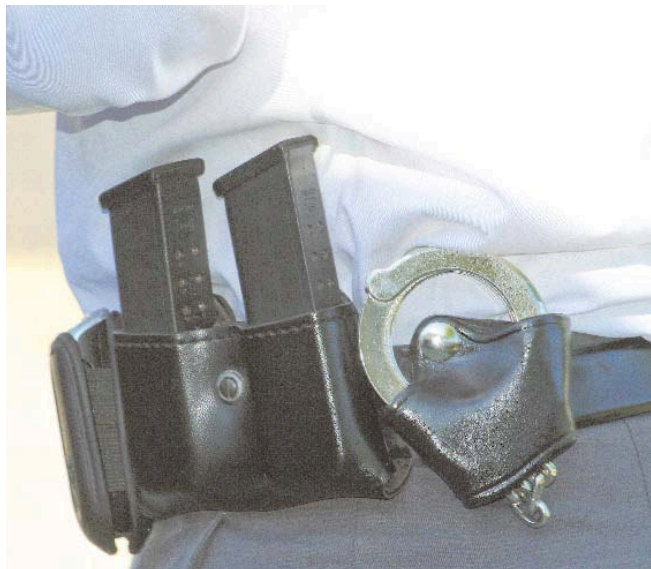
## **2. CARRY EXTRA AMMO**

A gun is only effective when it has ammunition. The more ammunition, the more useful it becomes. The lesson to carry extra ammo was taught to me by a survivor of the shoot-out in Washington, D.C., mentioned above in which three officers were killed. If you were told you were going to be in a gunfight today, you would pile up as much ammunition as could fit on your belt, in your pockets or in any other body orifice that would hold a magazine or more ammo. Isn't it amazing that you put your gun on every day because you might get in a violent confrontation, yet many plainclothes officers do not carry any extra ammunition? Carry it on your belt, in your car door or somewhere convenient, but have it accessible.

Here's a quick thought: If you know you are actually going to a gunfight, bring something much larger and more powerful than a pistol. Shotguns and rifles have much better stopping power in most situations. Continue to bring as much ammo as you can tactically carry.

## **3. HAVE A BACKUP WEAPON AVAILABLE**

Most of the time, I carry two handguns, one on my hip and the other on my ankle. I do this for two reasons. First, if my primary weapon does not work for some reason, the danger I am facing most likely will not end simply because my gun does not work. The probability of one gun not working, since I properly maintain it, is low. The probability of two guns not working is astronomically low; my family prefers and deserves the better odds.



**Extra ammunition and handcuffs should be standard carry when wearing a sidearm.**

Second, I like to compensate for the unprepared plainclothes officers who do not even carry one. I figure if I ever am in a situation with one of them, it would be nice to share a gun and have bullets directed at a suspect from more than one muzzle.

## **4. CARRY HANDCUFFS**

It doesn't matter if your handcuffs are traditional metal or the convenient string ties that fit in a pocket. In 17 years of policing, I have drawn down on quite a few people, but never had to fire a round. That said, once I stop the threat, the next stage is to deal with it. The safest thing is to adequately detain the suspect. The best thing about wearing extra ammo and cuffs on your belt is it counterbalances your gun's weight.

To be perfectly clear, you are not carrying handcuffs if they are hanging on the vehicle's foot brake or stuffed in the glove box. Keep the cuffs on your person. A federal agent was killed when he intervened during a bank robbery, subdued the subject and placed him in a chair. After sending a civilian to retrieve his handcuffs from the squad car, he was assaulted by the suspect, disarmed and killed. If he had been able to immediately secure the suspect, he probably would not have been murdered.

Another advantage of carrying handcuffs is the subtle sign it sends to other officers who may be coming to back you up (or responding to the 911 calls reporting "a man with a gun," who happens to be you). Handcuffs, although not an official form of police identification, do tend to distinguish law enforcement from other people with guns. How many crooks have you arrested with guns? How many also had handcuffs?





Plainclothes officers must carry the full complement of equipment needed to survive a confrontation with a suspect.



Keep a pair of handcuffs on your person. If you leave them in a vehicle, you might not have them when you need them.

#### 5. WEAR YOUR BADGE

Much like the handcuffs, a badge is a widely accepted initial identifier of a law enforcement officer. Whether you carry it on a chain around your neck or clipped to your belt, a visible badge will reduce the likelihood you will be mistaken for a criminal. In a tense situation, the last thing you want to do is reach inside your jacket or pants pocket (both areas where guns are often concealed) to pull out your bi-fold badge wallet for identification.

Make sure your badge is clearly and prominently displayed when help arrives and, if at all possible, have that badge out in your hand and pointed toward the arriving officers.

#### 6. BE COMFORTABLE & PROFICIENT WITH FIREARMS

If you're not comfortable carrying or shooting weapons, get some help from an authorized firearms instructor until you are. If you feel as though you just will never be comfortable with firearms, apply for another job that does not put this enormous responsibility and liability, including others' safety, in your hands.

#### 7. KEEP YOUR VEST AVAILABLE

The majority of plainclothes officers do not wear vests on a regular basis, but you should keep one readily available. If you drive an unmarked police vehicle, keep your bullet-resistant vest in the passenger compartment. I keep mine under the floor mat of my car's back seat. Under the floor mat, it's

## HANDCUFFS... DO TEND TO DISTINGUISH LAW ENFORCEMENT FROM OTHER PEOPLE WITH GUNS.

sufficiently hidden that it probably won't get stolen. Chances are if you happen upon a situation in which your vest would be a nice addition to your wardrobe, you probably won't have much time to dig for it under all your equipment, shopping bags or whatever else you have in the trunk. If you want to keep it in the trunk, keep it on the top of the pile.

#### 8. DON'T DEPEND ON COMMS EQUIPMENT

Assume every piece of electronic equipment you have will fail. Cell phones: crap. Direct-connect phone feature: crap. Text messaging: come on!

Partner: good.

Two partners: better.

*Bottom line:* Anything with a pulse is more dependable than anything with a battery.

#### SUMMARY

Working in plainclothes, whether you are an investigator, an administrator or a university, tribal, local, county, state or federal law enforcement officer, you must be prepared to react to the inherent dangers of your profession. Don't put yourself in a precarious situation in which you can't respond immediately to threats directed at you, your coworkers or the public.

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