

## Focus on Training

# Cop 101: Surviving Prisoner Searches

BY TODD COLEMAN

*Two officers arrested a suspect and secured him in the back seat of their patrol vehicle.<sup>1</sup> One officer stood beside the car while the other sat in the front seat to use the radio. Suddenly, despite being handcuffed behind his back and belted into the seat, the suspect began shooting at the officers with a .45-caliber handgun that he had concealed in his waistband. The officer standing beside the vehicle died at the scene.*

*The chief of police in a small town arrested an individual and recovered a handgun from him during a search.<sup>2</sup> After transporting the suspect to a holding facility, the chief turned her attention from the suspect to make a phone call. The suspect pulled a second gun that he had concealed in a pouch in the front of his pants and shot the chief in the head, killing her.*

Sadly, these represent only two out of the many actual incidents that cost law enforcement officers their lives every year. While tragic, these two deaths reveal a more distressing fact: they, like many others, could have been avoided. For the 10-year period 1993 through 2002, 20 officers were killed while handling or transporting prisoners.<sup>3</sup> Although some incidents resulted from prisoners overpowering and disarming the victim officer, many others occurred due to weapons missed during incomplete searches of suspects. These numbers also do not include the "near misses" or "could have beens" that happen each year. A check with

their local jail or holding facility about the number of weapons removed from prisoners each year should give law enforcement officers something to think about. These weapons do not include a James Bond laser-beam watch or something concealed in a hollowed-out boot heel. Rather, they involve a 9-mm or .45-caliber semiautomatic handgun stuffed in a waistband or a derringer, revolver, or other handgun hidden inside of a boot, pocket, or jacket. They are ordinary weapons that a thorough search would have discovered.

Although these tragic incidents happen all too often, they can be avoided, or at least vastly reduced, by paying attention to what I call "Cop 101." Simply put, Cop 101 stresses the importance of reinforcing the basic survival skills of law enforcement and not neglecting these in the quest for more glamorous or exciting training. It seems that we never practice or refresh some of the most important techniques in law enforcement after we leave the training academy. For some reason, these were deemed important enough to be included during the academy, but, afterwards, they are viewed as too basic or simple to merit additional training time. During train-

ing, we often pay a great deal of attention to elaborate self-defense training, tactical shooting, pursuit driving, and a myriad of high-risk scenarios. All of these are extremely important, and I am in no way implying otherwise. However, a small investment of time during training could pay large dividends in the form of saving an officer's life. By taking a few minutes and incorporating a segment dedicated to proper prisoner searches during follow-up training, law enforcement agencies can reiterate their importance.

### Use Existing Scenarios

Unfortunately, as those of us who have stood in front of a group of less than enthusiastic officers going through annual in-service training can

© Tony Whitmore



attest, the idea of attending a class on prisoner search techniques will not be particularly well received, not to mention how it will impact the limited amount of training time available for the various topics of instruction that we need to cover. However, I have found that including prisoner searches in current officer-survival training can prove relatively painless. For example, if agencies use practical scenarios, which many do and training experts recommend, they can add a prisoner search at the end of an arrest scenario. In cases where instructors have scenarios set up where officers must subdue a role-player wearing some type of protective suit, they can have a second role-player nearby wearing regular street clothes and a concealed weapon. Instructors should alternate the type, number, and existence of a weapon on the role player so that officers do not fall into the routine of looking for the ever-present training weapon. After subduing the first role-player, officers can move to the second one and continue with the arrest. At this point, they can practice prisoner searches as part of the scenario. If officers miss the weapon, instructors should have them repeat the scenario until they find any and all concealed weapons. This reinforces the importance that their agency places on this skill. Moreover, by incorporating prisoner searches as part of the existing training, instructors can avoid many of the obstacles of setting up and implementing an entirely new class.

### **Stress the Fundamentals**

Instructors should stress the fundamentals of a complete and safe prisoner search. If the suspect is under arrest, then officers should conduct the search after handcuffing him.<sup>4</sup> They always should handcuff the suspect behind his back unless some definite reason, such as physical impairments or injury, exists.<sup>5</sup> After handcuffing the prisoner, officers should conduct the search from a safe position, staying behind the prisoner at a 45-degree angle from his body. Officers should avoid placing themselves in

---

After handcuffing the prisoner, officers should conduct the search from a safe position, staying behind the prisoner at a 45-degree angle from his body. Officers should avoid placing themselves in front of the prisoner because it makes them vulnerable to kicks, knee strikes, head butts, spitting, biting, and other forms of violent behavior.

---

front of the prisoner because it makes them vulnerable to kicks, knee strikes, head butts, spitting, biting, and other forms of violent behavior. From the rear, officers can use one hand to maintain control of the prisoner and keep him off balance. Then, they can reach around him to conduct the search. Officers should be systematic during the search by sectioning the body into quadrants. For example, the front upper right quarter covers from the top of the head down to the groin and across to the center line of the body. The front lower right quarter begins just above the belt of the right leg and continues completely down the right leg. The quarters should overlap, ensuring that when officers search all of the quadrants, they will have overlapped areas and not omitted any. They should pay special attention to places where weapons are commonly found, such as the waist area, boots, and clothing with multiple pockets.

Officers also need to keep in mind other safety issues. For example, they never should thrust their hands into the suspect's pockets. Instead, they should lightly touch the outside first, then squeeze and twist the pocket from the outside to lessen the risk of cutting themselves on sharp objects, such as needles or exposed blades. If necessary, they should slowly turn the suspect's pockets inside out, thus allowing them to remove sharp objects safely. In addition,

officers should carry extra brown paper bags in their vehicles to hold these items. This avoids inadvertently giving the prisoner back an item that may contain some type of undiscovered concealed weapon, such as a missed razor inside of a wallet. This also allows officers to go through each item at a more secure and possibly well-lit area and makes it easy to determine if they missed something during a search of the prisoner. I encourage officers to take a few extra moments and conduct a re-search or, better yet, have a second officer do so. This helps ensure that the prisoner has been thoroughly searched.

This leads to my final point: searching a prisoner when transferring custody to another officer. Instructors ►

---

Officers also need to keep in mind other safety issues. For example, they never should thrust their hands into the suspect's pockets.

---

should stress to officers that they should not be offended if another officer who assumes custody of their prisoner searches that person nor should they worry about offending another officer by searching a prisoner they have received. This commonly occurs when one officer transports a prisoner for another officer. I strongly encourage officers to thoroughly search any prisoner they transport regardless of whether he already has been searched. In fact, while working narcotics, I got to the point where I told transporting officers that the prisoner had not been searched, even if he had, because I noticed that if I told the transporting officers that the prisoner already had been searched, many times either they neglected to search him again or they conducted a minimal search at best.

### Assess the Benefits

By keeping these points in mind and incorporating them into established officer-survival classes, instructors can provide several benefits to both their officers and their agencies. First and foremost, it will keep officers safer on the street. By instilling the habit of conducting a proper and safe prisoner search, instructors can reduce the occurrence of officers injured and killed by armed prisoners. Second, it will allow instructors

to identify individual officers who may have difficulties in this area. In turn, instructors can give these officers the additional training they need to ensure that they can safely and effectively search their prisoners. Finally, it makes a statement about where an agency stands on issues of officer safety. What an agency fails to train makes just as much of a statement about its attitude toward officer safety as what it does train.

### Cop 101 Prisoner Search Tips

- Use caution with all prisoners, even those in handcuffs.
- Maintain a safe position.
- Be systematic and section the body into quadrants.
- Touch pockets before reaching inside or turn pockets inside out.
- Search all prisoners, even those received from other officers.

### Conclusion

Law enforcement officers search suspects and prisoners on a daily basis. It stands as one of the most repeated tasks and, as such, can become a mundane chore. However, officers must remember that it also can prove deadly.

To ensure that their officers understand the dangers of conducting searches and the possible consequences of

missed weapons, law enforcement agencies should include proper and safe search techniques as part of officer-survival training. By stressing the fundamentals and reminding officers of the hazards associated with searching suspects and prisoners, agencies can improve officer safety and enhance their effectiveness in protecting the general public. □

### Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 2000* (Washington, DC, 2001), 49.
- 2 U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1998* (Washington, DC, 1999), 59.
- 3 U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 2002* (Washington, DC, 2003), 25.
- 4 For illustrative purposes, the author refers to suspects as males.
- 5 This demonstrates the importance of agencies investing in waist restraints if they currently do not have them.

*Master Police Officer Coleman, a certified police instructor, serves in the Special Operations Division of the Virginia Beach, Virginia, Police Department.*

*Reprinted from the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, May 2004, Volume 73, Number 5.*