

Law Enforcement Guide to Bullet Proof Vest Protection in 2015

Every day across the United States, thousands of brave men and women place themselves on the front line of the war against crime. With multiple areas of law enforcement focusing on the huge range of threats out there (drugs, terrorism, theft, homicide etc.), the specific responsibilities and duties involved with an officer's role will vary. However, when encountering suspected or convicted criminals – in any capacity – officers may face danger at all threat levels.



SWAT teams, of course, are perhaps in the most dangerous parts of law enforcement – storming criminal strongholds, entering armed sieges, facing terrorists all poses a significant degree of risk. Patrol officers (especially those walking high-crime neighborhoods) may well come face to face with gun-wielding gangs, either by design or accident. Drug-enforcement teams may need to raid a suspected drugs-den, with the threat of heavy-duty gunfire very real.

To stay as safe as possible in the line of duty, personnel in law enforcement need to wear bullet proof vests – these can, and do, save lives again and again. However, with so many out there on today's market, how do officers choose the right one to protect them against the dangers they expect to face?

Bullet Proof Vests – A User's Guide

In the past, bullet proof vests were heavy, cumbersome, and impractical – so much so that soldiers in past wars would prefer to face combat without armor due to the extreme discomfort they felt. Today, thankfully, body-armor manufacturers focus on making all body armor, even the toughest ones, as thin and lightweight as possible. This ensures that officers specializing in all areas, with all uniform restrictions, can depend on reliable bullet proof vests.

Though various materials are used to create ballistic armor today, [the most common remains Kevlar](#): this synthetic fiber has decades of successful use among law-enforcement officers, and is woven into tight grids to create a strong resistant barrier against projectiles. When arranged into multiple layers, this material provides defense against rounds of various types, from handgun bullets of the lowest velocities to even armor-piercing designs.

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NIJ Levels

Bullet proof vests are evaluated and rated by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). According to their current testing standard, there are five different levels of protection – to attain one of these ratings, each type of vest must meet certain criteria.

Level IIA vests must provide defense against 9mm rounds (fired at a velocity of 373 meters per second) and .40 S&W bullets. For officers operating in a low-crime area, with little to no expectations of encountering armed criminals, this type of vest may be suitable. However, most officers might well feel better-protected against all eventualities with a vest of a higher level.

Level II is made to stop 9mm rounds with a velocity of 398 meters per second, as well as .357 Magnum bullets. Level IIIA vests are the toughest 'soft' armor available, able to stop .357 SIG rounds and .44 Magnum bullets – for officers expecting to face handgun-fire, this may be the best option. With many layers of protective padding, these can stop all of the above ammunition-types.

Officers entering an area or situation in which rifles are likely to be a threat should choose armor at the latter two levels: III and IV. While these still feature Kevlar, they also include ballistic plates (these may be made of steel or ceramics, the latter of which is tougher) either integrated into the vest itself, or inserted into pockets on the front, back, and sides. These plates protect against rifle-fire of two kinds: level III stops 7.62mm FMJ rounds, fired at 847 meters per second; level IV stops .30 caliber armor-piercing rounds, with a velocity of 878 meters per second. Ceramic plates break bullets up on impact, but will also crack – this makes them incredibly powerful, but means they cannot provide reliable protection against a hail of armor-piercing rounds.

Covert or Overt Protection

As well as choosing the right level, officers also need to ascertain whether they should wear an overt or covert vest. Those working undercover need to maintain a low profile, typically wearing civilian clothing – a bullet proof vest should sit underneath their surface layers, providing protection without drawing undue attention.

Covert vests are designed for this very purpose, with a thinner and more lightweight build than standard (overt) armor worn over clothing: even some of those models carrying ballistic plates can now be concealed underneath other layers, for maximum protection and maximum discretion.

When choosing bullet proof vests, officers should always seek expert advice from ballistic experts such as [SafeGuardArmor – bullet proof vests](#) if in doubt: taking a chance on your personal safety can be a terrible mistake. Give your armor the right consideration, and it may well save your life someday.