

“Police mountain Bike Patrol: Policy Training, and Tactics”  
Kathleen Vonk

Police bicycle patrols have become common in today’s era of community policing and crime fighting. Police on bikes are found in large and small cities, on almost every college campus, and even on the federal level of law enforcement and training. Bicycles are even expanding into the emergency medical field, with some private and public agencies putting their medical technicians on mountain bikes for special events, such as bike races, marathons (and other runs), festivals, art fairs, and carnivals. The mountain bike has proven to be more than just a “buzz word” within the United States and other parts of the world, as success continues in the areas of urban drug enforcement, public housing projects, surveillance, business partnerships, and community relations.

The 8th Annual “Police on Bikes” conference sponsored by the International Police Mountain Bike Association (IPMBA), was held in Tacoma Washington in May of 1998. At this conference, public safety officers from all over the world were trained in numerous areas relating to mountain bike patrol. Emergency Medical Technicians from all over the United States were trained to use the mountain bike in their profession as well. Officer Lou Ann Hamblin of the Van Buren Township Police Department, Michigan, conducted two surveys at this conference. The first was an “Anonymous Survey” which queried police mountain bike officers on issues such as whether agencies defined the mountain bike as a police vehicle, what types of initial and in-service training were provided, what types of equipment were being used by agencies, policies and procedures, and what the bikes were actually used for in differing departments. The second was a “Tactical Survey” asking questions in the areas of perceived vulnerability by officers on bikes, how officers felt their chances of being assaulted were compared to motorized patrol, helmet removal in certain situations, firearms qualifications and related issues, and whether officers wore body armor while on bike patrol. Some valuable information was obtained, and in some cases results were surprising.

In the anonymous survey, 138 officers responded to the questions with the following results:

*Mountain bikes are used for community policing in 67% of the departments polled, 19% use them for drug enforcement, and 61% utilize mountain bikes for general patrol duties.*

*(Percentages do not add up to 100 due to multi-purpose uses in some agencies).*

*Only 58% said their agency defined the mountain bike as a police vehicle, and 47% do not have written policies and procedures specific to police mountain bike patrol units..*

*67% do not have firearms training and qualifications specific to police cyclists.*

*85% are not provided fitness education specific to police cycling.*

*78% are not educated in police cycling liability issues.*

*68% do not have annual refresher or advanced training.*

*82% do not use Simunitions or realistic scenario-based training*

These past six issues deal with liability, especially when the importance of police mountain bike training is now being grouped with that of firearms, defensive tactics, precision driving, and baton training. The chances of injury to civilian, officer, and suspect are extremely high if an officer is not trained properly in the use of the mountain bike while on patrol. Administrators are not sending officers on the street without policies, procedures, and training in the areas of deadly force, vehicle pursuits, and the use of force. Why are some agencies sending police cyclists on patrol without the same consideration for proper training? If an officer runs a stop sign and strikes a pedestrian, will his actions be justified according to policy? (Or is there no policy to fall back on?) Some policy considerations which should be addressed include defining the mountain bike as a police vehicle, properly equipping the bike itself to conform to statutory requirements (audible signal, lights while operating at night, etc...), properly equipping the officer (uniform material and gear conducive to physical activity, proper education and training), and others. For today's law enforcement officer, the bicycle is more than just a mode of transportation. Yes, everyone may already know how to *ride* a bike, but not everyone knows *how to effectively use it as a tool while performing their jobs*, unless they have been properly trained to do so. An officer on a bicycle must know how to *effectively* and *constantly* use cover and concealment without having a patrol car to rely on, especially when conducting surveillance and approaching crimes in progress. The bike officer must be able to conduct traffic stops in a fashion that minimizes risk of injury and property damage (no patrol car with emergency lights on top, no safe lane to walk up on the driver's side), maneuver safely and legally in heavy traffic while responding to emergency calls, and if needed, effectively use the bike as a defensive tool. Too many agencies have added bicycles to their patrol and community policing teams without providing initial guidelines and adequate training for their officers, thus increasing liability. The initial investment of a police cyclist class is well worth the cost for both the agency and the officer!

*12% of responding officers knew of or had been involved in a shooting incident while on bike patrol, and 19% knew of or had been involved in a lethal force situation while on mountain bike patrol. Examples included being dragged by a car, being shot while chasing a suspect who was on foot, and being intentionally ran over by a car.*

*46% are issued nylon holsters with a different retention level than their leather gear. This may not seem to be a big issue, but think about the different requirements for drawing from a triple retention holster versus a level-one holster. Consistency is important. Consider going to one of the companies which market identical retention holsters in both leather and nylon, so the "draw" is the same no matter which uniform you happen to be wearing that day.*

*75% do not utilize ear pieces or head sets, with the most common reasons including unreliability of the equipment, expense, and the wiring being too sensitive. An alternative is the use of a lapel mike and a shoulder tab on the uniform shirt. The mountain bike officer must realize, however, that his ability to patrol quietly (especially at night) will be more difficult if an ear piece is *not* utilized.*

145 Tactical Surveys were returned with the following results:

56% of responding officers stated that they felt more vulnerable patrolling on a mountain bike versus a patrol car. Reasons for this were attributed to a constant lack of cover, the dangers of cycling in traffic, and limited gear (no shotgun, alley lights, air bag, etc...) For those stating that they did *not* feel more vulnerable, reasons varied significantly. Some mentioned heightened awareness levels due to the use of ALL senses: when patrolling on a bike, the officer can *hear* more, *see* more and *smell* more of what's going on in the area. Some mentioned that they had been trained in bicycle-specific tactics, and some said that they always have at least one partner while working on the bikes. These are valid points. One officer, however, did not feel vulnerable because he was "still a big guy." This officer might be disappointed to find that the average suspect who kills a police officer is two inches shorter, 38 pounds lighter, and five years younger than the officer killed. (Officer Hamblin cites this statistic from the P.O.S.T. Officers Killed in the Line of Duty, 1996.)

79% stated that they felt more vulnerable as a result of less protective clothing (mountain bike uniform) while 17% did not. Only six officers offered explanations, noting road rash and skinned knees. One officer said that he felt more vulnerable because he did not wear body armor when he patrolled on a bike. That problem would be easily addressed--wear the body armor! Officer Hamblin notes that with the exception of pants and heavy boots, bike officers in some respects may have *more* protective gear than their road patrol counterparts: helmet, gloves, eye protection.

48% felt that their chances of being assaulted were greater patrolling on a bike, and 37% felt that they were less. Reasons cited were similar to those of the previous question. In addition, officers also cited closer and more frequent contacts with the public making them easily accessible and more vulnerable for attack. The constant lack of cover was mentioned, as was the inherent "stealthness" of patrolling on a bike leading to surprise confrontations (sometimes surprising the *officer* as well as the suspect). Of those answering that their chances of being assaulted were *less likely* on a mountain bike, reasons included that the *appearance* of the bike officer was less threatening, increasing the approachability of the police cyclist. Working with a partner while patrolling on bikes, and bike-specific training and tactics were also mentioned. 32% stated that they felt they could fire a hand gun effectively from a moving mountain bike. Many limitations, however, were added by those answering "yes" to this question, requiring a perfect (and unrealistic) environment to be successful. "Under controlled situations," "with the exception of turning and braking," "as long as the targets remained stationary", and "yes, but with less accuracy" were some of the limitations placed on the scenario. How many of these limitations are realistic? Allowing or training officers to do such a skill *may be possible*, but how tactically sound is the technique? Officer Hamblin relates the performing of such a technique to that of the "gliding duck" at the traveling carnival or local arcade. The duck moves predictably from left to right, never changing speed or elevation--just as an officer on a mountain bike would appear to a suspect--an easy target to hit! When it comes to shooting accurately from a moving mountain bike; just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should*! A better choice might be to get off the bike, get behind cover, and return fire from a more stable platform. Four questions dealt with helmet removal, whether the officers could cite a tactical advantage to doing so in certain situations: 47% saw an advantage when involved in a deadly force encounter, 38% saw no such advantage, and 14% were unsure. Some felt that the helmet would hinder their ability to utilize cover due to the height and width the helmet adds to the head. Some felt that it would serve as a target for their adversary, noting qualities such as the color

white, reflective lettering, or the shiny gloss finish. A few officers mentioned that the visor could hinder their field of vision, or felt that it could be grabbed by the suspect. Of those answering “no,” some officers said that it would depend on the type of weapon being used against them. Others said that they probably wouldn’t have time or wouldn’t even think of removing the helmet, because neutralizing the threat would be the primary concern. Focusing on the deadly situation would take precedence over the helmet. *Respondents were split equally on removing the helmet when perceiving a potentially resistant subject, with 47% on each side.* The primary reason to keep the helmet on was the added protection that it affords the officer should the suspect become violent (fists, feet, blunt objects, edged weapons, or if the officer’s head were to strike the ground). Some said that if they *had* to, the helmet could be used to “head butt” the suspect. The primary reason to remove the helmet was that it could be grabbed by the suspect and used as a handle to control the officer’s head. *When performing a building search, 65% saw a tactical advantage to removing the helmet noting the cover issue, the visor inhibiting the officer’s field of vision, and the glare off the helmet giving the officer’s position away.* As a part of some IPMBA Basic Police Cyclist courses, one of the four days starts in the afternoon so that a portion of the class is conducted in darkness. The class rides to an area where there are ambient street lights, such as a parking lot. An officer with reflective seams or reflective writing on the uniform, a metal badge and a shiny helmet, walks under the lighting towards the rest of the class. Everyone can clearly see that the reflective lettering does *not* give the officer’s position away, while the glossy helmet and the metal badge do. Embroidered badges, black matte-finish helmets, and nylon helmet covers are available options to correct these tactical issues. *While conducting an interview, 64% saw no advantage to removing the helmet, while 33% did.*

*94% saw a need to qualify with their weapons while in full mountain bike uniform including helmet, gloves, and body armor.* Some of the more logical and educated responses indicated that officers will perform how they have trained. Officers should find out how the gloves affect their aim, or whether the visor on the helmet obstructs their field of vision. On the street, there will be no time to remove the helmet and gloves if a deadly force situation arises. Officers should train and become proficient under these circumstances *prior* to experiencing the problems in real life, where the consequences could be much worse.

*98% felt that fitness levels play a significant role in an officer’s overall performance.* An officer’s survival could depend on him/her being able to sprint to a call, dismount, and *effectively* perform a number of duties. These could include anything from requesting assistance (he/she won’t be able to do this if he/she is gasping for air!), conducting interviews, taking a suspect into custody, fighting with a suspect, or even using deadly force.

*While only 5% answered that they saw no need to wear body armor while on mountain bike patrol noting concerns for heat and comfort,* this number is still 5% too high. Not even mentioning the protection from firearms, edged weapons, and blunt objects, body armor will offer additional protection to the mountain bike officer from falls and crashes. With the high-tech and lightweight body armor, and the moisture-wicking and breathable vest covers (all reasonably priced products) on the market today, there is no valid reason for *any* officer to work without body armor.