**Off-Duty Behavior**

**While off duty, watch your attire and associations. Avoid any hint of impropriety.**

January 03, 2013 | by William Harvey

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| **[Photo courtesy of William Harvey.](http://www.policemag.com/blog/careers/photos/1400/off-duty-behavior/679.aspx)** |
| *Photo courtesy of William Harvey.* |

"You are what you are," I had one of my trusted commanders tell me the other day. He was speaking about a young officer who was unable to grasp the concept that how he conducts himself off duty can subject him to departmental sanctions.

How you are viewed by others may be different than how you see yourself. Once you become a police officer or deputy, the world changes its view of you. I know you're the same man or woman that you were before you poked your hand up and took the oath, but there are some realities we need to discuss.

As much as we want the world to love cops, we should understand that they also love to hate us. For instance, I read a news story about a former cop who was arrested for a heinous crime. This guy has not been a cop in years, his career (using that term loosely) was only a few months.

The media—because bad cop stories sell—and some members of the public relish in revealing the few bad eggs in our ranks. If one cop is bad then we are all bad, according to some haters. Headline readers will view the headline as all cops are bad. We hope they read the entire article. Because of this phenomenon, we must protect our vocation by protecting ourselves first. If your integrity is intact, then there will be no problems.

First, new officers need to watch what they wear and how they act while off duty. I used to go to a food court in a local mall for lunch; it was down the street from a regional police academy. During lunch, I could play the off-duty-cop-or-not game.

Stop and look at yourself. If you don't want to be identified or bothered while off duty, check your wardrobe. You do have the freedom to don whatever apparel you wish, but give it a rethink if you enjoy your privacy. Avoid tactical boots or running shoes, jeans, and T-shirts that read "Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out" while covering a prominent gun bulge.

Are your hip pockets bulging with a wallet in one and badge wallet in the other? Do you wear a tactical knife clipped in the pants pocket ready to spring out at a moment's notice? What about a baseball cap with the tactically crushed visor? Did I mention sunglasses—the wrap-around tactical ones that you can wear inside a building?

If you're dressed like this in public and you drop a few ugly word bombs or exclaim anything slightly inappropriate for the delicate ears around you to hear, there will be a complaint coming for the offended citizen will call the local police. If you're in a group of cops, you should designate a "cop buddy" to act as the handler or wing. When one gets out of line, they handle the decorum to keep all out of the fray.

Who you hang around with while off duty is another question. I know it's your time. Stop and look at your neighborhood or school pals with your cop eyes. Everyone knows at least one convicted felon (heck, they could be a family member) but hanging out with them may be a policy violation. What if one of your old chums is now in a gang? Stop and think where their allegiances are now? Do they respect you for the good old days of playing ball together or are their new pals the ones who don't like cops.

You could be a set up for them to gain intelligence about gang-enforcement tactics. Always remember operational security. Be especially aware while attending public events. Recall that everyone now has a cell phone with a built-in camera. The off-duty cop seen at a motorcycle rally standing next to [**Outlaw Motorcycle Gang**](http://www.policemag.com/list/tag/outlaw-motorcycle-gangs.aspx) members (OMGs) will be found guilty of association. Just be careful.

Does this really matter? If you are in a large metropolitan department where you are one of hundreds or thousands of officers, it could go undetected. In the small- or medium-size departments where political views, public scrutiny and operational integrity come to play, it's a reality of life. Are you giving up your liberties, freedoms, or private life pursuits because you carry a shield? Yes. Is it fair? Nope. I was told years ago, there is nothing fair in Policeland. Fair is where you take your kids in September to see the animals.

My goal here is to protect your career for a slight slip that can be a career ender for you and tarnish the careers around you. You worked far too hard to earn your shield. Don't let one lapse ruin it.