

Metropolitan Police Academy



2.3 Situational Awareness

Introduction

All actions taken by police officers and the decisions they make are dictated by the information immediately available to them during real-time situations. It is imperative that officers use all available methods of gathering information, including situational awareness. To be an effective patrol officer, one must exercise situational awareness at all times. This practice not only enhances the safety of officers and community members, it also enables an officer to more accurately assess individuals and situations, ultimately leading to better decision-making and providing a higher level of police service.

Understanding the warning signs of danger, the potential for flight or assault, and gauging the seriousness and level of danger in any given situation produces a more prepared officer in on and off-duty situations.

Only through an understanding of situational awareness can a new recruit begin to recognize and assess individuals and situations thoroughly. Such knowledge allows the recruit to become a safety-conscious and diligent officer in the field.

2.3.1 Define the concept of situational awareness

The most widely accepted definition of **situational awareness** is “the perception of environmental elements within a volume of time and space, the comprehension of their meaning, and the projection of their status in the near future.” (Endsley, M., 1995)

In other terms, as it pertains police officers, situational awareness is:

- A frame of mind in which you are aware of your surroundings and also aware of whom or what could be of help to you if a problem were to arise.
- A comprehensive and coherent situation that is continuously being updated in accordance with the results of recurrent situation assessments.
- The continuous extraction of environmental information along with the integration of this information with previous knowledge to form a coherent mental picture, and the end use of that mental picture in directing further perception and anticipating future needs.
- Keeping track of what is going on around you in a complex, dynamic environment.
- The ability to maintain a constant, clear mental picture of relevant information and the tactical situation, including friendly and threat situations.

2.3.2 Appreciate the importance of situational awareness for police officers

One of the most dangerous functions of a police officer is handling incidents related to vehicles. According to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, between 2011 and 2020, 311 officers lost their lives working on this type of incident. Of those 311 deaths, fifty-six (56) officer deaths were due to motorcycle crashes, 131 were due to being struck by an automobile, and 124 were due to being in an automobile crash. Officers must use situational awareness in multiple ways while interacting with vehicles in an effort to detect signs of danger and continuously assess circumstances as they develop.

Think of situational awareness as an analytic process that our minds go through during nearly everything we do. An officer on a traffic stop will be communicating with the driver and/or passengers, communicating with the dispatcher and assisting officers, writing applicable notices of infraction (tickets),

and checking the driver's and vehicle documents for validity. At the same time, the officer must also practice situational awareness by monitoring the following:

- the behavior and actions of the driver of the vehicle
- the behavior and actions of the passengers of the vehicle
- the flow of uninvolved traffic to prevent being struck while in the roadway
- pedestrian behavior in the vicinity of the stop

As you can see, even a "simple" traffic stop has many factors that the officer must be constantly and actively thinking about.

It is important to note that situational awareness—being aware of your surroundings and identifying potential threats and dangerous situations—is more of a mindset than a hard skill. The best way to start recognizing the value of situational awareness and incorporating it into tactical decision-making is to practice the mindset now, as it is something that cannot only be taught. It can be exercised by anyone with the will and the discipline to do so. Increasing your situational awareness can be important not only in your personal life but it also may be especially crucial as a law enforcement officer in identifying criminal behavior and other dangerous situations. You should also be aware of your surroundings and the behavior of your fellow officers. You must take care of each other and protect one another not just from danger, but from inappropriate conduct.

Every day, everywhere you go, look, listen and pay attention to what is happening around you. For example, here are some tips for developing situational awareness while you are eating a meal:

- Think to yourself as you are pulling into the parking lot, what doesn't look right here or what's wrong with this picture?
- Before you walk into the restaurant, look through the windows and doors to get a glimpse of anything that might be out of place inside. Ask yourself, does anything look suspicious?
- While sitting down at a restaurant, take a look around inside and make a mental note of where all of the exits are located. If you are able, choose a seat that offers a view of the entire restaurant.
- Think to yourself and rehearse in your mind a number of mental scenarios. What if someone walks in arguing with another person and a fight ensues, or what if someone attempts to rob the establishment? Then ask yourself, "How am I prepared to react to that?"

It is important to practice situational awareness on all types of assignments while you are on duty. Regardless of the nature of the call, it should be utilized in the following ways when applicable:

- **Arrival:** As a patrol officer, you will receive radio calls for service to a wide variety of offenses and incidents. Situational awareness begins enroute to the scene, and the vehicle skills portion of recruit training will concentrate on that aspect.

When a subject is still known to be on the scene or close by and knowledge of police presence would hinder your ability to make an arrest, it may be best to turn off emergency lights and sirens when approaching the area.

Not all of your assignments will come through the dispatcher, however. Often times you will be flagged down by a community member and unexpectedly find yourself in the middle of a developing situation that requires police service.

- **Parking and Approaching:** Once on the scene, it is crucial to immediately exercise situational awareness, to include the manner in which you park your vehicle. Carefully begin observing the area. Look for occupied vehicles and vehicles leaving the location upon your arrival as they may be involved. Look for evidence in the roadway and, as you approach a scene, be mindful of potential evidence and take steps to preserve it. Do not drive directly in front of the location of the incident. Doing so alerts involved persons of your presence and puts you at a disadvantage in cases where stealth should be implemented. It also makes an officer more vulnerable to a potential ambush.

Park safely, a short distance away from the location. Communicate to the dispatcher so that he or she and your fellow officers know that you are on the scene. Wait for your backup to arrive in cases where you are told to do so. Additionally, take the few extra moments while walking to the location or waiting for your backup to look, listen, and observe before approaching the scene. Doing so can reveal crucial information you may have otherwise missed. While approaching, continue to be observant. Identify escape routes, alleys, and objects that can provide cover if needed.

Do not approach locations, whether you are on assignment or not, under the assumption that everything inside is safe. Look in the windows of homes and establishments before entering or knocking. Observe the appearance of the location, noting what strikes you as out of place or simply not right. These simple situational practices are utilized by police officers incessantly and are crucial to your safety and preparedness.

- **Initial Contact:** After your approach, you will make your initial contact with the person(s) involved. You should be exercising situational awareness during this step as well. Making eye contact with residents, employees, or patrons depending upon the location type prior to entering, can quickly provide you with crucial information about what may be going on inside. Observe how many persons are on the scene and, when possible, avoid being outnumbered.

While taking steps to perform your preliminary investigation, look for signs of injury and request medical attention if needed. Note the location of potential items of evidence. Continue to be alert for warning signs and behaviors of flight and assault. Be on the lookout for weapons of any kind and remain in communication with the dispatcher and your fellow officers, providing updates on the situation as needed and requesting additional resources sooner rather than later.

- **Closure:** Situational awareness should continue being practiced throughout the assignment or investigation, even after the situation is initially brought under control. Scenes have the potential to become dangerous even after officers bring order to the situation. Tensions can still be high or even escalate over the course of an investigation. Remain diligent throughout the entire situation before clearing and leaving the scene.

While completing any reports in your patrol car, continue to be aware of your surroundings. Backing into an area where you are less likely to be approached from behind is a good practice, as is parking in areas with less foot traffic to complete a report. Be sure to keep a lookout and not spend the entire time with your head down concentrating on the report. Leave one or more windows down in order to hear what is happening outside your cruiser.

2.3.3 Detect the behavioral warning signs of potential flight or assault

While interacting with complainants, witnesses, and subjects you need to focus your attention on not only what is being said, but also nonverbal signs as well. Making conscious observations about a person's body language is crucial in helping to determine whether he or she is contemplating an escape or assault or experience a mental health crisis or trauma. Some indicators that may help aid in determining this (special considerations should be given if more than one of these cues is present) include, but are not limited to:

- increased or heavy breathing
- angling the torso away from you (to run)
- targeted glances in certain directions (checking for avenues of escape)
- avoiding eye contact, which could mean he or she is considering ways out of the situation
- The "1,000 yard stare," a common appearance of people under the influence of drugs or alcohol who often becomes dangerous
- targeted staring at parts of an officer's body or his or her weapon (may be considering where to attack the officer or how to attempt to take the officer's weapon)
- exhibiting facial tension such as clenching of the jaw
- squaring, shrugging, or rolling of the shoulders (indicating tension building within the subject)
- clenching hands into fists
- body blading (angling the body away from an officer and moving one foot to the rear to the position from which most people launch an attack or indicating the subject is someone with training in boxing or martial arts)
- Distracting or aggressive dialog (trying to distract you or draw you in to legitimize an oncoming assault)

Summary

Law enforcement is an inherently dangerous vocation, but there are tactics and practices that help us control and manage that danger as much as possible. Situational awareness is one of the many practices recruit officers learn throughout their training program to minimize danger or detect its presence in time to prepare for it. It is not practical to be actively on guard at all times, but always being observant and simply paying attention to what is going on around you generally minimizes that perceived need to be on guard.

Recruit officers should now have a competent understanding of the concept of situational awareness as well as the numerous ways in which police officers implement it. Furthermore, recruits should recognize its importance to all people who use it, and be practicing it when on and off duty as they continue through the recruit training program. Continued attention to officer safety and self-preservation is a major theme among law enforcement personnel and the recruit training program, which all recruit officers should now acknowledge and develop on a constant basis.

Additionally, this practice helps to reduce your risk of being victimized. Situations that may have otherwise resulted in a dangerous crime or assault can be deterred without your knowing it, for the simple reason that you appeared to be aware and prepared. Criminals naturally seek easy targets, and generally avoid confrontation and apprehension. Being aware and prepared significantly reduces your risk of being victimized. Situational awareness not only enables you to detect danger, but helps to prevent it as well.