



## **Shift work is unavoidable for nearly 800,000 police officers in the United States.**

Most of the time, working long, irregular hours comes with the job description. But shift schedules can take a toll on the health, wellbeing, and career longevity of officers if managed incorrectly.

The demanding hours of a police officer's work shift schedule can lead to sleep disruption, fatigue, and an increased risk of on-the-job accidents. Certain shift schedules can also impact the social and family lives of officers due to missed events and strained relationships.

Operating under prolonged, stressful conditions like this can contribute to other issues, such as chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Law enforcement positions already rank consistently high among the most stressful jobs in the country, so it's important for departments to avoid adding additional stressors, if possible.

One way to support a healthy police force is by offering safe and healthy work schedules. These are work schedules that prioritize officer well-being and empower them to do their best work. Law enforcement leaders can create work schedules that help officers maintain their physical and mental health, balance work and home life, enhance work performance, and avoid burnout.

### **Highlights**

- ✓ **Fixed** shift schedules
- ✓ **Sufficient time off** between shifts
- ✓ **Limiting** night shifts
- ✓ **Forward-rotating** shift schedules
- ✓ **Flexibility** and officer input





# 5 Ways to Create a Healthy Police Shift Work Schedule

## 1. Implement a fixed shift schedule

Implementing a fixed shift schedule offers numerous benefits to police officers. First, a fixed schedule establishes a more consistent routine, helping officers establish regular sleep patterns. Getting ***consistent sleep can improve mental and physical health***, as well as everyday performance. This is vitally important for police officers who must remain physically and mentally alert on their shifts.

Irregular shift schedules can also throw an officer's work-life balance off kilter. Social time is necessary to maintain personal connections, sustain good morale, and avoid depression. Often, a fixed work schedule with predictable hours enables officers to decompress from a high-stress job by spending time with friends and family outside of work.

Finally, the stability of a fixed shift schedule encourages officers to build healthy routines. The combination of a good night's sleep, a healthy diet, and an exercise routine helps officers maintain their health.

## 2. Provide sufficient time off between shifts

Providing sufficient time off between shifts is essential for an officer's well-being and performance. Allowing officers to adequately rest and recover gives them time to recharge physically and mentally.

***Research*** indicates there should be a minimum of 12 hours between shifts; however, 72 hours is the ideal amount of time for shift workers to adequately rest and recover. Less than 12 hours between shifts does not give officers enough time to sleep.

Departments should also take overtime into consideration. Time spent completing paperwork after a shift ends reduces the amount of time between shifts. Time between shifts benefits not only officers, but also departments. Regular time off between shifts helps prevent officer burnout, which can lead to improved retention for the department.



### 3. Manage night shifts carefully

While critical to the safety of communities, night shifts can lead to negative consequences if not managed properly. ***Shift work in general has been linked to many health related problems***, including heart disease, depression, sleep issues, and even cancer. Research studying the ***impact of night shifts on officer health*** concluded that officers working night shifts are at higher risk for metabolic syndrome, sleep apnea, and obesity.

***A recent study*** examining the impact of shift types on officer wellness since the COVID-19 pandemic found that officers working night shifts were more likely to experience poor sleep quality, feel sleepy during the day, and to report falling asleep at the wheel while driving home from work. The risk of incidents caused by human error also increased by 30% among officers working night shifts compared to officers working morning shifts.

Although there are challenges with working nights, leaders can mitigate some of these risks with careful, intentional management of night shifts. Here are a few factors to consider:

- ✔ **Length of Night Shifts:** There are no hard-and-fast rules when it comes to optimal shift length. Studies show there are ***pros and cons to all shift lengths***, regardless if they are 8-,10-, or 12-hours. Officers working 12-hour shifts may suffer from greater sleep fatigue and reduced alertness, but they have more time to recover between shifts. Officers working 8-hour shifts clock an average of ***three times more overtime*** than other shifts, but allow for more personal time. Some consider 10-hour shifts the sweet spot. Officers working 10-hour shifts work less overtime, experience less fatigue, and have more time to recover between shifts. But for shifts over 8-hours, the risk of negative consequences go up significantly.
- ✔ **Officer Age:** Because everyone's circadian rhythm is slightly different, some people can tolerate changing sleep schedules better than others. ***A study looking at the effects of circadian rhythm and shift work*** shows that older workers are less able to sleep during the day and may be less tolerant to working nights.
- ✔ **Shift Start Times:** Ideally, shift start times should coincide with natural sleep cycles. Experts suggest morning shifts starting between 7:00 and 8:00 AM are ***best to preserve circadian rhythms***.



Departments can further mitigate the risks of night shift work by educating officers on the potential impacts of working nights and offer them coping strategies. For instance, research shows ***napping before overnight shifts*** improves performance and keeping the same shift-sleep cycle can regulate circadian rhythms. Ensuring night shift officers have access to healthcare and wellness resources is important to support their wellbeing.

## 4. Consider a forward-rotating shift schedule

A forward-rotating shift schedule rotates through morning, afternoon, and evening shifts in a forward direction, allowing officers to adjust their sleep-wake cycle gradually. ***Studies*** indicate that this clockwise rotational schedule is optimal for shift workers and results in higher productivity compared to counterclockwise schedule rotations.

By avoiding sudden changes in schedules, officers can reduce fatigue and more easily adapt to changing schedules. One of the key benefits of a rotating police shift schedule is its predictability. Officers can plan and prepare for their shifts well in advance, which leads to better work-life balance and avoids many of the previously-mentioned issues. Being able to anticipate and organize personal commitments reduces stress and minimizes disruptions to their personal lives.

Unpredictable work schedules ***affect not only individual officers, but also their families***. Arranging childcare, making appointments, and keeping commitments are all challenged by unpredictable work schedules.

## 5. Seek officer input

Incorporating officer input into the work scheduling process can benefit officer well-being and job satisfaction. Giving officers a say in their long term schedule gives them a voice, which creates a supportive and balanced work environment.

Officers also gain a sense of autonomy and control over their work-life balance. This flexibility empowers them to take necessary breaks and time off, reduces the risk of burnout, and promotes their overall well-being – leading to increased job satisfaction and morale.

## Final Thoughts

Healthy shift schedules are crucial for the well-being and effectiveness of police officers. There are several ways to promote a healthy work-life balance for police officers, despite the demands of the job. Doing so will have long-lasting benefits for officers and departments alike.

Police scheduling software can enhance your department's ability to manage the complexity of shift schedules. PowerTime police scheduling software offers a wide variety of capabilities, from:

- ✔ Providing clear visibility into officer schedules
- ✔ Ensuring sufficient time off between shifts
- ✔ Limiting night shifts
- ✔ Implementing forward-rotating schedules
- ✔ Offering flexibility
- ✔ By using scheduling software, police departments can optimize officer schedules, enhance their well-being, and create a healthier and more productive work environment.

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