Single vs. Double Officer Deployment

Version 1.0 · Current · October 2026

What It Is

Patrol deployment policy determines whether officers respond to calls alone (solo or single-officer deployment) or in pairs (two-officer or double deployment). This decision is made at the agency level through deployment policy, staffing levels, and shift scheduling – not by the individual officer on a given call.

In the United States, solo patrol is the operational norm in most agencies. Two-officer units are standard in some large urban departments and for specific high-risk assignments, but most patrol in mid-size and smaller agencies is conducted by single officers.

Structural Differences in Edged-Weapon Encounters

When a solo officer arrives at an incident involving a subject with an edged weapon, several tactical capabilities that require two people are unavailable or degraded:

Containment. A single officer cannot simultaneously cover multiple exit paths from a structure or position. A subject who moves to a different angle relative to the officer forces the officer to reposition, potentially closing distance or losing cover.

Communication and command. Verbal engagement – establishing rapport, giving commands, gathering information – requires sustained attention. A solo officer who is also monitoring movement, maintaining distance, and planning exit routes has less cognitive bandwidth for communication. A two-officer team can designate a primary communicator while the second officer maintains tactical observation.

Force option coverage. If a solo officer deploys a less-lethal option (CEW, chemical spray), they cannot simultaneously cover with a lethal option. A two-officer team can split these roles: one officer deploys less-lethal while the second maintains a lethal cover position, preserving a response option if the less-lethal fails or the situation escalates.

Time and distance. A solo officer whose position is compromised – by a subject advancing, by loss of cover, or by an unexpected approach – has fewer immediate options. A partner can provide an additional barrier of response time.

Documentation and oversight. Two officers produce two accounts, two body-worn camera angles, and mutual accountability. This matters both for accurate post-incident reconstruction and for officer decision-making during the incident.

What the Evidence Shows

Research on solo versus two-officer patrol outcomes is limited by the confounding effects of deployment policy – agencies that use two-officer patrol for certain areas or times do so partly because those areas have higher risk, making direct comparison difficult.

Available evidence suggests:

- Officers involved in use-of-force incidents are more likely to be solo at the time of the incident than their proportion of patrol hours would predict, even after controlling for call type.
- Two-officer response to mental health and behavioral crisis calls is associated with lower rates of force and higher rates of voluntary engagement – though the direction of causation is uncertain (agencies may dispatch two officers to calls they anticipate as more difficult).
- In incidents involving subjects with edged weapons specifically, the presence of a second officer is associated with increased likelihood of non-lethal resolution. The mechanism is likely a combination of better containment, the availability of split less-lethal/lethal coverage, and reduced time pressure on the primary officer.

Tactical Implications for Solo Officers

Because solo patrol is the operational baseline, tactics must be designed to function without a partner:

Create distance. A solo officer cannot compensate for proximity risk through covering positions. Distance is the primary tactical resource. Edged-weapon incidents should never be managed at conversational range when distance is achievable.

Delay until backup arrives. If the scene can be contained and the subject poses no immediate threat to others, waiting for a second officer is almost always the correct decision. Time spent waiting is time for the subject's state to change, for additional information to emerge, and for tactical options to expand.

Use environmental cover and geometry. A vehicle, door frame, or corner that creates a partial barrier adds response time equivalent to distance. Solo officers should actively manage their position relative to cover, not just relative to the subject.

Communicate arrival status to dispatch. A solo officer who has arrived but not yet made contact should relay their status and wait for backup confirmation before approaching, when the situation permits.

Backup Policies and Wait-to-Arrive Protocols

Some agencies have implemented formal wait-to-arrive protocols for solo officers responding to calls involving edged weapons or mental health crisis. These policies require the first-arriving officer to stage and observe – rather than make contact – until a second unit arrives.

Wait-to-arrive policies face implementation resistance from officers trained on a "contain and approach" model and from a culture that equates immediate contact with effective response. Evidence on their effectiveness is limited but directionally positive: incidents resolved during the wait period (subject leaves, calms down, or surrenders before contact) require no force at all.

Policy Implications

1. Dispatch two officers to calls with reported edged weapons as a default, not a discretionary option, where staffing permits.
2. Implement and enforce wait-to-arrive protocols for solo officers on calls with confirmed or suspected edged-weapon subjects.
3. Train solo officer tactics explicitly, since solo patrol is the operational baseline. Training should not assume partner availability.
4. Track solo-at-time-of-force as a data element in use-of-force reporting to enable outcome analysis.
5. Build two-officer response into co-responder deployments for calls with any weapon element, regardless of whether the call is primarily a behavioral health contact.

HOW TO CITE

Edged-Weapon Response Lab. (2026). *Single vs. Double Officer Deployment*. In *EWRL Evidence Library* (Version 1.0). https://droptheknife.org/bulletins/single_vs_double_officer_deployment (https://droptheknife.org/bulletins/single_vs_double_officer_deployment)