

How can Correctional Officers Stay Safe?

As a correctional officer, you need to be prepared for any situation: if inmates get out of hand, you could find yourself facing a volatile encounter, with the potential of getting hurt. To stay as safe as possible in the line of duty, you need to depend on your thorough training, the support of your colleagues, and the best equipment and gear money can buy. As an officer, you'll spend so much of your time surrounded by society's most dangerous individuals; you need to feel as reassured of your own security as possible. There are various types of bullet proof vests available, and depending on the amount of experience you have in the corrections industry, you might already be familiar with most of them. But what if you're new to the job? What if you don't quite know yet which bullet proof vests will best protect you against certain risks? Read on to learn the basics.

Each year, [approximately 8,000 correctional officers are assaulted by inmates](#), and despite the strict rules, regulations, and sanctions imposed on prisoners, they still manage to get hold of, or produce, their own weapons to use against other prisoners or officers, in often brutal attacks. If this is the case, your best chance of avoiding injury is to subdue them as quickly and as safely as you can. However, inmates may also take control of your firearm, or access the prison armory in a riot situation. Bullet proof vests are a vital accessory in these extreme situations, as any attack made against your torso will be dampened – provided it's rated to provide adequate protection against the level of threat you encounter. So how do you choose the best bullet proof vest for your needs?

The Right Bullet Proof Vest

The [National Institute of Justice \(NIJ\)](#) rates vests based on the amount of defense they provide against numerous ammunition types. Six levels are available, each one designed to stop specific calibers of bullets: I, IIA, II, IIIA, III, and IV. Whichever you choose, you need to be sure you have the best for the rounds you expect to face. As mentioned earlier, the only way inmates should be able to get their hands on guns is by seizing control of your firearm or by accessing the prison armory somehow – to ensure the best protection against both of these threats, your bullet proof vest should, at the least, rated to protect against the type of ammunition you use in your guns.

Level I vests are designed to stop .22 caliber LR LRN rounds, as well as 380 ACP bullets. Level IIA vests protect against 9mm rounds of a low velocity, plus .40 S&W bullets. Level II vests stop 9mm bullets of a high velocity, as well as .357 Magnum rounds, while level IIIA vests defend against .44 Magnum and 9mm sub-machine gun ammo. These are soft armors, and you're more likely to need these on a regular basis over the next two levels, which are classed as hard armors. These are made with Kevlar, which absorbs a round's energy on impact and distributes it throughout the material, flattening it in the process.

Level III vests stop rifle-fire, of the following ranges: 30 Carbine FMJ, 223 Remington, and 12-gauge. Level IV vests are the toughest available on the market today, incorporating tough plates alongside the standard multi-layer Kevlar (these plates are typically made of ceramics or steel), and are able to stop even armor-piercing rounds. These are bulky and unable to be worn covertly (under your uniform), and will only be needed in the most extreme circumstances.



When it comes to choosing armor, you need to consider how likely you are to face heavy-duty gunfire. Will you realistically need to wear a level IV vest on what you'd consider an 'average' shift? Typically, provided you're using common handgun rounds – 9mm, for example – you should be fine wearing a lower-level armor.

Some bullet proof vests also offer additional protection against other weapons. Knives and spiked weapons are a serious risk in most prisons, as, if inmates manage to smuggle blades in or sharpen their toothbrushes or other domestic items into shivs, they may attack with fatal results, either targeting other prisoners or officers they feel have wronged them in some way. Before you or your employers order body armor, be sure to check with your supplier to see which levels of additional protection a vest offers.



Finding the Best Fit is Vital

Fit is essential when wearing bullet proof vests – if you choose the wrong size, you could leave yourself still exposed to certain dangers: an oversized vest may leave a gaping space for a bullet or blade to pass through, while if a vest is too small, it may feel tight and leave you feeling restricted. Make sure you measure your chest and height before ordering, and have a person you trust help to ensure accuracy. Compare your measurements to your supplier's size chart for additional peace of mind, and always seek expert advice if in doubt.

This educational pack has been produced by Chris Taylor of [SafeGuard Clothing](#) who provide bullet proof vests for correction officers.