As the research and development agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) pursues a wide range of research and development programs to prevent crime and improve the criminal justice system. The Institute’s Technology Assessment Program (TAP) explores new technologies that benefit the criminal justice community and also helps agencies make informed equipment-purchasing decisions. A few examples are NIJ’s research and field demonstrations of less-than-lethal weapons that police can use in situations where lethal force is not justified or there are risks of injury or death to innocent victims or bystanders; DNA analysis that identifies suspects or eliminates suspicion from the innocent; and surveillance technology that aids in the drug law enforcement arena, such as vehicle tracking devices, body worn transmitters, and miniature surveillance recorders.

Through TAP, NIJ also operates a body armor testing program to ensure that protective equipment worn by law enforcement personnel meets NIJ-established minimum performance requirements and publishes a list of complying armor models in the body armor Consumer Product List.

To accomplish program tasks, NIJ coordinates the activities of two organizations: the TAP Information Center (TAPIC) and the Office of Law Enforcement Standards (OLES) of the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). OLES prepares equipment standards, reports, and guides, and TAPIC coordinates the testing of equipment by independent laboratories and publishes the test results. OLES, TAPIC, and NIJ support one another in accomplishing TAP’s tasks and goals.

Because of NIJ-sponsored research in the early 1970’s, many police officers and other law enforcement personnel today have lightweight body armor to protect them against many of the ballistic threats they face on the streets.

NIJ works to see that you have access to body armor that continues to meet its standard. However, NIJ believes that its responsibility does not stop there. It is hoped that in providing you with this guide, you can use the information to help extend the life of the armor that may one day save your life.

Write or call the Technology Assessment Program at Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 or call 800–248–2742 (301–251–5060 in Maryland and Metropolitan Washington, D.C.).

NIJ’s Consumer Product List is the only sure way to determine whether a particular vest complex with NIJ Standard 0101.03; this cannot always be determined from the label on the armor. Even though some manufacturers may affix a label certifying compliance with the NIJ standard, their armor may not have been submitted to NIJ for verification.

NIJ’s Body Armor Compliance Testing Program verifies only that an armor’s design meets the NIJ standard. Any changes in production methods, materials, and quality control can affect the armor’s conformance with the standard. NIJ recommends that police department purchasers conduct acceptance testing of the vests they purchase to ensure that those production units meet NIJ’s standard.

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice

Body Armor User Guide

Law enforcement officers protect the lives and property of citizens, and one piece of equipment is the primary protector of police
No Armor Protects From All Ballistic Threats

Although some restrictions apply, the advantages of wearing NIJ-listed body armor far outweigh any limitations. Note the following restrictions:

- Soft body armor is not designed to protect against rifle bullets or edged or pointed weapons.
- Hard or tactical armor, designed to defeat rifle bullets, incorporates metal or ceramic plates and is generally too heavy, bulky, and conspicuous for routine wear.
- Armor that incorporates ballistic plates designed to defeat rifle bullets offers protection only from rifle bullets that impact the limited areas covered by the plates. However, the soft armor supporting the plates will provide ballistic protection against handgun ammunition that the soft armor is labeled to defeat.
- Armors cannot be expected to provide adequate protection from ballistic threats that strike too close to the edge of an armor, or too close to another impact.

Although manufacturers have recently come out with new fabrics that claim to be more comfortable, there generally is a tradeoff between comfort and protection. The higher the level of protection worn, the more layers of ballistic material and stitching are required, adding to an armor’s weight and bulk. Although discomfort may result from an armor’s weight, bulk, or stiffness, such discomfort may be due to a bad fit or the strapping on of armor too tightly. If possible, conduct a wear test before purchasing armor.

Safety Instructions

Remember: No body armor is bulletproof. Manufacturers rate armor in accordance with the NIJ standard threat levels. Although NIJ-listed body armor will generally protect against bullets identified by manufacturers at those specific threat levels, the armor could be penetrated by a bullet of a higher threat level. Remember, bullets may also penetrate armor when the impact is too close to the edge of the armor or too close to another impact. Follow these guidelines for safe use of your armor:

- Be sure to read the label on your armor. Familiarize yourself with its level of protection. Labels on NIJ-listed armor must identify designated levels of protection and warn if the armor does not protect against rifle fire or sharp-edged or pointed instruments. Manufacturers may also add additional safety instructions or information to labels.
- Read and retain for future reference any safety literature accompanying your armor.
- Follow care and maintenance instructions to ensure your armor’s intended performance (see “Care and Maintenance”).
- Seek medical attention if you are shot while wearing your armor—even if the bullet does not penetrate. Although NIJ-listed armor protects against blunt trauma from nonpenetrating bullets, internal injuries requiring medical attention may still result.
- Replace your armor immediately if it has been impacted by a bullet or damaged in any way. Some manufacturers replace armor free of charge if they are provided with official documentation concerning the incident.
- Make sure your vest’s level of protection corresponds to the types of threats you face on the streets and that your vest protects against your service weapon and ammunition.
- Remember that proper fit aids in your armor’s effectiveness and comfort.
- Conduct visual inspections of your armor.
- Become educated about proper cleaning methods (see “Care and Maintenance”).
- Follow the inspection/replacement procedures recommended by the manufacturer and your department.
- Keep manufacturer addresses and telephone numbers handy. Many manufacturers provide a toll-free 800 number for their customers.
- Wear your armor.

Care and Maintenance

Studies show that age alone does not cause the ballistic resistance of armor to deteriorate. The kind of care and maintenance the garment receives is a more important factor. Although the label on NIJ-listed body armor provides general guidelines for the care and maintenance of your armor, follow these additional DO’s and DON’Ts:

- DO follow the manufacturer’s instructions for the care and maintenance of your armor.
- DO handwash your armor with a mild detergent in cold or warm water, and rinse it thoroughly to remove all traces of detergent.