



California Community Colleges

In partnership with POST

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Use-of-Force Training



The nature of police work requires officers to perform a complex, multi-faceted job in diverse communities. Training and education can prepare officers by instilling professionally appropriate values and principles so that officers develop a service-oriented, empathetic mindset; by giving officers relevant knowledge and information; and by teaching officers the physical skills that they will use in the course of their duties.

The capacity to use force is fundamental to policing, but the use of force is among the most controversial aspects of policing. The use of force is statistically rare, but can be a lightning rod for public attention and criticism. When officers are perceived as using force when it could have been avoided, or using an unnecessary amount of force, or using force too frequently or in problematically disparate ways, community outrage can result even if the specific incident in question was legally justifiable.

What do we know about the use of force?

Unfortunately, outside of academic studies that focus on individual or a small number of police agencies, there is a lacuna of data on the use of force. The best available national information is limited to lethal police shootings—a very small subset of overall uses of force—collected by the Washington Post’s Fatal Force project (<http://wapo.st/3gU4pl6>). Some states collect limited use-of-force data, including California’s URSUS Use of Force Incident Reporting, which requires police agencies to report firearms discharges and incidents of force resulting in serious bodily harm or death of civilian or officer. Individual agencies often collect much more robust data, but differences in how agencies classify use-of-force incidents (e.g., discrepancies in levels of force and resistance and in what and how officers have to report) preclude direct comparisons.

Force incidents only take place in the context of a police encounter, of course, and certain types of interactions—primarily arrests and investigative detentions (*Terry* stops)—are more likely to precipitate a use of force than other types of interactions (e.g., traffic stops without an arrest). The best available data on pedestrian and vehicle stops reveal that police come into contact with, stop, and arrest people of color more often, *per capita*, than they do white people. Further, existing studies reflect that force is used disproportionately against people of color. In some contexts, such as the use of deadly force against unarmed persons, the available data reflect an even higher rate of racial disproportionality. Some studies suggest similar disparities with regard to socioeconomic characteristics, gender, and age.

What factors contribute to an officer’s decision to use of force?

Officers typically use force to address or overcome an individuals’ non-compliance, resistance, or threat, so the most obvious factor that contributes to officers’ use-of-force decisions is the behavior of the subject. However, an officer’s mindset, tactical decisions, and communications early in and throughout an encounter can have a significant impact on the individual’s behavior or the threat that the individual can ultimately present.

An officer’s judgment is guided by his/her mindset. The best available evidence establishes that officers who are more distrustful of the public (who have what has been referred to as an *Us vs. Them* mentality) are more likely to use force than officers who have a service-oriented mindset that emphasizes the benefits of earning cooperation over demanding compliance. Strong interpersonal communications skills can mitigate the potential for resistance and violent confrontation (i.e., conflict avoidance or de-escalation). An overly aggressive approach or weak communications skills, on the other hand, can provoke conflict that a better approach would have avoided. Sound tactics help officers manage the risks and threats of an encounter, primarily by “creating” time—using tactical concepts like situational awareness, distance, cover, and concealment—so that officers can better assess the situation and decide how to respond appropriately. Poor tactics, on the other hand, can put the officer into an inappropriately dangerous position (i.e., officer-created jeopardy).

Safety is not a zero-sum game. A professional mindset, good tactics and strong communications skills can dramatically reduce the likelihood that an individual will be non-compliant, resistant, or threaten officers, which correspondingly reduces the need to use force. That increases the safety of officers and community members alike.

Evidence-Based Policing Panelists

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How can agency leadership influence department's use of force?

Police leadership plays an important role in shaping the mindset, communications skills, and tactics that can shape use-of-force decision-making. Agency executives and the command staff set the tone, but it is up to the frontline supervisors (e.g., sergeants) and field training officers to communicate and reinforce the importance of building community trust through the practice of procedurally just policing – communicating respectfully to each individual and listening to them. Officers who adopt a service-oriented mindset by seeking to understand and serve the community increase police legitimacy and community trust, which, in turn, reduces the use of force. The data is clear that police leaders are likely to see reductions in use of force when they invite community input on policies, evaluate data to access policy and training, and provide good training and robust oversight.

Where can I learn more about police uses of force and relevant considerations?

Online Resources

Center for Policing Equity, <https://policingequity.org>

The Washington Post, Fatal Force, <http://wapo.st/3gU4pl6>

Books

Seth W. Stoughton, Jeffrey J. Noble, Geoffrey P. Alpert, *Evaluating Police Uses of Force* (2020)

Ken Murray and Maria R. Haberfeld, *Use of Force Training in Law Enforcement: A Reality-Based Training Approach* (2020)

Articles and Book Chapters

Dharmika Dharmapala, et al., *Collective Bargaining Rights and Police Misconduct: Evidence from Florida* (forthcoming),

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3095217

Kyle McLean, et al. *Randomized controlled trial of social interaction police training*, (2020)

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12506>

Justin Nix, *Just Following Orders: A Meta-Analysis of the Correlates of American Police Officer Use of Force Decisions* (2015)

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12103-014-9278-y>

Michael Sierra-Arévalo, *American Policing and the Danger Imperative* (forthcoming);

<https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/yrw65/>

Michael Sierra-Arévalo, *The commemoration of death, organizational memory, and police culture*, (2019)

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335434233> **The commemoration of death organizational memory and police culture**

Seth W. Stoughton, *Principled Policing: Warrior Cops and Guardian Officers* (2016)

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2830642

Seth W. Stoughton, *The Regulation of Police Violence*, in *Critical Issues in Policing*, 8th Edition (2020)

George Wood, Tom R. Tyler, and Andrew V. Papachristos, *Procedural justice training reduces police use of force and complaints against officers*, (2020)

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1920671117>