

TRAINING



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The National Police Association's free Law Enforcement education series is designed for home school, classroom, or independent learning. As part of our nonprofit educational mission, it prepares you for careers in public safety. This series is authored by [Chief Joel F. Shults, Ed.D.](#)

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What Cops Can't Train For

The animal in man is something that appears in his most desperate hours. It is intense, visceral, and primitive. What happens in the mind and body when death is in the air is hard to research, since the body's functions are rarely measured during those moments. Capturing the full reality of a fatal encounter cannot accurately be accomplished in simulation.

There is a myriad of law enforcement training products available to respond to the constant call for more training for police officers. This almost always means more lectures, more PowerPoints, more videos, more simulations, more scenario training, more role-playing, and ultimately less time for these officers to be out on the street protecting the citizens. It would be a tragic waste of resources for ineffective or unnecessary classes and hardware to be required. The current political posturing and mandates give little regard to such matters, resulting in the potential to burn through grant funding, keep cops off the street, and diminish public safety.

This writer has been a trainer, practitioner, researcher, and consultant. There's no antagonism against more training and technology. With any topic, whether police training or new brain surgery techniques, an honest evaluation of its effectiveness and limitations is necessary. Periodic reviews of those traits are also essential. Is this really working? Has it failed? Are the results better now than before the change? If there has

been an improvement, was it significant enough to justify the expense and time to obtain and utilize it?

In business, these questions are constantly being asked because profit depends on it. ROI – return on investment – is constantly being measured. So it should be in law enforcement. Here are some considerations in law enforcement training.

Is there a need? The rush to de-escalation training will probably produce some good results, but did we establish a goal to meet? If there is an expectation that persons armed with deadly weapons can always be talked down, or that a drug-induced psychosis can be cured with empathy, then the critics will be disappointed. We have far too little data on the current effectiveness of officers accomplishing their mission with a minimum of force. We do know that only a small percentage of contacts results in the need for physical coercion, and a very small number of those are ultimately determined to be unjustified. In other words, we don't know what a great job law enforcement is doing, but because of selected viral videos, the entire culture of law enforcement has come under attack with the assumption that the current conduct of most police officers is defective.

Is it research-based? As a former subject matter expert on curriculum for the Colorado Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) board, there was constant pressure to add this or that. The animal advocates wanted training on dealing with aggressive dogs. The domestic violence folks wanted training on cycles of violence. Now everyone wants de-escalation training. Those are

fine topics, but do we have evidence that the way the courses are presented, and the material used produce effective behavior changes? Do we chart current results and compare them to results after the training? Is the research, if any, on which the material is based objective and data-rich, or based on the opinions of activists and influencers?

Is it periodically evaluated? If so, what standards are to be met, and what goals were established to be met? Are we going to keep training this way forever?

Is it political or practical? The reality is that many police executives have to conduct a dog and pony show in order to make a press release that placates the critics. (Like that would ever happen!). Training in the essentials of the job that have the highest risk to public safety is often cut back or criticized in favor of indoctrination. Since most complaints deal with the use of lethal weapon options and use of force at all levels, perhaps more training in firearms and defensive tactics would be most fruitful. But a press release that says police officers are spending more time on the range doesn't have the soft appeal of saying that they all have had sensitivity training.

Does it work in the real world? Here is the real heart of this article: you cannot train to a point of fully understanding that primitive, visceral, violent, intensity of a deadly encounter. Role-playing and interactive video training can be helpful to raise awareness of tactical options, but there is no way to replicate the expression on a killer's face when they have decided to take a life. The best actors can't do it. Stress training on

the firing range or in scenario training cannot reproduce the chaotic environment of a street fight.

As a consultant on a shooting case in a large southwestern city, I saw the derision directed at an officer whose report indicated that his assailant had a murderous look in their eye. This was an excellent observation and a very well-known reality in studies in the animal world. Even some faint smells can be detected in a fatal encounter that most officers wouldn't be consciously aware of or enter in a report detailing the reasons for their decisions.

An officer can train to achieve muscle memory in responding to threats and using their tools, including their body, during a deadly encounter, but they won't know what it's really like until it happens in the real world. We need to recognize this reality in our courts, including the court of public opinion.

What's the Big Deal About Cop City

Around the country, we hear the cry for more police training. Unless you don't want police training. In Atlanta, despite sometimes violent protests, the city council approved millions in funding for a new training center for law enforcement dubbed "Cop City". The decision was not unanimous and after the 11-4 vote, the council was greeted with "boos" from the crowd in the wee hours of the morning after hearing a parade of testimony.

This classic case of damned if you do (want to improve first responder training) and damned if you don't, has played out in vociferous objections to the building of a facility that advocates say will develop the kind of first responder the public is demanding in terms of training and skills.

One of the major claims that protestors have made is that the site's environmental impact is devastating to the ecosystem there. The reality is that the nearly 400-acre area had been cleared years ago for a prison and that the training facility would involve only 85 acres. There is no mature forest growth to be impacted. Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens told reporters that the tract is filled with rubble and overgrown with invasive species, not hardwood trees and that 300 acres would be preserved as a public greenspace. "This is Atlanta, and we know forests. This facility would not be built over a forest," Dickens said.

Another claim is that the training will increase the militarization of the police to engage in urban warfare. This claim disregards the fact that other public safety first responders will be training at the site in addition to police officers. The militarization argument is a frequent trope of anti-police extremists who have no clue about what law enforcement faces.

Thirdly, just to toss in some racism as part of the protest soup, the training site will be near an economically depressed area populated largely by minority residents. If this were a nuclear waste dump one might be inclined to join the protests, but this facility will offer job opportunities, traffic for businesses to cater to the new population of staff and trainees, and may be the best hope for economic development that can benefit the area.

It is important that observers of this controversy recognize the terroristic tactics being used so that the character of these attacks on the facility becomes crystal clear. In January of this year, Georgia's Governor Brian Kemp had to declare a state of emergency over the protests. Explosives were reported to have been found and six arrests were made with criminal charges of domestic terrorism.

Purported to be protests over the death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of Memphis Police officers, the protesters set a police cruiser on fire and damaged buildings in downtown Atlanta one of which houses the Atlanta Police Foundation. A thousand National Guard members were on call but were not deployed. Kemp declared that in Georgia "we'll always back the blue".

Protestors also called the shooting of a protestor at the Cop City site a murder, even though the individual shot by police had shot and seriously wounded a state trooper. Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, known as Tortuguita, was a non-binary individual who had undergone training to be a medic for the “forest defenders” and was among a small group of protesters being cleared from the site. Tortuguita fired into the abdomen of the trooper with a gun that was purchased by Terán in 2020.

Georgia Bureau of Investigation Director Mike Register said that his agency and other law enforcement “embrace a citizen’s right to protest, but law enforcement can’t stand by while serious criminal acts are being committed that jeopardize the safety of the citizens we’re sworn to protect.” While protesters shouted slogans like “Trees give life. Police take it. Stop Cop City! If you build it, we will burn it!”

Register said the protesters were illegally occupying the area and committing criminal acts that endanger the community, including arson, beating people up, using explosives and setting booby traps that have the potential to seriously hurt someone.

Governor Kemp tweeted “Domestic terrorism will NOT be tolerated in our state, and we will not hesitate, we will not rest, we will not waver in ending their activities and prosecuting them to the fullest extent of the law”, in the kind of unequivocal

support that citizens need in support of their police.

How Do You Train for This?

Dennis Guider Jr was recently sentenced to five years in prison for a 2021 incident that severely injured Carol, IA Officer Patrick McCarty. Body camera footage released for the trial tells the dramatic story of what started as a traffic stop during which McCarty learned there was an arrest warrant for Guider. Guider began to drive away as the officer was in front of the suspect's car despite McCarty's drawn weapon and commands to stop the car.

As the suspect continued forward, McCarty ended up on the hood of the car and eventually clinging to the car's roof as it accelerated being pursued by assisting officers. With McCarty holding on for life and still commanding the driver to stop, the vehicle went off the road to avoid a passing train, driving into an industrial area and crashing across a deep ditch which threw the officer off. McCarty suffered a broken vertebra in the fall but has since returned to duty.

A New Mexico Deputy in Sierra County and a New Mexico State Police Officer stopped to offer assistance and check on the well-being of a young man on a highway south of Truth Or Consequences. Abraham Quezada was reported to have been hopping in and out of vehicles, which included an ill-fated bounce from a vehicle into the bed of a passing pickup, then onto the pavement.

Body camera footage shows the deputy asking Quezada, injured from his pavement encounter,

questions about his injuries. The man gave short, reluctant, and vague answers then continued to walk down the roadway with the deputy following until the state officer arrived as a backup. Quezada admits to being under the influence of LSD, then dashes toward the deputy's vehicle and stole it, crashing into the state police car. Quezada was extricated from the crash and taken into custody.

In Putnam County, FL a driver attempting to outrun deputies apparently got lost on the back roads and drove into a cattle gate and fence, backed up and rammed a deputy's vehicle, then drove his truck into the marsh nearby. The 25-year-old suspect, identified as Austin Daniel Cox, had already rammed a police vehicle in an adjoining county which had provoked the pursuit. Taking a lesson from Rambo, Cox covered himself with mud to blend in with his soggy environment as camouflage from the cops, but could not camouflage his scent from police K9 trackers. Cox was a previously convicted felon released from prison in 2020. He was subsequently arrested for the assaults and resisting, in addition to possession of trafficking amounts of methamphetamine and a sawed-off shotgun.

In another Florida case of hide and seek, yet another suspect with a criminal record was fleeing from ramming a law enforcement officer's patrol vehicle. This time it was Ryan Lee Pope who fled to a home and hid behind a makeshift fake wall. The U.S. Marshals assisted in the hunt.

A weekend of family fun in Tinley Park, IL, a village suburb of Chicago, was scheduled as the Armed Forces

Weekend Carnival but a flash mob of over 400 teens summoned through social media got the event shut down by police. Bystander video shows chaos and random fights from the invading crowd. One police officer was injured and several persons were taken into custody or cited in the melee.

A Detroit police cruiser was damaged as officers attempted to crack down on a street takeover by over 30 ATVs and mini-bikes downtown. Drivers were operating recklessly on the streets and sidewalks when one ATV crashed into the patrol car. The driver fled but was arrested after a short foot chase. No other arrests were made as officers attempted to clear the area.

In Alachua County, FL, body cam footage shows police kicking in the door of a residence where a reported stabbing had been reported and the suspect refused to exit the home. The bloodied victim was able to be extracted, then the suspect, Omar J. Gutierrez, who was at the time, for unknown reasons, dressed as a kitty.

Continuing with the costume theme, a Kansas man was arrested for driving drunk by Franklin County officers patrolling I-35 about an hour from Topeka. Body camera video shows the driver doing roadside sobriety tests dressed as a can of Bud Light beer as part of his Cinco de Mayo celebration.

Police officers get a lot of training and amass years of experience, but the unexpected eventually surprises even the veterans among them.

Critical Training for Patrol Officers Amidst the Current Chaos

I've been around for a while. I've worked with officers who were around before anybody paid much attention to the 14th amendment. That means pre-Miranda, pre-Escobedo, pre-Terry. The day I was sworn in began my three week field training. It wasn't quite "here's your badge, a map, and the car keys – stay out of trouble" initiation that many of my era got, so I felt well prepared! Seven months later I attended a three week police academy, although I was exempt since the mandatory training law went into effect after I was hired. I was in the very first class that the law mandated, hosted by our state law enforcement agency.

Thereafter, I snapped up any training I could get, read everything I could find that I thought was relevant, and spent hours studying through my courses and sat in classrooms earning my degrees while working my full and part time jobs. I share that characteristic with a lot of officers, in this era when cops are accused of being poorly trained and minimally educated, who eagerly and sacrificially pursue knowledge.

What Cops Don't Know

Former Defense Secretary McNamara raised eyebrows in 2002 in commenting on progress on the war on terror when he said "There are known knowns, things we know that we know; and there are known unknowns, things that we know we don't know. But there are also

unknown unknowns, things we do not know we don't know." Despite the roller coaster verbiage, there is a lot of truth in that statement.

Collaboration skills

With community policing back in the headlines, there's no skill more essential than collaborative problem solving to reach into the community in the current season of demands for police reform. That 8 hour block on community policing very likely gave little or no attention to the collaborative process.

To be fair, hardly anyone does collaboration by the book. In its purest form, collaboration is the work done among people who consider one another equal in value and contribution, resulting in the definition of a problem, and construction of a solution satisfactory to all collaborators. There are several roadblocks to that process. The first is the question of who gets to define what the problem is. The second is who gets to invite those who will be working on the problem. The third is that a resolution that makes everybody happy can be so watered down that in the end it makes no one happy.

Collaboration is at the other end of the decision-making process opposite coercion. Police officers are trained in the art of assertiveness and coercion. They are taught command presence, using a confident tone of voice, and schooled in martial skills to be used in extreme situations. Even when believing they are collaborating, officers are often leveraging their training in coercion by sitting at the head of the table, choosing the members of a team, bringing a definition of the problem

for the group to address, and strongly advocating a pre-determined outcome. That may be a certain brand of leadership, and it may create an effective solution. But it is not collaboration.

Supervision and management

A common theme among the rank and file is that once a patrol officer is promoted, they forget where they came from. In those cases where that is true it is truly a shame. But what often happens is that that newly minted supervisor is suddenly faced with all of the realities of decision making that they never knew, and never read about in management books.

In due course, patrol officers will have the opportunity to gain experience in supervisory roles. For the officer on the career track through promotions, there are schools and courses that will prep them for those stripes, bars, and stars. But what patrol officers really need to know is what kind of obstacles and challenges those currently holding leadership positions are facing. Officers on the front lines deserve to know the reality of politics, budgets, morale, training priorities, cultural clashes, and a host of other interwoven complexities that result in the policies and procedures that guide their work.

Brain science

Among the wonders and tragedies of human behavior is the world of the brain. Behaviors always serve a purpose, and the main purpose of the brain is

short term survival. Understanding how the brain works can help officers better understand violence, memory, deception, self-care, and decision making. Understanding brain function can help transition an officer from feel-good training that talks about emotions and feelings to practical methods of dealing with stress and depression, perhaps saving their own lives and relationships.

Principles of learning, habit, motivation, and retention can accelerate training effectiveness and efficiencies. Poor teaching methods and poorly executed scenario training are serious impediments to the current state of police education. This applies to basic academy training as well as in-service and specialty training.

The future

The politics of police reform will necessarily include legislative edicts about course content and titles. Influencers from policing must guide these efforts away from meaningless mandates and develop education and training that will carry law enforcement through the balance of this turbulent century.

Whatever Happened to the Police Corps?

There were high hopes when the Clinton presidency oversaw the development of the Office of Community Policing within the U.S. Department of Justice in 1994 with an initial \$8.8 billion expenditure over six years. One of the initiatives from the COPS office was the Police Corps, a program which, as stated in the authorizing legislation 42 USC 14091: The purposes of this part are to- (1) address violent crime by increasing the number of police with advanced education and training on community patrol; and (2) provide educational assistance to law enforcement personnel and to students who possess a sincere interest in public service in the form of law enforcement. By the mid 2000s, the program was defunct under the Bush administration, now focused on Homeland Security.

Twenty years ago the General Accounting Office (GAO) published a [report](#) on the Police Corps program. It reported “The philosophy of Police Corps training is that to serve effectively on the beat in some of America’s most challenged communities, Police Corps officers must have a solid background in traditional law enforcement, strong analytical abilities, highly developed judgment, and skill in working effectively with citizens of all backgrounds. Police Corps training is to emphasize ethics, community and peer leadership, honesty, self-discipline, physical strength and agility, and weaponless tactics—tactics to protect both officer and citizen in the event of confrontation.” The GAO’s

mission is to audit performance and use of funds, so their report focused on the fiscal and operational aspects of the program. In its report, the GAO cited lack of participation due to bureaucratic impediments concerning financing the programs within participating states, lack of direction for grants to police departments, and residential requirements for the academy programs. The Police Corps curriculum was not discussed.

In the same year as the GAO study, the Office of Justice Programs, which ultimately was given responsibility for operation of the Police Corps, issued its own [report](#). Specific curricula or learning objectives were not discussed in this report either. Consistent with police training reform demands today, the report praises the “continued efforts to ensure that Police Corps training remains dynamic and futuristic with a continued emphasis on the social context of crime, communication, and problem-solving skills in multicultural settings, leadership, and ethics. Police Corps training promotes skill development in the areas of disengagement and weaponless arrest and control tactics, and goes beyond legal considerations in the use of force to considerations of moral and ethical dimensions.”

Although praised by many who observed the program and by the bureaucrats who ran it, there is precious little evidence that the training was vastly different than other quality police academies. Any difference the program may have made was either obscured or unmeasurable. As with many reform-minded efforts, the Police Corps replicated training that was already happening in the profession with little truly innovative

methods. The Corps did have an explicit philosophy of community policing, ethics, and cultural awareness which is also espoused by most academies today. Members of the press were invited to see the training in progress, with features in major outlets and some documentaries. Being typically unfamiliar with other academy training and front loaded with the idea that this was new and special, the reports reflected those factors, not realizing how typical the training really was.

Why resurrect memories of the Police Corps? One word: Biden. Senator Biden was a proponent of the Clinton crime bill and still purports to be an advocate of police reform through community policing. If police reform is still a political football in the coming months, Biden may be recycling training proposals like the Police Corps. Police leaders and citizens should be wary of politicians claiming to be innovative reformers by attaching new names to existing successes and adding meaningless hours of redundant training. There are some lessons to be learned from the Police Corps. It was a worthy experiment. But one lesson learned is that a make-over with federal dollars isn't transformative.

Police trainers and leaders welcome with open arms and open minds to transformative technology, methodology, and cultural change. They are less enthusiastic about political theatre, adding fluff to an already burdened training schedule, and being forced to develop curricula that is not based on research and data that affirms its value.

If Biden's campaign claims to increase funding for community policing come to fruition communities will

welcome any funding and technical support to improve public safety. If the proposals come with burdensome strings attached, those proposals must be rejected or renegotiated. The public must also accept that police reform, no matter what form it takes, cannot compensate for violent crime resulting from lax prosecution and massive release of prisoners.

Training in Transition

Long before the current shouts for police reform, police leaders and trainers have been considering the efficiency of basic police academy training. Since the New York City School of Pistol Practice in 1895, which grew into a more generalized police academy by 1909, there was early opposition to the need for training as the notion that prevailed for a long time was that all an officer needed was common sense and enough strength to swing a billy club.

J. Edgar Hoover's FBI training in the 1930s served as an inspiration for police training at all levels. The LAPD under Chief William Parker became a model professional agency in the 1950s after a major scandal when Parker emphasized rigorous pre-service and in-service training. Crime became a national political issue under the Presidency of Lyndon Johnson, with studies encouraging more education and training for officers with some money to help achieve it.

It wasn't until the 1980s that all fifty states adopted minimum training standards. (As a Missouri officer this writer was hired before the state required police academy graduation. I was on solo patrol at age 21 after a three-week field training program, which was more than a lot of small departments got.) There are frequent movements to establish national training standards, but the history of independent, local policing and sentiments against the federalization of law enforcement have prevailed thus far.

Training standards are up to each state, and individual agencies may exceed those standards. The two basic models of academy training are the paramilitary model and the collegiate model. The paramilitary model looks very much like military basic training. Physical fitness and mental toughness are emphasized. Cadets are placed under stress in highly formal structures. The collegiate model has a more academic approach with policing skills achieved through less formal means. There is no consensus on which produces a better law enforcement officer, and many – your author included – believe that the field training component after the academy when the rookie practices their craft under the tutelage of an experienced officer is the most important aspect of police training.

Pre-service training is available for eligible potential police officers who want to enroll in academy training before being employed and at their own expense. Most of these academies are on college campuses and are made up of self-sponsored pre-employed students and newly employed students on an agency's payroll whose training is being paid for by their employer. Many agencies require a fixed period of employment commitment, with a promise to repay their training costs if the student leaves the sponsoring agency within a few years. This is to discourage having a small agency pay for certification training of an officer who immediately gets hired by a higher-paying agency.

Some law enforcement entities have an interest in perpetuating a unique culture that provides pride, unity, and status. These agencies eschew the blended academies in favor of having all cadets a part of one

agency. For the sake of economy, some of these departments have accepted lateral employees from another agency with a shortened version for enculturation and agency-specific training, but the results have been mixed.

The irony of the demand for more training among police reform advocates is that some topics that have become politicized have been forced into academy curricula and displaced some of the traditional essentials of real-world policing. Defunding and budget shortfalls are often suffered most in the area of training.

For example, New York's immigration crisis is being partly funded by Mayor Adam's cutting the next NYPD recruit class, even with a 3,000 officer shortage since 2019 and a 30% rise in crime. The ongoing battle from so-called environmentalists against a new training facility in Atlanta, GA, has slowed progress toward better first responder training being demanded by other critics. Voters in Colorado Springs declined to fund a new training center that would have expanded recruitment and training capacity for an understaffed department in a growing city. In New Hampshire, the recruiting crisis has driven police executives to ask the state legislature to reduce or eliminate mandated physical requirements. In Portland, OR where vacancies have been high, newly hired candidates are waiting up to five months just to get into any of the state's academies. In Massachusetts, a larger number of cadets already in an academy are quitting after losing the desire to become law enforcement officers. In Cleveland, OH, a city that is more than 200 officers

short, the latest academy class had only 9 students, the smallest number in 25 years.

To all of those clamoring for police officers to get more training, it should be known that law enforcement leaders are trying, but the profession is taking a beating from critics and activists and budgets are taking a hit. Is this what the reformers wanted?

What ‘Reformers’ Don’t Know About Police Training

For various reasons, my wife and I decided to home school our two children for a year. One of the things that we discovered is how efficient and flexible homeschooling can be compared to public schools. Movement from class to class or activity to activity, slowing down for some students, managing discipline, and scheduling meals, snacks, bathroom breaks, and bus lines steal from instructional time. Individualized learning at home, blended with experiential learning such as supermarket math, can create a rich and efficient learning environment.

Much law enforcement training follows the public school assembly line pattern designed to accommodate the industrial factory age. Make no mistake, I am a supporter of both public and homeschooling. My wife is a teacher, I sit on my local school board, have a doctorate in education, and our partly homeschooled children grew up to be a special education therapist and a university professor. So, my observation that much of a school day is devoted to creating efficiencies of mass movement is not harsh criticism, but a question of innovation.

There has been too little innovation in police training and, in some ways, we’ve gone backward. Recently renewed calls for officers to have college degrees, first articulated on a national basis from a Presidential Commission Report initiated by Lyndon B. Johnson in

1965, do not answer the call from current police reform advocates for better training.

The typical entry to policing involves reaching the age of 21, completing a police academy either before or after being hired, undergoing a period of closely supervised field training, then fully entering into police responsibilities while completing a probationary period and frequent evaluation. According to the [National Police Foundation](#), about one third (30.2 percent) of police officers in the United States have a four-year college degree. A little more than half (51.8 percent) have a two-year degree, while 5.4 percent have a graduate degree. In addition, well over half of law enforcement basic training academies are part of a college campus. So, for discussion starters, the law enforcement career has a much higher percentage of college-educated officers than critics imagine.

A U.S. Bureau of Justice Studies [report](#) shows that the average police academy is 21 weeks long. The field training programs where an officer rides with a training officer can range from several months to a year, with a probationary period that may last up to two years. After that, critical skills are retained with in-service training, training required by insurers to avoid liability, and specialty training and new curriculum items. This creates a full plate for agency training officers and leaders.

The double-edged sword of training means that while it may create a better officer, it removes the officer from service. That means that training needs to be justifiable and efficient. Current models of police training often

rely on a certain number of hours in a subject. Measuring learning by the number of hours in a classroom has never been a valid way to determine whether the objectives of a course have been met. Course objectives must be identifiable and measurable. To be identifiable and measurable, course content must be fact-based.

This reliance on science, research, and data in developing curriculum is often absent from the emotionally laden demands for more police training. Police leaders are very open to additional training, but their main mission of public safety must not be compromised. I know of a mayoral candidate in a city with 700 police officers who was incensed because the department's administration would not commit to an additional forty hours of training in dealing with the emotionally disturbed. Was there research showing that this training was needed based on outcomes of current encounters? Was there research to say that there is a curriculum that would improve outcomes if implemented? What specific behavioral and knowledge outcomes have been shown to validate the training? Is forty hours a magic number worth taking police officers off the street for a total of 28,000 manhours and the logistical nightmare of scheduling and overtime costs? Could objectives be achieved by a training memo, a squad briefing, or computer-based modules?

Police leaders and community members should welcome new training mandates only if those kinds of questions are answered with facts and logic.

Are We Trying to Eliminate Stress in Police Training?

The brim of the academy instructor's campaign hat shudders just inches from the forehead of the rigid cadet straining not to bend over backward to retreat from the intense tirade. It was a typical start to a day that would be filled with push-ups and classroom studies. Even the "fun" stuff like arrest control, driving, and firearms would be accompanied by fast-paced commands demanding perfection while providing distractions, intense scrutiny, and insults.

Not everyone agrees with this military basic training approach. The philosophy was to break a trainee down and rebuild them. Creating physical and mental stress was designed to allow the trainee to develop the confidence that they can overcome whatever was thrown at them. Normalizing stress was a means of teaching coping skills for the stress they would be called on to endure in combat.

Others advocate for a supportive, collegiate-type police training academy that develops skills without creating artificial stress. In fact, within some police reform efforts are proposals to get away from a police subculture developed from basic academy training that demands that cadets suppress their emotions. The accused culture of toxic masculinity, imposed on men and women alike, is presumed to be damaging to police officers to the extent that they cannot deal with others in crisis and will, themselves, inevitably implode into

brutality. The answer? A kinder, gentler training regimen that emphasizes empathy over aggression and self-awareness over tactical skill.

Police aggression and misconduct are believed to be related to the stresses of the job. While policework is accepted as an exceptionally stressful occupation by most, it is not these stressors that are blamed but rather the police officers' conditioning to suppress and ignore their own emotions that produce bad results. In order to fully suppress one's own emotions as purportedly their culture and training demands, one must keep a lid on their peer's feelings as well. Police reformers believe that by increasing sensitivity to the feelings of police officers, they will be less stressed themselves and less aggressive in dealing with suspects.

Here's this writer's theory. First, let me explain that I've been on both sides of the training/trainee/trainer spectrum. My limits were pushed in Army basic training. My bed-making skills were trashed by a drill sergeant. My ancestry was impugned up to the point of my willingness to spend time in the stockade. But my skinny, intimidated self evolved quickly into a man that was ready to deal with whatever life threw my way. Every victory of survival was a building block of my character. Every insult that I was able to let fly past without wounding me thickened my armor.

My theory is that subjecting trainees to physical and mental stress in a controlled environment is a necessary element of practice for the time when stressful situations threaten to overwhelm them in an uncontrolled environment. The old maxim in psychology is

that frustration results in aggression. Aggression can be exhibited outwardly as anger or violence, or inwardly in self-destructive behavior. Stress is often considered the culprit that causes frustration. But what really causes frustration is the feeling that something is out of one's control. Therefore, what we learn about controlling our reaction to stressful circumstances increases our ability to automatically process emotion, reducing frustration and the resulting aggression.

Do we need to be supportive of the mental health of our police? No question. Do we need to be more open about providing services to our first responders without shame? Of course! Do we need to expose our officers in training to some simulation of the chaos and pressure they will inevitably confront on the job? Absolutely.

There is, of course, a balance between stress-inducing training and unnecessary mind games. Building character and resilience requires not only confrontation with one's potential weaknesses but supporting and enhancing the strengths that training develops. Learning to perform under stress, to control emotions rather than ceding control to our emotions, and – yes – being tough is still an essential of police work.

The Myth of the Untrained, Uneducated Police Officer

The mantra of police reformers is more training. The problem with many of those voices is that activists and politicians have no idea what the current state of training and education of law enforcement in the US is.

Research has shown that college-educated officers suffer less from stress, generate fewer complaints, and have fewer use of force incidents. While it is true that potential police officers can come to the recruiter's table with only a high school diploma, many agencies require some level of college to be eligible for employment. When considering that most police academies are taught on a level that is eligible for college credit, and many academies are on the grounds of a college, the number of officers with college credits is high.

A certificate program consists of vocational competence with classroom contact hours less than a two-year degree. The average of all police academy programs consists of 840 clock hours which equates to about 56 college hours. (One college credit hour is approximately 15 clock hours, with more clock hours required for learning labs.) Completing a two-year degree requires around 60 college hours which translates to 900 clock hours, not far from the average police academy which is compressed into a stressful 21 weeks. None of that counts the rigors of field training that officers must complete before working on their own.

Over half of all American police officers have at least a two-year degree, known as an Associate of Arts or Associate of Science which includes general education courses and is transferable in pursuit of a four-year degree, or an Associate of Applied Science which focuses more work on vocational skills and is not as readily transferable toward a four-year degree.

Nearly a third of police officers have a four-year degree. This is likely in the area of criminal justice, but officers and their agencies benefit from a variety of academic pursuits from psychology to computer science to English. Degrees in criminal justice are helpful, but no knowledge is wasted in law enforcement. Basic police skills are taught in the academies and field training

Over five percent of officers have a graduate degree or higher. With the availability of online graduate programs, that number is expected to grow as officers recognize the advantages of more education as they strive to move into management, supervisory, and specialty positions as their careers advance.

A current claim of critics is that police officers have no training in dealing with mental health crises. Although more training is always desirable, officers are taught these skills in the academy and in field training. In Colorado, for example, the minimum state required basic police training curriculum consists of a mandated set of courses totaling 556 hours. Many, if not most, state certified academies exceed this minimum. As in many other states, most police officers are trained in a community college environment while the remainder

are trained at agency-run police academies. Most agencies prefer that recruits come with their basic training already completed at their own cost, while others are happy to conduct their own training. Some require completion of their agency academy even if the newly hired officer is already certified or experienced. This preserves the tradition and culture of a particular law enforcement agency.

Physical skills training in Colorado consists of driving, firearms, and arrest control which total 176 of the 556 clock hours. Of the remaining 378 hours of academic classroom instruction. Although only 12 clock hours are explicitly devoted to dealing with special populations, the topic is embedded in other subject areas like stress management, liability, ethics, judicial process, interviewing, controlled substances, and others in addition to field training and ongoing continuing education.

Other filtering of recruits to be eligible to train as a police officer include, of course, a background investigation, psychological evaluation, and entrance tests designed to determine the level of literacy and ability to learn of a potential recruit. The American public can be reassured that officers are well selected, well educated, and well trained. That doesn't mean that every officer performs perfectly every time. The filtering process continues throughout an officer's potential career and not everyone survives the demands of the profession. After all, as the old riddle says "What do you call the person who graduated last in medical school? Answer: Doctor.

The War on Warrior Training for Police: A Conversation with Lt. Col. Dave Grossman

Minnesota law now reads “Sec. 14. [626.8434] WARRIOR-STYLE TRAINING PROHIBITED. Subdivision 1. Definition. For purposes of this section, “warrior-style training” means training for peace officers that dehumanizes people or encourages aggressive conduct by peace officers during encounters with others in a manner that deemphasizes the value of human life or constitutional rights, the result of which increases a peace officer’s likelihood or willingness to use deadly force. Subd. 3. Training prohibited. A law enforcement agency may not provide warrior-style training, directly or through a third party, to a peace officer.”

The statute, which went into effect August 1st, doesn’t mention the face that appears on every news report about the law – Lt. Col. Dave Grossman. “It’s not my word”, said Grossman in a recent phone conversation. He doesn’t spend much time arguing the warrior and guardian vocabulary saying, instead “My word is sheepdog”. Indeed, those who have taken time to hear him speak know that the “w” word is used only a handful of times, and only in context, never as a cheer or charge.

Often accused of promoting pseudo-science, Grossman cites his impressive credentials that include peer reviewed publications in journals, the well-researched library of books he has authored, and his time spent teaching psychology at West Point. He also relates how media presentations about his courses take content out of context to fit the narrative of Grossman being an

advocate for warlike operations among police officers. He explained that he doesn't take a lot of time promoting his qualifications, but the attacks on his credibility as a scholar ring hollow when compared with the facts of his resume.

As the author of **On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society**, co-author of **On Combat: The Psychology and Physiology of Deadly Conflict in War and in Peace**, and contributor on **Warrior Mindset: Mental Toughness Skills for a Nation's Peacekeepers**, and a trainer in the course **The Bullet-Proof Mind-Prevailing in Violent Encounters and After**, his study of "killology" is mischaracterized. "Psychology isn't about teaching people to be psychotic. Criminology isn't about creating criminals." Grossman related that media reports aren't merely biased, but intentionally misleading.

Grossman states that objective journalism is not the only thing lacking in the assessment of current affairs in criminal justice, so is the science. Grossman observes that the true picture of a violent America is not reflected in the reported murder rate. Citing major advancements in emergency medical care saving thousands of victims that would have been homicides in years past, the apparent leveling of the murder rate is deceptive, requiring more law enforcement, not less. Noting the risks of terrorism on American soil Grossman contrasts many other countries where policing is nationalized and the military operate within their borders, U.S. policing is local, so while we continue to fight the war on terrorism across the sea, the war on terror is left to the million police officers in our neighborhoods to remain

vigilant and mentally prepared. “It wasn’t 400 soldiers that ran into the twin towers as they collapsed, it was cops and firefighters”. Intense training for the physical and mental challenges of that mission is essential.

Grossman believes it may take a generation to restore the narrative of police officers as the good guys. He points out that instead of growing up on Adam-12, Dragnet, and characters like Marshal Matt Dillon on television, today’s generation was raised on *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Shield* where bad cops were the norm. In addition, educators from elementary to college often aid the narrative of police as the enemy.

A significant generational plague, says Grossman, is that screen time has created a generation of children who are over stimulated in bad ways and under stimulated in good ways. He promotes screen withdrawal in his book **Assassination Generation: Video Games, Aggression, and the Psychology of Killing**, and support of <https://www.takethechallengenow.net/>, a program for withdrawal of screen addiction.

Besides the sheepdog analogy Grossman cites the mission of American law enforcement as akin to the big dog on the porch of our childhood homes. Gentle and tolerant of the householders, but ready to growl at a trespasser. His training days always end with his big red and blue markers on the flipchart writing the word love, affirming that the concept of love is the ultimate motivation for service as a law enforcement officer, soldier, or other first responder. That seems hardly a violation of Minnesota’s new law prohibiting training

that deemphasizes the value of human life or constitutional rights.

About The Author



This series is authored by [Chief Joel F. Shults, Ed.D.](#) Joel is a retired police chief. He is an award-winning writer, college professor, trainer, and first responder chaplain.