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Blue Knights
with Lt. Dan Marcou

How cops can help citizens better understand police use of force

Policing — already a dangerous profession — is becoming even more so because of anti-police rhetoric and inaccurate reporting in use of force cases

Picture the following hypothetical scenario: A chief at a press conference states, “Ladies and gentlemen I have gathered you here today, because police use of force cases are routinely mishandled by journalists and community leaders. It is my belief that journalists and community leaders may do a better job in this area if they have at least a basic understanding of what a justified use of force looks like.”

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Left out of all of the so-called analysis in the mainstream media in the aftermath of the Ferguson OIS is any real examination of the science of human performance during rapidly-unfolding, high-stress events.

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There are three things the public needs to know about contacts with police.

1. Be courteous
2. Be cooperative
3. Be compliant

Criminality, Not Color

It is important for you to convey to the public that police officers pursue criminality, not color. Officers must have a reason to make contact with an individual. They must be able to explain later in court that they had either a reasonable suspicion or probable cause to believe the individual had committed or was about to commit an offense.

The fact is that more than 95 percent of police contacts are handled without rising above the level of dialog. This is because most people are cooperative and compliant. This is the way it should be, because it is unlawful to resist and or obstruct an officer, while in the performance of his/her duty.

If a person disagrees with a stop or an arrest, the place to argue the case vigorously is in a court of law, not on the street.

Force Options

When an officer meets resistance, officers are trained to use a level of force justified by the specific threat, or resistance they are presented with. For example, if a person pulls away from an officer making an arrest and snaps, “Don’t you touch me,” the officer can choose to apply [a compliance hold](#) to that person.

These holds are designed to convince the person to comply.

When a suspect is actively resisting, the officer can also choose to disengage and deploy a TASER or utilize pepper spray to overcome that resistance.

It might surprise some people to discover that when a suspect strikes an officer, or even acts as if he or she is about to strike an officer, that officer can legally deliver impacts with what we call personal body weapons.

Officers can punch, kick, or strike with elbows and/or knees to defend themselves and/or make an arrest.

Officers can also choose to deliver baton impacts to targeted areas on the body. Officers can even strike a suspect more than once if once does not stop the suspect’s threat. If a suspect tries to hit an officer, don’t be surprised when that officer hits back.

Use of Deadly Force

I’ve never heard an officer say at the beginning of a shift, “I hope I get to shoot someone today.”

While the vast majority of officers never fire their weapons in the line of duty, some have to. When an officer is faced with the threat of death or great bodily injury — or someone they are sworn to protect is faced with that same imminent threat — an officer is justified in using deadly force.

There are three generally held misconceptions about deadly force that continually arise and need to be addressed:

1. An officer can shoot an unarmed man under certain conditions.

An officer may have to use deadly force on an unarmed man who is larger, stronger, and/or attempting to disarm the officer, for example. In the case of a suspect, who is battering an officer to the point that

he or she may suffer death or great bodily harm, the use of deadly force is defensible. Police officers do not have to sustain a severe beating in the line of duty.

Other factors that could justify an officer's choice to utilize deadly force are the extent of that officer's injury, exhaustion, or the number of assaultive adversaries the officer is confronted with.

2. An officer can, in certain conditions, shoot someone in the back.

You see if a suspect is fleeing and their escape presents an imminent threat of death or great bodily harm to the community at large, the use of deadly force can be justified. On some occasions a round might enter through the back, because of the dynamics of the circumstance.

3. Officers are not — and never will be — trained to shoot to wound or shoot weapons out of subjects' hands.

These are not realistic options. Handguns are not accurate enough to deliberately attempt such things when lives are on the line.

The Bottom Line

From 2003 to 2012, 535 officers were [killed in the line of duty](#) in this country. Another 580,000 were injured in the line of duty.

I'm afraid that policing — which is already a dangerous profession — is becoming even more so, because of anti-police rhetoric and inaccurate reporting in use of force cases.

If every person contacted by officers were to remain courteous, cooperative, and compliant, there would never be a need to employ force. The reality is, however, that although most people will cooperate, some people will resist arrest.

It is not easy for a lone police officer to get a resistive suspect into handcuffs. If it looks rough, that's because it is rough.

Police work is a contact sport, but for cops there is no second place. If someone in the public sees a cop struggling with a suspect and decides not to give him/her a hand, they should at least give them the benefit of the doubt.

Cops are not asking for citizens to get into the arena with them — they would just like the audience to stop cheering for the other team.

The only way to get these three extremely simple ideas out to our communities is for you to take this information and share it, with both your fellow officers and with your community members.

About the author

Lt. Dan Marcou retired as a highly decorated police lieutenant and SWAT Commander with 33 years of full time law enforcement experience. He is a nationally recognized police trainer in many police disciplines and is a Master Trainer in the State of Wisconsin. He has authored three novels *The Calling: The Making of a Veteran Cop*, *S.W.A.T. Blue Knights in Black Armor*, and *Nobody's Heroes* are all available at [Barnes and Noble](#) and [Amazon.com](#). Visit his [website](#) and [contact Dan Marcou](#)

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