

# THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE

The ability to lawfully use force against the public is a major factor that distinguishes officers (security, law enforcement, corrections, government and military) from the remainder of society. As a result of this responsibility, the use of force by these sectors comes under close scrutiny from both the public and the courts. The individuals who take up the calling of ensuring community safety choose this role mostly because of their moral character, much like people with compassionate personalities enter health and community services. The common desire of both groups is to make a positive contribution to society; for officers, this entails making society safer for everyone. To fulfil this function, officers are equipped with 'tools' to enable them to undertake this task, and trained for a (mostly) thankless job that has severe consequences.

In his book 'On Combat', author Dave Grossman outlines the 'complex' relationship of officers in society:

*"Most people in society are sheep. They are kind, gentle, productive people who can only hurt one another by accident. Then there are the wolves, who feed on the sheep without mercy. Then there are sheepdogs, who live to protect the flock and confront the wolf. The*

*sheep generally do not like the sheepdog. He looks a lot like the wolf. He has fangs and the capacity for violence. The difference, though, is that the sheepdog must not, cannot and will not ever harm the sheep. Still, the sheepdog disturbs the sheep. He is a constant reminder that there are wolves. They would prefer the sheepdog cash in his fangs, spray paint himself white, and go baa... until the wolf shows up. Then the flock tries desperately to hide behind the sheepdog."*

Statistics show a worldwide increase in violence. A violent confrontation is a series of moments in time strung together, and officers need to make split-second decisions based on their situational assessment. The role of officers is becoming increasingly vital, yet they are being affected by factors that hinder their ability to achieve the task entrusted to them.

The aim of this article is to highlight modern issues that affect officer safety, and to stimulate discussion between relevant parties at all levels. The issues are listed separately for objective analysis, but are all intrinsically linked.

## The Issues

### Bureaucracy

Officers make operational decisions based on training and experience. Many organizations

(company, agency and department – public or private) are managed by people who have no operational background, and therefore have neither training nor experience. It is commonly these 'theorists' that determine workplace policies and procedures, yet it is hard to implement effective officer safety strategies when they have never experienced the reality of the workplace firsthand.

A modern trend is the appearance of media and legal 'divisions'. Whilst many of these serve to protect officers, some cater to public and political pressure by incriminating officers and settling out-of-court to minimize the workplace incident backlash. This trend only makes officers insecure about if, when and how to use force, knowing that their organization may not support them when they are simply doing their job.

Insurance is a major factor that every administrator has to take into account. Premiums are commensurate with gross revenue, operational roles and workplace risk – the greater the risk the higher the premium. The greater the risk to officers in the workplace, the more importance should be placed on training. To prepare officers properly in proportion to the operational risk, training must be regular, appropriate and realistic. However, regular training increases costs and

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## HOW SOCIETY INFLUENCES OFFICER SAFETY

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realism increases injury potential. This in turn can affect premiums. Officer safety is therefore a balance between operational risk, probability of actual occurrence in the workplace and likelihood of injury in training.

Organizations have tight budgets and often cannot release staff for long periods of time for training, yet these skills are essential in workplaces that pose the real hazard of physical violence. Training must be simple to learn, easy to understand, and provide effective strategies for officers with time efficiency. Financial considerations are always relevant; when times are tough, training usually suffers cutbacks. Often, it is viewed as a legal obligation, rather than a necessary part of standard operations that add benefit to service provision and ensure officer safety. Progressive organizations realize that training is not simply an option, but an essential aspect for ensuring future success.

### Media Scrutiny

For the large part, officer actions and outcomes are scrutinized by people with no 'real-world' experience in the situations that officers face. This includes general citizens, but also such groups as the media and the legal fraternity. Unfortunately, media focus is often on sensationalizing news, reporting in a manner that will attract the most viewers or sell the most editorial. In the US, the more violent and bloody a story, the earlier it will appear in the news broadcast and the longer it will remain as headlining news... if it bleeds, it leads. In addition, officer actions are often portrayed in a negative manner, using subjective language and hyperbole, often with no proportionate description for the offender's role in the incident. Rarely is consideration given to the fact that it is the offender who chooses violence, with officers responding to maintain order. The issue here is that the more violent the incident, the more scrutiny it will attract in the post-analysis.

### Public Perception

The effect of media influence over the public cannot be overstated. Many people believe what they see represented through the media, whether it be news and current affairs, television or movies. This idea of how violence occurs, and what officers should be capable of, comes from the media and is usually grossly inaccurate. But it is these same people who will be reading newspapers, watching TV and sitting on juries.

Actual violence is rarely depicted in the media, because it is disturbing to the psyche, but it is the reality of what officers face every day. The public often have unrealistic expectations of officer actions in the workplace and can be quick to criticize in line with media representation.

### Legal Issues

In today's world, personal responsibility is often deferred. People choose to commit violent acts, but the legal system often fails to hold them accountable. Many law firms proactively encourage citizens to file civil cases, using hooks such as 'no win, no fee', and many organizations are quick to make out-of-court settlements with complainants rather than endure drawn out legal cases and media attention, even if the officers have done the right thing. With an increase in civil litigation, trends show that officers often second-guess their options in response to using force. It is common for officers to choose a lesser force option, or not to use force at all, when they were justified in using higher options. This not only affects officer safety in the workplace, but also impacts on policy and procedures and training standards.

### Human Nature

Officer safety training is a paradox. The entire concept is built around 'what if...', and officers can be their own worst enemy. The longer they go without job violence, the more complacent they can become about the need for training; there are overconfident officers ('I know it all'), and denial officers ('it will not happen to me'). The balance between perceived and actual ability is a tenuous one, and there is always potential for situations beyond every officer's capability. The better trained officers are, the better prepared they are for every operational reality and the safer they are physically and legally.

### The Outcomes

Administrators need to balance a myriad of factors such as cost, risk, media representation and litigation, against the welfare of officers who operate in potential harms way every day. However, no amount of money or media exposure is worth the cost of a single officer's safety, and administrators would do well to gain practical experience in operational reality before creating policy that affects people's safety and wellbeing.

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Casual observers (the public, media and legal fraternity) should withhold judgement of officer actions until they truly understand the reality of operational violence that officers are exposed to. It is easy to criticize with the 'bravery of being out of range', but experiencing real violence first-hand puts things in an entirely different perspective.

Officers must be realistic about the risk inherent in their chosen job role, and honest about their actual ability, to ensure their safety whilst operating professionally to fulfil this vital role society relies on them to do.

The knowledge and skill required for successful management of violent situations takes time to learn and maintain, and are perishable. Training must be accessible for all officers and should be quickly learned, easily practiced and readily maintained. Content should always be designed to work on the street (not just in the training environment), be court defensible and be administratively feasible. Standards are impacted by many factors, but ultimately, officers with a use-of-force mandate require adequate training to ensure appropriate operational conduct.

These issues are by no means a definitive list. The solutions involve a combination of realism (accepting things as they really are), idealism (believing things can be made better), and open communication, with all parties understanding the very reason why there are officers in society, and the reality of the operational environment they face every day. ■

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