

SME RESEARCH BRIEF

Research Review – Use of Force

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What do we know about police use of force in Canada?

The Frequency of Use of Force

Estimates of use of force are often difficult to calculate due to insufficient data and debates about how force should be measured and defined. However, there is general agreement among researchers who study this topic that force is used infrequently by police officers in Canada (see e.g., Baldwin et al. 2018, which suggests that use of force is used in about 0.08% of police-public interactions). Of course, it's important to appreciate that even this low base rate translates into many occasions where Canadian citizens experience force at the hands of police officers. Given this, the policing community must do everything they can to ensure that any application of force is appropriate.

Factors Influencing Use of Force Decisions

Research on factors influencing use of force decisions is limited in Canada; however, two areas of Canadian research are worth highlighting. One line of research is being conducted by Judith Andersen and her colleagues (2018). They showed that the provision of a physiologically focused intervention (involving classroom instruction, biofeedback, and opportunities to practice exercises to change nervous system activity) could reduce lethal force errors in high stress training scenarios by allowing officers to modulate their physiological arousal in accordance with situational demands. In another emerging line of research, Greg Brown is examining how use of force decisions are influenced by “policing’s new visibility” (Brown, 2018, p. 293) through ubiquitous video-recording devices and file-sharing platforms. Brown’s research suggests that officers are using less force in their interactions with the public than they would have if recording was not a possibility. This may be positive, but not if officers are putting themselves or others in danger by adjusting their use of force behaviour.

Safety and Effectiveness Associated with Use of Force Intervention Options

Police officers in Canada are trained to use various use of force options. Research examining the safety and effectiveness of these options is important because it might help determine which tools yield the best outcomes. In a recent Canadian study, Baldwin, Walker, Blaskovits, and Bennell (2017) analyzed almost 6,000 use of force events to determine how various intervention options related to subject and officer injury, and how effective these options were perceived to be by the reporting officer. Compared to stuns and strikes, the reference category, vascular neck restraint was perceived to be more effective, but pepper spray (OC), conducted energy weapons (CEWs), and batons were perceived to be less effective (with batons being the least effective). However, subject and officer injury rates suggest that perceptions of effectiveness must be balanced with safety concerns. For example, while certain intervention options (e.g., OC spray and CEWs) were not perceived as being particularly effective relative to stuns and strikes, these options were likely to cause fewer subject and officer injuries compared to stuns and strikes. Interestingly, the baton was not perceived as being particularly effective *and* it caused more subject and officer injuries compared to other options.

Attitudes Towards, and Knowledge of, Police Use of Force

Canadian research has shown that the public has a limited understanding of use of force. For example, research from my lab has indicated that the public doesn't appreciate how rare use of force is, nor do they fully understand the complexities of force dynamics, legal issues surrounding the use of force, or how stress can impact an officer's performance, judgement, and memory (Corey & Bennell, 2008). For instance, it is not uncommon for participants we've studied to estimate that force is used in 20% of all police-public interactions, or to believe that officers are skilled enough to accurately shoot small, moving targets (e.g., a subject's hand). It's hardly surprising that the public has concerns about police use of force given these types of erroneous beliefs. Recent research has also suggested that video exposure to controversial police interventions has negative implications for people's attitudes towards police use of force (e.g., it results in them believing that force is used too often), though not for general attitudes toward police (Boivin et al. 2017).

Implications for Policing

Data collection

Agencies need to collect adequate use of force data and attempts should be made to standardize data collection across agencies. Currently, it is difficult to determine use of force rates at a national level or how various factors (e.g., encounter characteristics) relate to use of force. It is also difficult to establish the effectiveness and safety associated with use of force options when high-quality data is lacking, or to develop sound, evidence-informed policies. Better data collection will also open up additional research opportunities.

Training

Training quality also suffers in the absence of good data. Scenario-based training is critical in this area, and training scenarios should ideally relate to the sorts of situations that officers in a given jurisdiction regularly encounter. Agency data can inform the development of scenarios. In addition, data related to the effectiveness and safety of use of force interventions can be used to inform the amount of time dedicated to training (e.g., if an option is deemed ineffective and unsafe, agencies might consider the training time dedicated to this intervention).

Public Education

Knowledge of use of force issues can impact how the public perceives and treats the police. In light of the fact that such knowledge appears to be limited, more effort needs to be put into public education. The police can play a central role here (e.g., by exposing as many people as possible to the realities of policing through ride alongs, citizen academies, exposure to police training, etc.), but researchers can also help by conducting relevant research and sharing that research broadly (beyond academic publishing).

Key References

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