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R E P O R T S

Officer Behavior in Police-Citizen Encounters: A Descriptive Model and Implications for Less-Than-Lethal Alternatives

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Introduction

by Hubert Williams

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As a former police officer and chief executive of one of America's major urban police departments, I can attest to what history has shown—that police officers must occasionally use force in order to do their job effectively. Indeed, the legitimate use of force is the defining characteristic of the institution of policing.

In *The Capacity to Use Force as the Core of the Police Role*, Egon Bittner eloquently contends that:

... whatever the substance of the task at hand, whether it involves protection against an undesired imposition, caring for those who cannot care for themselves, attempting to solve a crime, helping to save a life, abating a nuisance, or settling an explosive dispute, police intervention means above all making use of the capacity and authority to overpower resistance to an attempted solution in the native habitat of the problem. There can be no doubt that this feature of police work is uppermost in the minds of people who solicit police aid or direct the attention of the police to problems, and that every conceivable police intervention projects the message that force may be, and may have to be, used to achieve a desired objective.

In the last decade, the job of the police officer has become even more difficult. The widespread presence of firearms, including semi-automatic and automatic weapons, coupled with gang activity, drug trafficking, and rampant disregard for human life, have made the

daily routine of police a matter of life and death, and increased the potential for the police to use force.

Increasingly, police practitioners and researchers are seeking new technologies and approaches to reduce the potential of violent police-citizen encounters. This report is part of a larger study conducted by the Police Foundation under a cooperative agreement with the National Institute of Justice in response to the clear need to devise approaches that permit police to exercise control of difficult situations with the minimum force possible. The study analyzed data concerning several types of police-citizen encounters to ascertain characteristics of those encounters, paying particular attention to how control tactics and technologies might be applied. This is the first of a series of reports that the foundation plans to publish from that study.

There are no philosophies or practices that can take into account the full range of human behavior that officers might encounter in the course of their work. Ultimately, it is the police officer's judgment that will be the deciding factor in most cases. This and other research will help us understand the range of influences that affect police officers' decisions and their effect on the confidence and security of citizens.

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A descriptive model of police-citizen encounters and the role of the police officer in them is presented in this report. This model is built on the understanding that in determining influences on officer behavior, it is more important to focus on risk factors present in all these encounters rather than simply on the type of situation.

The mandate to use force, within the confines of the law, is the defining feature of the role of police in society. The use of excessive force, or the allegation of use, can threaten not only the legitimacy of the police but of government itself. Clearly, there is a need to devise approaches involving technologies and tactics that permit the police to control difficult situations with the minimum force possible.

The National Institute of Justice has held conferences of practitioners, scholars, and manufacturers of control technologies to discuss their needs and perspectives. From those conferences has come a consensus of opinion that there are certain scenarios in which the application of control technologies appears particularly fruitful. The scenarios identified include “search warrants/raids, domestic disturbances, barricade/tactical assaults, and those involving fleeing felons/patrol applications.” However, little is known about the frequency with which such situations occur, their characteristics, or the points at which the police might be able to apply particular tactics or technologies in order to reduce the level of force necessary to gain control of matters.

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The decision by a police officer to use lethal or less-than-lethal force in encounters with citizens is an issue of grave concern to police agencies, officers, and the community. Virtually all police-citizen encounters are dynamic situations influenced by a range of

factors. There is a need for a comprehensive, descriptive model to help understand the larger factors (dimensions) and specific variables that affect the need or likelihood of an officer using force. Such a model could be applied across a variety of situations, and could illustrate the links between the various dimensions of these situations.

While some (Binder and Scharf 1980; Scharf and Binder 1983; Toch 1985; Hayden 1981; Reiss 1980) have proposed various models or frameworks for understanding police-citizen encounters and the use of force, none of these fully depict the range of situational dynamics in police decision making. However, the descriptive model outlined here (Amendola 1995, see Figure 1), captures these situational dimensions within a broader framework.

Model of Officer Use of Control Tactics and Technologies

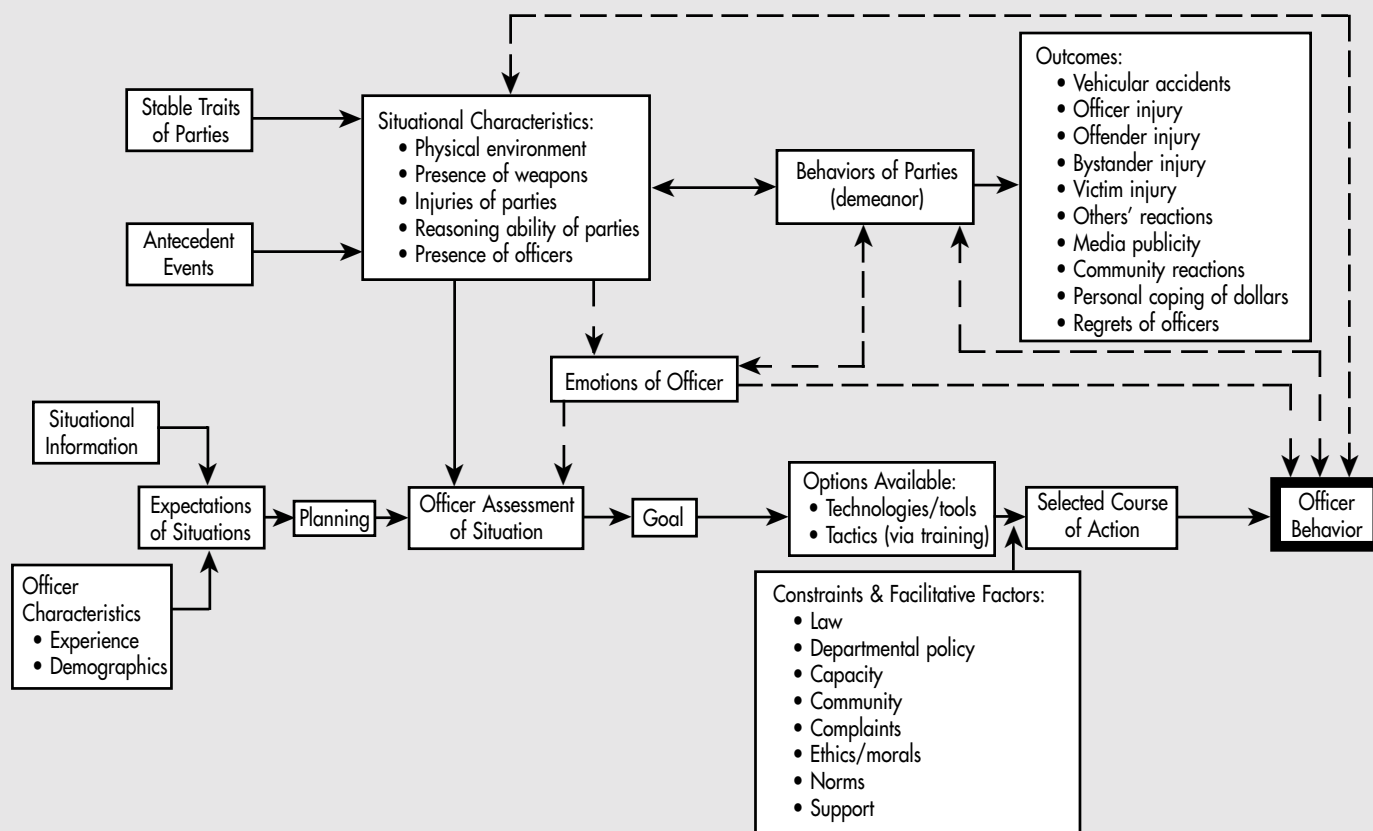
As this model shows, an officer’s behavior is the culmination of a variety of influences and others’ actions. Although there have been extensive one-variable and some two-variable studies published on characteristics associated with use of force, this is the first theoretical framework comprehensive enough to unify previous research.

In providing the Model of Officer Use of Control Tactics and Technologies in Police-Citizen Encounters, it is hoped that researchers will be able not only to tie into a broader theoretical framework but also to conduct comprehensive, multi-variable studies designed to more thoroughly understand the multiple influences on officer use of force.

The following report will detail the components of the model. Subsequent reports will discuss these components within specific

Figure 1

Model of Officer Use of Control Tactics and Technologies in Police-Citizen Encounters



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situational domains, including high-risk search warrant issuances, domestic disturbances, hostage and barricaded persons incidents, and felony suspects fleeing from police, both in vehicles and on foot.

As part of this model, it is important to consider antecedent events, officer characteristics, citizen characteristics, situational characteristics, the range of options, and the associated constraints upon using any particular tool, technology, tactic, or behavior as an intervention.

Antecedent Events

The precursors to any particular encounter between the police and citizens may directly influence any

number of situational characteristics. A hostage situation begins with some antecedent event; for example, the break-up of an intimate relationship, or a botched robbery attempt, which, in turn, may define the boundaries of the situation at hand.

Stable Traits of Parties

The characteristics of all parties involved (offenders, suspects, victims, witnesses, etc.) in the situation can also play a significant role in the situation. For example, whether or not the parties are known to one another, the nature of the existing relationship(s), the psychological profiles of individuals, and demographic characteristics all

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may help define the situation being faced. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has long realized the benefits of understanding the profiles of criminal offenders. This is particularly useful for hostage negotiation (Reiser 1982).

Situational Information

Before arriving on the scene, an officer has either been dispatched or flagged down to respond to an apparent problem. Pre-arrival information, such as type of event, which an officer receives secondhand, can certainly affect his or her other expectations of the situation, which in turn may affect any pre-intervention planning that he or she does. Officers may also come upon situations in progress and have no more information than what they see.

Officer Characteristics

Just as individual characteristics of citizens can affect the situation directly or indirectly, so too can the characteristics of officers. For example, the level of personal or professional experience of an officer may affect his or her expectations of the situation, planning, assessment of the situation, and ability to select or carry out an appropriate action.

Officer Expectations of the Situation. The social psychological literature shows that one's preconceived notions or expectations of an event can affect what actually happens, in that some events can be somewhat self-fulfilling (see, for example, Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid 1977; Kelley and Stahalski 1970). This makes it important to understand the expectations an officer may have before arriving on scene. Officers may have unique interpretations of what to expect on scene based on whatever information they have already received. An

officer's own characteristics (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, previous knowledge, or experience) may bear upon the processing of that information, further influencing planning or on-site assessment.

Planning. Although we often conceive of police response as a rather immediate action, the time between dispatch and arrival is critical for officer planning and decision making. Should any specific plans be made, they might interfere with an officer's ability to make an adequate situational assessment and select an appropriate response if they are based on either inadequate information or its misinterpretation.

Situational Characteristics

There are a number of visible situational characteristics that may influence how an officer assesses the encounter. For example, the physical environment in which he or she is operating may be constrained (e.g., barricades, darkness, ability to gain access). The presence and types of weapons certainly will affect how an officer evaluates the situation and responds to it. If any of the parties on scene appear injured, this adds urgency to an officer's assessment and response.

Literature has been published regarding the emotional states, intoxication or drug abuse, and mental illness of individuals in police-citizen encounters. These are not usually considered to be similar, but all these limit the reasoning ability of the parties encountered on scene. The presence of other officers on the scene also can influence how an officer perceives his or her role and change the dynamics of the situation. Connors and Nugent (1990) indicate that awareness of vicious pets on the scene will also have a bearing on police operations or decision making.

Officer Assessment of Situation

Accurate assessment of the situation is essential to selection of an appropriate response. The way in which an officer processes situational information is key in determining what course of action he or she selects, reflecting how he or she perceives what options are available, assesses the danger to himself, herself, or others, and his or her corresponding emotions.

Officer Emotions. Although the stereotypical officer is without emotion, in fact officer emotions affect perception of the situation and ultimately the officer's goal in handling the incident. There is a dearth of research on the emotions of officers before, during, and after encounters with citizens.

Goal. The officer's goal in the encounter is the outcome he or she desires. Once an officer has assessed the situation, his or her goal serves as a guide in the search for behavioral, tactical, or technological options for handling the incident.

Options Available

There are a range of tools, technologies, tactics, and behavioral alternatives available to an officer in dealing with any particular situation. A number of technologies or tools may be available to the officer as a result of standard issue equipment or special equipment selected based on situational expectations (e.g., tactical assault weapons, bullet-proof vests). A number of tactical strategies learned through training or experience may also be possibilities. To handle a given situation, an officer may also choose behavioral options (e.g., verbal commands, physical restraint) by themselves or in conjunction with technologies, tools, or tactics.

Constraints and Facilitative Factors

Certain intervention options available to an officer may appear more favorable based on factors facilitating the choice. These may include expected support for behaving in a specific manner or the requirements of standard operating procedures. Other alternatives may be less attractive due to factors like departmental policies or laws. A variety of issues can constrain or facilitate the choice of any particular option that an officer has available. These are outlined below.

Law. Police officers know that legal interpretations are often based on the dynamics of a situation, some of which are statutorily cut and dried, while others have much fuzzier borders. For example, there are many legal constraints governing the lawful search of a vehicle. Given the increasingly litigious nature of police-citizen encounters, officers must consider the legalities and political ramifications of any selected action and make decisions accordingly, often in a split second. Laws can also facilitate officer actions in that they specify actions that must be taken.

Departmental Policy. Standard operating procedures and general orders in departments are regularly updated. Officers are obligated to keep abreast of changes in these policies and change their behavioral repertoire accordingly. According to O’Lear (1993):

There has been a strong shift to enforcing standards in nonlethal force options. Florida has published lesson plans of approved techniques that are acceptable within guidelines. If a police officer does not use those techniques, he may stand alone in court.

Policies that mandate certain actions under prescribed conditions facilitate the choice of a course of action. But when policies change, standard procedures that have become ingrained often necessitate the retraining of officers, but retraining is often hampered by limited time and resources. Hence, an officer’s job requirements and responsibilities are not static, making split-second judgments about appropriate actions difficult.

Capacity. Although selection and training systems in policing are often designed to facilitate standardization, individuals have unique differences that may prevent an officer from making an optimal response. For example, physical capacities vary significantly among individuals, despite certain minimum standards in departments. Intellectual and reasoning capacities also vary. Capacity can also be limited by systemic factors such as fatigue (due to shift schedule, time of day, etc.), physical exertion, and a host of organizational factors (e.g., one’s assigned partner, the location in which one is working, and the resources to provide specific technologies, tools, or training to officers).

Community. As the philosophy of community policing continues to take hold in police agencies, increased awareness of community perceptions can affect what options an officer might select. The anticipated community reaction to a particular course of action may keep an officer from choosing it or give the officer greater confidence in pursuing it.

Complaints. Citizen or departmental complaints filed against an individual officer may limit his or her willingness to select a particular course of action out of fear of

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repercussions. This could lead to an inappropriate choice or even negligence in carrying out one's duties. Complaints filed against the agency may have a similar impact. For example, if there have been growing public outcries regarding racism on the part of an officer, this may deter an officer from certain means of dealing with perpetrators or victims of particular races.

Ethics/Morals. Although many police agencies have a formal or informal code of ethical conduct, individual officers may have ethics or morals inconsistent with the code. Further, some officers use their own, higher order (or sometimes lower order) morals to define how they will behave. An officer may feel either constrained or facilitated to act based on his or her individual moral code, the departmental code, or the broader law enforcement code.

Norms. In addition to prescribed responsibilities, policies, and procedures, every organization has its own unwritten set of rules for behavior. Undoubtedly, there are sub-cultural norms that prescribe acceptable behavior at yet another level within organizations (see Alpert and Dunham 1992); e.g., those of detectives or of patrol officers. Many of these norms may be inconsistent with overall organizational or professional norms and may constrain or facilitate certain behaviors.

Support. Perhaps one of the most critical considerations for an officer in determining which behavior to select is his or her perception of whether or not the behavior may be questioned and who, if anyone, will support it. If an officer perceives that he or she has support and can justify a particular action, that action will be more likely to be taken.

Behaviors of Parties

Obviously an officer does not act independently of the other citizens in an encounter. The behaviors of others can affect the situation, outcomes, officer emotions, or officer behaviors. The greater the number of individuals involved in a situation, often the harder it is to determine what is happening, the perceived threat to the officer(s) and others, and the appropriate response(s).

Selected Course of Action. It should be clear that there are a multitude of influences on what an officer ultimately does in any encounter. The actions selected by the officer, though often instantaneous or reactive in nature, may depend upon a thorough and appropriate assessment of the situation and all of its dynamics, the actors and the available options, his or her capacity, and other constraints or facilitative factors.

Officer Behavior. The actions taken by the officer can directly affect the immediate situation, the lives of individuals including himself or herself, the victims, perpetrators or suspects, innocent bystanders, and witnesses. This may happen either directly during the encounter or through the activities or situations that result from the encounter. The actions can also influence subsequent departmental policies, community perceptions, and the officer's career. This all adds up to a responsibility that sometimes seems overwhelming to an officer and may add pressure to an already volatile encounter.

Situational Outcomes

An encounter can produce immediate or long-term effects on people, such as injuries, property damage, psychological trauma, media attention, community reactions, and even officers'

difficulty coping with the aftermath. In some situations like hostage and/or barricaded persons events, it is important for all primary and secondary negotiators to go through critical incident stress debriefing (Rivas 1996; Garrison 1996).

Conclusion

The model described in this report can be used as a framework for organizing findings from existing literature and interpreting their meaning. The Police Foundation has also collected and analyzed new data in the following areas: high-risk search warrant issuances, domestic disturbances, hostage and barricaded persons incidents, and felony suspects fleeing either on foot or in vehicles.

Although hostage and barricaded persons situations have distinct definitions, many agencies do not distinguish between these two scenarios in collecting and categorizing data because both require the use of trained negotiators. Many departments classify a whole range of situations as hostage taking or barricaded persons incidents, even though many actually are suicides or domestic disturbances (Rogan, Hammer, and Van Zandt 1994).

Subsequent reports covering these situational or other influences on officer behavior will contain information on several key incident types. Data about hostage and barricaded person events, domestic disturbances, felony suspects fleeing in vehicles or on foot, and high risk search warrant issuances will be described and interpreted according to the model presented in this report. Hopefully, researchers and practitioners can use this model to enhance their understanding of the range of influences complicating a police officer's job, particularly in dynamic situations such as those described in this report.

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ABOUT THE POLICE FOUNDATION

The Police Foundation is a private, independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to supporting innovation and improvement in policing through its research, technical assistance, and communication programs. Established in 1970, the foundation has conducted seminal research in police behavior, policy, and procedure, and works to transfer to local agencies the best new information about practices for dealing effectively with a range of important police operational and administrative concerns. Motivating all of the foundation's efforts is the goal of efficient, humane policing that operates within the framework of democratic principles and the highest ideals of the nation.



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