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Beyond a Split-Second: An Exploratory Study of Police Use of Force and Use of Force Training in Canada

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

- The authority to use force is a defining feature of the police profession.
- Use of force events are often characterized by a rapidly evolving scenario, a complex environment, considerable uncertainty, and a high degree of fear and stress.
- In recent years, the actions of police in use of force encounters have been subject to increasing visibility and scrutiny.
- It is important that officers are physically and mentally prepared for managing dangerous encounters.
- Officers typically receive use of force training at the police academy and continuous in-service training.
- Comparatively little is known about use of force training provided to officers in Canada.

STUDY AIMS

- To fill existing gaps in our understanding of the purpose, content and application of Canadian police academy and in-service use of force training, by conducting in-depth interviews with law enforcement practitioners – specifically, academy and in-service use of force instructors.
- To gain insight into the philosophies of use of force instructors, to identify the key elements involved in use of force encounters and explore how those elements are addressed in training.

METHODS

- Data was collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten current and former pre-service and in-service use of force instructors from British Columbia (n=9) and Manitoba (n=1).
- Four participants (n=4) were current or former academy instructors; six participants (n=6) were current or former in-service instructors.
- The study was approved by the SFU Research Ethics Board and written consent was received from each participant prior to conducting interviews.
- Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and integrated with all field notes.
- Interview transcripts were coded for identifiable themes. Responses were analyzed in relation to the available literature in order to determine whether they were consistent with existing knowledge and to link emergent themes to the broader context.

RESULTS: PRE-SERVICE TRAINING

- *A Delicate Balance:* Academy instructors must balance the rarity of force with the reality that recruits may have to use force – deadly or otherwise.
- *Keeping it Simple:* The goal of academy training is to provide the basic technical and tactical use of force skills – akin to “putting tools in the toolbox.”
- To minimize cognitive overload the focus is on teaching as few techniques as possible.
 - *“I mean the techniques we teach are based on gross motor skills. They are highly learnable and highly retainable under stress...”*
- *A Lack of Innovation:* Proprietary nature of training leads to the same techniques and practices being taught in spite of evidence pointing to their ineffectiveness.
 - *“So, sometimes things get passed on and they’re held onto, not because they’re necessarily the best but because that’s the way it’s been done before.”*

RESULTS: IN-SERVICE TRAINING

- Whereas pre-service training focuses on teaching basic skills, in-service training focuses on decision-making and refining and improving skills.
- A significant component of in-service training is reality-based training.
 - *“I think the biggest benefit is being able to put the member right in time, being able to see their actions, being able to correct it right at that time as well.”*
- In addition to judgmental decision-making, great emphasis is placed on articulation.
 - *“The biggest challenge...well number one, I think is the articulation.”*



RESULTS: GAPS IN TRAINING

- Instructor Qualification and Best Practice Standards
 - *“Even though you must have qualifications, they are pretty minimal. You can complete a one-week course and be certified as a use of force trainer.”*
- Insufficient Resources and Training Time
 - *“We need to get that philosophy embedded into our leadership that says, ‘we need to get our officers trained more.’”*

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS



- Need for increased training, particularly at the in-service level due to perishability of skills.
- Need to implement best-practice standards for instructor qualification.
- Moving toward data-driven training – barriers include a lack of Canadian literature and the conservative nature of policing.
- Is Canadian practice too reliant on U.S. research and practice?
- Complexity of use of force has implications for accountability and civilian oversight.
- Police must do a better job of educating.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- The high stakes nature of police use of force events and the level of scrutiny use of force attracts, places a premium on the training given to officers both at the academy and while in service.
- While pre-service training has evolved to teach more simplified, basic techniques, there is still a resistance on behalf of some instructors to change their systems.
- In-service training is increasingly relying on reality-based training to prepare officers for real-world encounters – though it may be too heavily reliant on U.S. practices.
- Advances in training are hindered by a lack of best practice standards, a dearth of Canadian research, and insufficient resources.

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