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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
National Institute of Justice



National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

Jeremy Travis, Director

October 1994

ACQUISITIONS

Controlling Police Use of Excessive Force: The Role of the Police Psychologist

by Ellen M. Scrivner, Ph.D.

Police departments have used the services of psychologists for more than two decades. In the 1980's, police psychology began to be recognized as a distinct field, with psychologists' activities expanding beyond screening job applicants to include a broader range of psychological support services. These included counseling to help officers cope with the unique stresses inherent in police work, training in human relations and general

stress management, debriefing after traumatic incidents, and such operational interventions as forensic hypnosis and assistance in negotiations with hostage holders or barricaded persons. Psychological support services for officers who used lethal force were more prevalent than interventions for managing nonlethal, excessive force.

Control of excessive force by police officers is a major challenge for the

departments they work for, and it will be increasingly important to the success of community policing initiatives. In two of the most recent examples, excessive force triggered riots in Los Angeles and has been associated with charges of police corruption in New York City. In controlling the problem, the police psychologist can play a key role. This Research in Brief discusses that role and presents ways in which psychologists

Issues and Findings

Discussed in the Brief: The role of police psychologists in identifying officers at risk for excessive force and in preventing its use; the factors that contribute to use of excessive force.

Key issues: Police psychologists were surveyed to examine the types of services they provide and how those services are used to counter police use of excessive force. The psychologists were also asked to characterize the types of officers who abuse force and to suggest psychology-based intervention strategies that could help police managers reduce excessive force. Of particular interest is whether police departments should rely almost exclusively on preemployment screening to identify violence-prone candidates.

Key findings:

◆ Psychologists' services consist of counseling and evaluation more than

training and monitoring of police behavior. Counseling is more likely to be a response to excessive force incidents than a preventive step.

◆ Not one but several distinct profiles were created on the basis of the psychologists' descriptions of officers at risk. The multiplicity of profiles belies the popular stereotype of a few "bad apples" being responsible for most excessive force incidents.

◆ For periodically evaluating incumbents, psychologists supported using methods other than routine psychological tests. They recommend increasing behavioral monitoring and providing better training.

◆ Excessive force needs to be considered a result not only of individual personality traits but also of organizational influences. It is symptomatic of a systemwide problem that implicates administrative policies as well as such

human resource components as selection, training, and supervision.

◆ Current screening methods to evaluate police candidates are limited almost exclusively to psychological tests and preemployment clinical interviews.

New screening technologies could enable psychologists to examine such areas as a candidate's decisionmaking and problem-solving abilities and quality of interaction with others. These dimensions are important for resolving situations without using excessive force and are particularly relevant to hiring officers who will work in community policing.

Target audience: Police officials and administrators, police psychologists, private security firms' staff, researchers.

can identify officers at risk and create remedial interventions, both at the individual level and the department level, to prevent the use of excessive force.

This article summarizes one of the studies sponsored by the National Institute of Justice as part of a Justice Department effort to identify additional means to control police use of force.¹ The beating of Rodney King that precipitated the Los Angeles riots was the event that prompted the Justice Department initiative. On the basis of input from psychologists working in police departments in the Nation's largest cities, profiles of officers who abuse force were developed. The study also identified the functions of psychologists that had relevance to officers' mental health, specifically their use of excessive force, and presented their recommendations on how best to predict, remedy, and prevent excessive force.

History of Police Psychological Services

Psychologists began to work with police agencies in the late 1960's, following urban riots in several major cities. The 1968 National Advisory Commission On Civil Disorder Report called for screening methods that would improve the quality of the police officers hired. These recommendations, and the availability of discretionary funds through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, encouraged police departments to seek the expertise of psychologists to help them select emotionally stable candidates with personal characteristics suitable for police work.

Thus, one of the first police psychology functions involved preemployment screening of applicants, using psychological tests and assessments, a fairly traditional responsibility for psychologists but one that was new to police. Later, clinical services were requested and, by 1980, psychologists were not only screening applicants but

The highly experienced police psychologists interviewed for the study had worked a long time either as salaried employees or as consultants to police departments. One out of four were on police command staffs, a measure of the extent to which police psychological services had become established in law enforcement agencies.

A shift in police department focus

Attention by researchers and psychologists to police use of nonlethal excessive force represented a change in emphasis. For the first two decades in which police departments employed psychologists (see box, "History of Police Psychological Services"), the use of lethal force was the prime concern. Shootings by police were traumatic incidents that created strong emotional reactions from the officers who did the shooting. The need

also counseling officers on how to cope with the stress of policing.

Psychologists brought new sets of skills to police agencies in areas such as critical incident response for police shootings, hostage or barricade negotiation, criminal profiling, and forensic hypnosis. They also offered training in how to manage the personal stress unique to law enforcement.

The use of police psychologists' services continued to grow. By the latter part of the 1980's, according to one survey, a substantial proportion of police agencies were using these services. Psychologists were screening police recruits, counseling officers for job-related stress and personal and family problems, and conducting training in human relations.

Currently, although preemployment screening and counseling still command a major share of police psychologists' attention, several departments have adopted a broader role for psychologists, using their services for consultation on policy and planning.

to provide psychological support for these officers was clear. Departments gradually recognized the need to provide such services immediately following these incidents.

That same level of concern did not generally carry over to the use of nonlethal excessive force. Officers who used excessive force in making arrests or handling prisoners might be evaluated for their fitness for duty, but psychological support services were not widely available.

Over the past few years, however, greater attention has been given to the issue. Recent research has identified multiple determinants of the use of excessive force, raising questions about whether police departments should rely exclusively on preemployment screening to identify violence-prone candidates and predict future officer performance. In fact, two reports that followed the Rodney King beating—the 1991 report of the Independent Commission To Study the Los Angeles Police Department and the 1992 Los Angeles County Sheriff's Report by James G. Kolt and staff—questioned the effectiveness of existing psychological screening to predict propensity for violence.

Profiles of violence-prone officers

Psychologists interviewed in the NIJ survey were asked about the characteristics of officers who had been referred to them because of the use of excessive force. Their answers did not support the conventional view that a few "bad apples" are responsible for most excessive force complaints. Rather, their answers were used to construct five distinct profiles of different types of officers, only one of which resembled the "bad apple" characterization.

The data used to create the five profiles constitute human resource information that can be used to shape policy. Not only do the profiles offer an etiology of excessive force and provide insight into its complexity, but they also support the

notion that excessive force is not just a problem of individuals but may also reflect organizational deficiencies. These profiles are presented in the following sections in ascending order of frequency, along with possible interventions.

Officers with personality disorders that place them at chronic risk. These officers have pervasive and enduring personality traits (in contrast to characteristics acquired on the job) that are manifested in antisocial, narcissistic, paranoid, or abusive tendencies. These conditions interfere with judgment and interactions with others, particularly when officers perceive challenges or threats to their authority. Such officers generally lack empathy for others. The number who fit this profile is the smallest of all the high-risk groups.

These characteristics, which tend to persist through life but may be intensified by police work, may not be apparent at preemployment screening. Individuals who exhibit these personality patterns generally do not learn from experience or accept responsibility for their behavior, so they are at greater risk for repeated citizen complaints. As a consequence, they may appear to be the sole source of problems in police departments.

Officers whose previous job-related experience places them at risk. Traumatic situations such as justifiable police shootings put some officers at risk for abuse of force, but for reasons totally different from those of the first group. These officers are not unsocialized, egocentric, or violent. In fact, personality factors appear to have less to do with their vulnerability to excessive force than the emotional "baggage" they have accumulated from involvement in previous incidents. Typically, these officers verge on burnout and have become isolated from their squads. Because of their perceived need to conceal symptoms, some time elapses before their problems come to others' attention. When this happens, the event is often an excessive force situation in which the officer has lost control.

In contrast to the chronic at-risk group, officers in this group are amenable to critical-incident debriefing, but to be fully effective, the interventions need to be applied soon after involvement in the incident. Studies recommend training and psychological debriefings, with followup, to minimize the development of symptoms.

Officers who have problems at early stages in their police careers. The third group profiled consists of young and inexperienced officers, frequently seen as "hotdogs," "badge happy," "macho," or generally immature. In contrast to other inexperienced officers, individuals in this group are characterized as highly impressionable and impulsive, with low tolerance for frustration. They nonetheless bring positive attributes to their work and could outgrow these tendencies and learn with experience. Unfortunately, the positive qualities can deteriorate early in their careers if field training officers and first line supervisors do not work to provide them with a full range of responses to patrol encounters.

These inexperienced officers were described as needing strong supervision and highly structured field training, preferably under a field training officer with considerable street experience. Because they are strongly influenced by the police culture, such new recruits are more apt to change their behavior if their mentors show them how to maintain a professional demeanor in their dealings with citizens.

Officers who develop inappropriate patrol styles. Individuals who fit this profile combine a dominant command presence with a heavy-handed policing style; they are particularly sensitive to challenge and provocation. They use force to show they are in charge; as their beliefs about how police work is conducted become more rigid, this behavior becomes the norm.

In contrast to the chronic risk group, the behavior of officers in this group is acquired on the job and can be changed.

The longer the patterns continue, however, the more difficult they are to change. As the officers become invested in police power and control, they see little reason to change. Officers in this group are often labeled "dinosaurs" in a changing police world marked by greater accountability to citizens and by adoption of the community policing model.

If these officers do not receive strong supervision and training early in their careers, or if they are detailed to a special unit with minimal supervision, their style may be reinforced. They may perceive that the organization sanctions their behavior. This group would be more responsive to peer program or situation-based interventions in contrast to traditional individual counseling. Making them part of the solution, rather than part of the problem, may be central to changing their behavior.

Officers with personal problems. The final risk profile was made up of officers who have experienced serious personal problems, such as separation, divorce, or even perceived loss of status, that destabilized their job functioning. In general, officers with personal problems do not use excessive force, but those who do may have elected police work for all the wrong reasons. In contrast to their peers, they seem to have a more tenuous sense of self-worth and higher levels of anxiety that are well masked. Some may have functioned reasonably well until changes occurred in their personal situation. These changes undermine confidence and make it more difficult to deal with fear, animosity, and emotionally charged patrol situations.

Before they resort to excessive force, these officers usually exhibit patrol behavior that is erratic and that signals the possibility they will lose control in a confrontation. This group, the most frequently seen by psychologists because of excessive-force problems, can be identified by supervisors who have been properly trained to observe and respond to precursors of problem behavior. Their

greater numbers should encourage departments to develop early warning systems to help supervisors detect "marker behaviors" signifying that problems are brewing. These officers benefit from individual counseling, but earlier referrals to psychologists can enhance the benefit and prevent their personal situations from spilling over into their jobs.

Steps in prevention

Because the profiles reveal different reasons for the use of excessive force, police departments need to develop a system of interventions targeted to different groups of officers and at different phases of their careers. The types of profiles also reveal that individual personality characteristics are only one aspect of excessive force and that risk for this behavior is intensified by other experiences. Some of those experiences implicate the organizational practices of the police departments in which the officers work. To the extent this is true, it indicates the need for remedial intervention at the department level as well as the individual level.

Preemployment screening. The first step in prevention logically entails not hiring officers who would present a problem. Such deselection is the aim of preemployment screening, a function in which the police psychologist has a role. Of the psychologists who perform preemployment screening, almost all rely on fairly traditional assessment tools—psychological tests and clinical interviews. By contrast, they make limited use of more innovative approaches.

There are sound reasons for using the traditional screening tools. They are valid and reliable measurements, and because they are standardized they can serve as the foundation for data bases useful for further analysis. But because the tools are used to prevent problem behaviors, including use of excessive force, screening has become psychopathology-driven. It is focused on identifying the characteristics of "bad" officers, and as a result, less is

known about the characteristics of "good" officers or about how career experiences mitigate or reinforce these characteristics.

Although information about potential psychopathology is essential to making employment decisions for highly sensitive jobs, this focus has dictated the use of a single model, one that screens out. Reliance on this model makes innovation more difficult. The psychologists interviewed made limited use of other screening approaches—risk assessment models, situational testing, or job simulations—even though these approaches could incorporate a wider range of information for making decisions about the best candidates for police officers.

Innovation on the horizon. Opportunities for developing new screening techniques that may be better able to predict violence are arising for reasons that have nothing to do with excessive force. In particular, recent developments related to the Americans With Disabilities Act will change screening procedures. According to EEOC enforcement guidance issued in May 1994, some tests administered before a position is offered are now allowable only *after* a conditional job offer has been made. Tests that might detect mental impairment or disorder are included in this category.

As a result of the ADA-driven changes, "preoffer" testing could undergo substantial change, from which will emerge new screening technologies and analytic methods. These will be used to measure how prospective police officers are likely to interact with people under stressful conditions, make decisions, and solve problems consistent with community policing practices. Automated assessment systems, interactive video testing, assessment centers, job simulations, and role playing exercises all hold promise for meeting these goals.

Testing incumbent officers. The psychologists were divided on the use of psychological tests to routinely evaluate incumbent officers for a propensity toward violence. Overall, they supported alternatives to testing because the evidence is still not conclusive that all officers at risk for excessive force could be identified. Although significant strides have been made in methods to predict behavior, psychologists are mindful that human behavior is complex; they are cautious in claiming the accuracy of scientific prediction.

Thus, recommended alternatives to testing need to be considered. At the level of the individual, these alternatives should include increased attention to the availability of counseling and support for it.

Innovations in Excessive Force Training

Some of the psychologists interviewed in the study have developed training models that take into account how people function under adverse conditions and in highly charged situations. Components of these models include:

- Cultural sensitivity and diversity.
- Intervention by fellow officers to stop the use of excessive force.
- The interaction of human perception and threat assessment.
- Decisionmaking under highly charged conditions.

- Psychological methods of situation control.

- Patrol deescalation and defusing techniques that not only teach a tactical response but also respond to the fear stimulated by confrontations.

- Anger management programs that use self-assessment and self-management techniques for providing individual feedback to officers on how variable levels of legitimate anger influence judgment.

- Training in verbal control and communication, including conflict resolution.

At the level of the department, alternatives should include increased attention to management strategies to improve training, monitoring, and screening.

Training

Some of the training described by the psychologists interviewed represents innovative and promising trends. The models are based on principles of adult learning that require class participation, using such techniques as patrol simulations and role playing. They emphasize the development of nonphysical skills as well as physical ones in a community policing environment that assumes frequent interaction between citizens and police. (See box, "Innovations in Excessive Force Training.")

For a majority of the psychologists, the excessive force training they offered was in the context of stress management only. To be sure, stress management training is important; it would be difficult to argue that police work in general, and use-of-force confrontations in particular, are not stressful. However, framing excessive force as a stress issue raises several questions, among them whether the notion is supported by research and whether the approach encourages the perception that stress justifies the use of excessive force.

Stress management training in police departments has not been evaluated systematically, and this raises an additional concern. Beyond anecdotal evidence and limited research data, there is little to indicate how stress consistently affects general police performance. A more viable training focus would reflect departmental policy statements that clarify the tolerance limits for use of force and perceive excessive force as a patrol risk that needs to be managed through a range of specialized skills.

First line supervisors received less instruction on excessive force than did recruits. Yet the psychologists indicated that first line supervisors have greater influence on officers prone to excessive

force than other police personnel. Police departments may need to shift the emphasis in supervisor training to one that incorporates larger behavioral issues in order to improve the management of excessive force. This level of supervisory training could also incorporate instruction on early warning behavioral monitoring.

Monitoring

Monitoring of officers' behavior to detect precursors of excessive force was the function used least often by psychologists. (See box, "What Police Psychologists Do.") Although a majority of the police departments represented in the study sample used some form of monitoring, 58 percent did not include the psychologists in these efforts. Computer tracking of complaints appeared to be the most prevalent form of early warning. However, while computer tracking may provide useful management information, it is not as helpful in changing behavior because the behavior is relatively well developed by the time it is flagged by the computer.

Monitoring of police behavior can serve other purposes in addition to early identification and intervention. It can involve a sustained level of contact between supervisor and officer to reinforce policy and training on excessive force. Because it involves supervisors, monitoring can provide valuable information to help police managers evaluate the effectiveness of their policies. Thus it can change the behavior of the organization overall in addition to that of the individual officer.

The evidence showing the current emphasis on referrals to counseling and on fitness evaluations provides further support for increasing the monitoring function. The need for earlier interventions, which monitoring would provide, parallels the metaphor of "broken windows," which in a community are signs of deterioration viewed as forerunners of more

serious criminal problems. The metaphor could be applied to human behavior within the police organization. Police managers should pay attention to the signals of deterioration in officer behavior, the behavioral equivalent of "broken windows," *before* it results in excessive force complaints.

What Police Psychologists Do

The survey on which this study is based revealed that psychologists' functions in police agencies fell into the categories of evaluation (preemployment screening and fitness for duty), monitoring of police behavior, training, and counseling. The breakdown is as follows:

- 77 percent provided counseling services.
- 71 percent conducted preemployment screening.
- 54 percent conducted training classes.
- 52 percent conducted evaluations of fitness for duty.
- 42 percent monitored officers' behavior.

The psychologists were also asked what types of functions they directed specifically toward the use of excessive force. Counseling, noted above as the intervention used most often, was also used to respond to excessive force more frequently than were other functions:

- 79 percent counseled officers charged with excessive force.
- 51 percent covered excessive force in stress management training.
- 25 percent conducted training specific to excessive force.
- 23 percent monitored behavior for signs of excessive force.

Of particular significance is the limited amount of training specifically directed to excessive force and the low level of monitoring.

Rethinking the role of police psychologists

The study findings indicate the lack of a coherent strategy to systematically integrate the functions performed by psychologists that are relevant to the use of excessive force. Police departments do not appear to use psychologists as a consistent resource; rather, they use them on an "as needed" basis and as protection against liability from charges of negligence. There should be a greater emphasis on involving the police psychologist in a proactive approach to managing human resources. Screening out potential violators, counseling problem officers, and evaluating them for fitness to perform their duties are critical activities, but there is a strong need for ongoing prevention activities that lead to early identification of problems and timely intervention.

Within this context, the prevalence of excessive force needs to be considered as symptomatic of a systemwide problem that implicates administrative policies as well as key elements of the human resource system: selection, training, and

supervision. These services should be integrated into a structure that maximizes the impact on the individual officer and on the department overall.

Simply using a new screening test or trying a new training program will only continue the piecemeal approach. It will not achieve the balance needed in the structure between predicting excessive force and managing it. A more balanced approach encourages attending to the front end of the system (selection) while building in safeguards throughout (monitoring, training, and supervision).

Ellen M. Scrivner, Ph.D., was a Visiting Fellow at the National Institute of Justice. The second phase of her research, now underway, consists of case studies that demonstrate how police departments, working with psychologists, have established model programs to improve their capacity to respond to officers at risk for excessive force. The report of this study will be available through NIJ.

Note

The full report of the research discussed in this Research in Brief, *The Role of Police Psychology in Controlling Excessive Force*, can be obtained from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS), Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 (800-851-3420). Ask for NCJ 146206.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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