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October 8, 2019

Sentencing Essay

The Efficiency of Law Enforcement: Radios and Firearms

INTRODUCTION

In today's day in age police officers are tasked with a multitude of responsibilities as part of their day-to-day duties and they are equipped with numerous tools to help accomplish their goals. Two essential pieces of equipment that police officers rely heavily on are their radios and firearms. The purpose of this essay is twofold: Firstly, this paper will examine why police radio communications are crucial when arriving to a scene, especially when the scenario does not match the transmissions dispatched. Secondly, the physiological and psychological response of a police officer when shooting at paper targets in comparison with human targets and the effect at longer range distances will be inspected. To properly address these issues I will supplement the information sought with the current training for these devices as well as how these methods can be improved to better address any issues or flaws.

RADIO COMMUNICATIONS

"How often misused words generate misleading thoughts"

- Herbert Spencer

This quote from the English philosopher exemplifies how miscommunications can lead to misunderstandings of what is actually happening. This applies directly to police officers because any incongruence can drastically effect how police calls are evaluated and handled. For this reason, police radio communication is so vital for successfully managing calls for police service.

To understand how the emergency call process works you must start at the beginning when calls originate from a member of the public who contacts a dispatch team. The dispatch team member then relays that information to the officers assigned the signal. These insights prior to going on a call are a bridge between the community, the dispatcher, and the officers arriving at the scene. This information is greatly beneficial for police officers who can use it to properly handle a call. For example, if the dispatcher mentions that the subject on scene has a weapon then police officers are alerted and arrive prepared to confront any threat posed. Conversely, if an

EXHIBIT A

officer gets a call about a woman in labor the officer arriving has much less alarm for violence but know they will have to provide medical help until fire rescue arrives.

While this communication ideally serves to assist police officers, there are nevertheless circumstances in which the information provided is inaccurate or altogether wrong. These miscommunications can arise in three ways: from the citizen calling in the information, and/or the communications hub relaying the information, and/or technological deficiencies in the transmissions. In the first instance the misinformation comes from a misinterpretation of a witness at the scene. While any well intentioned citizen calling the police to report an event is surely doing so because they are concerned for their safety or that of the public, it is not to say that what they perceive is correct all the time. For example, if someone were to drive by a house and observe a person looking through the windows at night they would be prudent to call police to report a possible burglary to a dwelling. However, on this occasion when police arrive and make contact with the individual they realize there is no crime taking place. In fact, what the passerby who contacted police actually saw was a homeowner who had been locked out of their home and was trying to see if he could get in another way.

However, there are instances in which the emergency caller's perceptions are correct and the information relayed to officers arriving on scene is still incorrect. This second circumstance arises from inconsistencies in the communications department. The communications department consists of a call taker and a dispatcher. The call taker receives the 911 calls, enters the information into a computer, and then relays that information to the dispatcher. The dispatcher is in charge of sending this information over the radio and determining which officers will be responding. Any information that was not heard and/or typed by the call taker, plus any information not delivered by the dispatcher during this phase could cause serious inconsistencies in how the original message from the citizen is given to the police officers responding.

The final source of miscommunication with police radios arises from technical problems. This category is the only one in which there is no human error involved. The emergency caller and dispatcher both relay accurate information to officers on scene, however, the information is completely or partially distorted due to equipment malfunctions and/or the transmission frequencies errors. Some possible sources of difficulties include: dead battery on radios receiving transmission, dispatch received in a location with low and/or blocked frequency, ambient noise canceling out transmission, and radio wavelength interference from another radio in close proximity. While these malfunctions are frequent it is very difficult to troubleshoot or identify the problems unless the officer knows that they are missing information as a results of hearing partial transmissions or viewing alerts on their equipment show them there is interference with a message coming in.

This last category of miscommunication is very common when radio networks are revamped or rewired such as in Roseville, CA. In August of 2018 the Roseville Police Department was revamping their communication system when the Roseville Police PIO noted officers "had a hard time understanding the clarity of some of the transmissions that were coming

through”. This issue caused the Roseville’s Police Department to take proactive measures to protect their officers such as having two officers assigned to each vehicle and running a backup radio system in case the new one failed. However, Roseville stopped using their 6 million dollar investment because the risk of harm to their officers was too great (“Glitches Plaguering New Roseville Police Department”).

Although not perfect, the reasoning behind upgrading police communication is sometimes deemed a necessity to keep up with technological advances. A prime example of a failure to keep up with the technological needs of officers occurred at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. In this deviating shooting a former Navy reserve killed 12 people before he was killed by police. During this incident police and fire responded but were hindered from issuing prompt aid due to faulty radios communication. This was due in part to a known issue with the older model radios paired with an old radio system which caused various radio issues making it impossible to dispatch from inside the structure or even when situated on the same side of the building in which it occurred. (Carr, A). Moreover, these communication issues were life threatening for the first police officers who arrived with their radios working, but as they traveled further into the building where the shooting exchange occurred their equipment stopped functioning:

“After the first shootout with the gunman, one officer found his radio’s battery was dead, while another officer could not receive a signal from his radio and was unable to call for help. That forced them to use an officer’s cellphone to call others outside the building” (Bogardus, K).

All of these significant issues regarding how calls are received and relayed are not meant to disparage or discourage citizens from reporting what they see; but instead are factors for police officers to take into account when they arrive at a scene. While officers should use the information originally dispatched as a tool to prepare for what they may encounter, they must also reevaluate the scene when they arrive to confirm and corroborate the initial information dispatched before making their own determination on how to best proceed. This reevaluation is a continuous process on scene and allows officers to gain as much information as possible to best handle their calls for service.

FIREARM SHOOTING DISTANCE

The second vital item that police officers carry and will now be discussed is their firearm. No matter their rank or unit placement, all police officers are responsible for carrying a firearm to perform their duties. Police officers traditionally have carried handguns on their hip, however, it has become more common for police officers to have a shotgun or rifle in their vehicles to combat the increasingly violent criminal landscape.

While the firearm a police officer carries can vary on make, model, and caliber of projectile; the gun training provided by the majority of police departments has remained a

constant by using paper silhouette targets. Paper targets are used because they are the most efficient, standardized, and economical way to train or assess a large number of police officers who need to practice or qualify. While paper targets do provide ease in determining the accuracy of shots fired, they have one big downfall; the realism of shooting under duress.*****

In most police shootings the subject is a moving threat and occurrences in which a threat is standing still and not moving are few and far between. An additional aspect that doesn't match the circumstances in which a firearm is used on duty is the shooting range environment. While practicing at the range, officers are told the sequence of shots, how long they have to shoot, and how many shots need to be fired. This safe and controlled environment doesn't match the dynamics of an underlying active scene in which police officers must react when discharging their firearm in the line of duty.

This dynamic environment also leads officers who shoot on duty to experience numerous uncontrollable physical and psychological responses in the moments leading up to, during, and after the shooting. Some of these responses were touched on by neuroscientist Kevin Fleming who has dedicated over 25 years to researching the psychology of gun violence and shooting firearms. Fleming notes that the catalysts of these responses are the numerous hormones released by the body in response to the situational flight-fight response associated with firing a weapon. Some of these hormones released include: adrenaline, cortisol serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine (Mosher, D).

Fleming goes on to point out the physical response to these hormones saying "based on our primate heritage if you're going to run away or fight something, you'd better start breathing fast to get enough oxygen in your blood, and pumping that oxygen". This response causes the body to increase blood pressure to pump blood, increase perspiration, decreased digestion, and dilate pupils. The effect of these hormones is also reciprocated in the brain's psychological response which includes increased mental focus, increased ability to recognize patterns, and an increased amount of subconscious/conscious information. Put together, the brain of the person experiencing this event is working so fast to analyze everything that it gives the sense that time is slowed down (Mosher, D).

While a novice shooter may feel these effects shooting at paper targets under a controlled environment, most law enforcement are beyond the jitters of their first trigger pull during target practice. According to Fleming, police officers are among those who have undergone repetitious cycle of training "primarily designed to bypass all of the emotional baggage of the experience". While some may claim to successfully detract themselves from the reactions shooting causes when practicing with silhouettes, Fleming doesn't "think it ever fully goes away". Fleming's reasoning is based on the body and brain's uncontrollable physical and psychological responses when shooting and the fact that these body's reaction would be heightened when firing at a human in contrast to a lifeless and motionless target (Mosher).

All of these factors contribute to an officer's shooting accuracy when faced with a situation in which they must discharge their firearm. These added stressors drastically exacerbate the indirect correlation between accuracy and the distance at which the shot is fired. That is to say, as the distance of the shot increases then the accuracy of the shot decreases. This makes the margin of error that much smaller for those under the pressure of shooting under stressful circumstances and especially at larger distances.

To address these issues law enforcement agencies are reconsidering the way they train with firearms. Special Weapon And Tactics (SWAT) teams have been the first to advance their training using using metal targets and simulated scenarios. Metal targets are used in conjunction with paper targets to help replicate hostage scenarios or used on a dolly to simulate moving targets. Simulated scenarios are also used to enhance the realism when using firearms. Simulated ammunition rounds (also known as "simmunition") are used in these scenarios and are fired at as well as by "subjects" (volunteers or other officers) posing as threats under the given scenario. By participating under these conditions police officers have a threat to their/others safety that is interactive and causes them to fire as they evaluate the scenario while under a greater pressure than simply striking a stationary target. For this reason, both of these dynamic and interactive training methods are very beneficial but shouldn't be limited to SWAT personnel. A complacent police officer is a liability; therefore, although patrol officers don't execute search warrants and may not encounter similar situations as often as SWAT officers, it is still imperative that they are exposed to this type of training so they can react appropriately if they find themselves in a situation that requires them to act.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both issues covered in this paper are extremely important to police officers' ability to accomplish their goal of serving their community in a manner which doesn't impose added risk for themselves or the citizens they serve. In the first topic covered, it is evident that police communication is vital when a police officer arrives on a scene that is different from what was originally dispatched. In these instances officers responding must review the differences, access the situation for themselves based on their observations as well as other officers on scene, and re-evaluate their pre-arrival perceptions and preparation tactics to properly handle the actual situation at hand. From the second topic covered, it is evident that there is a significant difference in an officer's physiological and psychological response when shooting at a silhouette versus having to shoot at a human subject in which deadly force is required. The elevated stress levels that accompany an on-duty shooting cannot be duplicated and increase exponentially depending on the distance, training, and experience of the officer taking the shot.

The law enforcement community is now beginning to recognize the issues in both radio communications as well as firearm training. As a result, law enforcement agencies are doing their best to respond by revamping their communications equipment and firearm tactics to address any deficiencies. However, the reality is that many police departments operate under strict budgets

which can restrict their efforts. Nevertheless, while improving equipment and training is a step in the right direction and will hopefully assist police officers in conducting their duties; one must not lose sight of the dynamic nature of police work. Police officers are tasked with continually processing and evaluating a scene from the moment they get a call for service until its completion. Quite often and despite their best efforts, these officers face numerous physical and mental stressors that combine with various changing variables they cannot control. Mover over, many times their decision to act must be made in a split second and/or with only the information they have available to them at that times which can cause misunderstandings and mistakes to occur. That is not to say that law enforcement officers are unprepared, negligent, or careless; but instead it should be understood that police officers are human. Recognizing this aspect is perhaps the simplest and the most important factor for law enforcement agencies to address deficiencies in their equipment and training.