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POINT OF VIEW

Do scholars really “get” the craft of policing?



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. “[The more things change, the more they stay the same.](#)” That catchy phrase naturally drew our attention. But it was the title’s second half, “A multi-wave national assessment of police academy training curricula,” that led us to pore through the data-laden article in depth. Authored by criminal justice academics John J. Sloan, Eugene A. Paoline and Matt R. Nobles, the deeply-researched piece probes whether “decades of efforts” succeeded in getting police recruit training to shed its historical “danger imperative” orientation in favor of “a guardian-based foundation and emphasis” that “allows for the rare instances when officers need to use warrior tools.”

After an in-depth quantitative analysis of basic training curricula [at 421 U.S. police academies](#), their answer is a resounding “no.” Across the 2002-2018 study period, “police operations” and “weapons and defensive tactics” hogged a consistent 70 percent of basic training time. Training in police operations was primarily directed at the “warrior dimensions of the occupation,” such as patrol procedures and emergency vehicle operations. On the other hand, community policing drew sparse attention. Its two components, “mediation/conflict management” and “cultural diversity” usually merited no more than three days in programs whose length often exceeded ten weeks. These findings were by no means unique:

Recent qualitative fieldwork at multiple academies by Simon (2023, 2024) and Sierra-Arevalo (2021, 2024) identifies an overall BLET [basic law enforcement training] message (often amplified by graphic body camera recordings of police officers being killed by civilians) stressing the “danger imperative” that recruits

will face on the job, supplemented with a secondary message that recruits must “become warriors before they can become guardians.”

It’s not only academics who question that “warrior” approach. While DOJ’s [Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st. Century Policing](#) doesn’t dig into the actual content of police training curricula, its take on things seems very much in sync with “the more things change”:



Law enforcement culture should embrace a guardian—rather than a warrior—mindset to build trust and legitimacy both within agencies and with the public...A starting point for changing the culture of policing is to change the culture of training academies... The designation of certain training academies as federally supported regional “training innovation hubs” could act as leverage points for changing training culture while taking into consideration regional variations.

So there we were, getting ready to pen a provoking piece about the disconnect between what police academies teach and what criminal justice academics (and DOJ) wished they would. But that nasty “real world” of policing suddenly got in the way. On September 4, 2024 the [Washington Post](#) alerted readers to the police killing of Justin Robinson, a 25-year old D.C. resident whom officers had shot dead three days earlier. Protesters were blocking streets around a police station and demanding the release of the full, unedited video of the officers’ interaction with Mr. Robinson, an apparently highly-regarded “violence interrupter” with the Capital city’s [“Cure the Streets” program](#).

[That video](#) was soon released. We’ll use screenshots and audio clips to follow along with the [U.S. Attorney’s official account](#) of what took place. Here’s how its report begins:

On September 1, 2024, at about 5:20 a.m., Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) Officers received a radio run for a vehicle that had crashed into the side of the McDonald’s...MPD Officers and D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Service (DCFEMS) members responded to the scene and observed an unresponsive individual, later identified as Justin Robinson, sitting in the driver’s seat of the vehicle....When the MPD Officers arrived, they observed a firearm in plain view in Mr. Robinson’s lap.

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As an MPD officer reached into the car and attempted to retrieve the gun from Mr. Robinson's lap, a struggle ensued, during which Mr. Robinson refused to relinquish control of his own gun and grabbed the firearm of that MPD Officer. MPD officers instructed Mr. Robinson to take his hand off the gun. After this warning, as Mr. Robinson continued to struggle, two MPD officers discharged a total of 11 rounds from their service pistols at Mr. Robinson, striking him.



Mr. Robinson was promptly pulled from the car and given first-aid. He soon died. A few minutes later an officer said “make sure that DFS [forensic services] is coming out to recover [Mr. Robinson's] firearm.” [Its image](#) (see left) on a Washington D.C. police report depicts a [Canik TP9 9 mm. pistol](#).

Where that pistol came from hasn't been revealed. But Mr. Robinson wasn't supposed to have a gun. On October 1, 2018, Mr. Robinson, then 19, drew a five-year prison term, and a 26-year old running mate, Kevin Grover, got twenty years, [for a killing that took place on D.C. streets](#) two years earlier. According to a [DOJ press release](#), Mr. Robinson got into an argument with the victim, then had Grover shoot the man dead. (Mr. Robinson was also armed but didn't fire.)

Back to the McDonald's. Officers Mateus and Gilchrist were promptly placed on paid leave. On January 15, 2025 the Justice Department [announced that neither would be charged](#):

After a careful, thorough, and independent review of the evidence, federal prosecutors have found insufficient evidence to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the MPD Officers were criminally liable for Mr. Robinson's death.

Both officers have supposedly [returned to duty](#).

Fraught officer-citizen encounters are commonplace. Happily, most reach a more-or-less amicable conclusion, and everyone gets to go home. But as in this case, some citizens can prove seriously uncompliant, and may even be armed. Seemingly “ordinary” situations can quickly descend into chaos (“[Routinely Chaotic](#)”). That's a special problem in chronically violence-ridden places such as D.C. (“[America's Violence-Beset Capital City](#)”), where urgent calls frequently strain resources. Two recent posts, “[What Cops Face](#)” and “[When \(Very\) Hard Heads Collide](#)” discuss how such things can

undermine policing. And there's more bad news. As we mentioned in "[Working Scared](#)", outcomes are always influenced by officer attributes and skillsets:

Some cops may be insufficiently risk-tolerant; others may be too impulsive. Poor tactics can leave little time to make an optimal decision. Less-than-lethal weapons may not be at hand, or officers may be unpracticed in their use. Cops may not know how to deal with the mentally ill, or may lack external supports for doing so. Dispatchers may fail to pass on crucial information, leaving cops guessing. And so on.

Here, all the above apply. Imagine responding to a call where an ex-con (with a violent prior conviction, no less) is passed out behind the wheel of a car he crashed into a drive-through. What's more, there's a gun on his lap and he's uncompliant when awakened. Two law enforcement scholars assessed the police response in the [Washington Post](#). One thought that officer tactics were "really poor from start to finish." In his view, the gun in Mr. Robinson's lap didn't pose an immediate threat. Since "there was no need to rush" officers could have "set up a perimeter and tried to wake Robinson from a distance with a loudspeaker." In contrast, the other academic thought that going after the gun "without startling Robinson" was a good idea. But once the man started wiggling, "cover and distance" became the best approach.

We're not sure that D.C.'s chronically-pressed cops would be prone to set up loudspeakers. Still, we have a serious quibble with sticking a pistol into a suspect's car, let alone their face. Doing so clearly unnerved Mr. Robinson and, we feel, directly provoked the tragic outcome. "[When \(Very\) Hard Heads Collide](#)" describes a like provocation, and an equally catastrophic result, when Ohio officers tried to coax a woman out of her Lexus. Here's what took place:

Eight seconds after Officer 2 began ordering Ms. Young to exit her vehicle, Officer 1 walked by and planted himself in front of the car....Only nine seconds after that, the car began to move. Veering sharply to the right, it knocked Officer 1 aside. Having already unholstered his gun, he instantly fired. His round penetrated the windshield...and fatally wounded Ms. Young.



Ta'Kiya Young had just participated in a mob shoplift. She had a minor criminal record, including petty theft and driving offenses. So she was a non-compliant sort. And when a cop placed himself in front of her car and drew his gun, something definitely snapped.

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Back to recruit training. Should academies shed their “danger imperative” orientation and adopt “a guardian-based foundation and emphasis” that “allows for the rare instances when officers need to use warrior tools”?

Our preference would be to drop the loaded language and ideologically-infused approach. Instead, do as we suggested in [“How to Defuse Police-Civilian Encounters”](#) and [“Why Do Officers Succeed?”](#). Ask street cops what *they* experience and how things can improve. How do they avoid igniting non-compliant souls? How do they minimize the use of force? How do they keep colleagues from making things worse? Instead of shedding tactical training, suffuse it with the real, everyday experiences of working cops. Use actual examples, such as the above, to explore the effects of chaotic, potentially dangerous situations (and no, they’re definitely *not* “rare”) on the police response. After all, thanks to *YouTube*, there are few “secrets” to keep.

And be sure to let us know how it goes!