

To Shoot or Not to Shoot: An Analysis of Police Officers' Deadly Force Decision-Making Processes

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

How police officers exercise their unique power to use deadly force continues to be a topic of interest among academics and, due to recent events, has moved to the forefront of public policy concerns. A number of scholars have proposed theories as to how police officers make the decision to use deadly force, but arguably the most comprehensive deadly force decision-making framework was put forth by Arnold Binder and Peter Scharf three and a half decades ago (1980; Scharf and Binder, 1983). They posit that officers' decision-making processes during an encounter that either includes police use of deadly force, or could have reasonably included police use of deadly force but did not, can be broken down into a four-phase model: anticipation, entry and initial contact, information exchange, and the final frame. Binder and Scharf believe that decisions made by a police officer during prior phases of the encounter have bearing on the officer's final decision regarding whether to use deadly force. Previous work has referenced this framework when analyzing the differences in decision-making between officers involved in incidents in which they discharged their weapons and officers who held fire in incidents wherein no officers shot (Scharf and Binder, 1983; Fridell and Binder, 1992). Scholars have yet, however, to study decision-making processes during incidents in which multiple officers are involved, but only some chose to discharge their weapon. Such an analysis would not only contribute to our understanding of how police officers make decisions during this type of encounter, but it may also shed light on why, given the same situation, some officers make different decisions regarding the use of deadly force.

Using qualitative data collected during interviews with police officers across the United States who were involved in incidents in which at least one officer discharged his or her firearm and at least one officer did not, this study assessed the extent to which the Binder and Scharf deadly force decision-making framework applied to officers' decision-making processes in events where only some officers present chose to shoot. The sample used in the analysis consisted of 83 police officers: 46 who chose to use deadly force during their incident and 37 who chose not to use deadly force, but were present when another officer fired at a suspect.

Initial coding of the interviews summarized each instance of decision-making using the model proposed by Binder and Scharf (1980; Scharf and Binder, 1983). The initial codes were used to identify when and how decisions were made in each of the four phases, as well as the situational context in which decisions were made by the participating officers. A constant comparison method was used to assess the decision-making processes of the police officers in the sample. Comparisons were made between shooters and witness officers as two separate groups and among police officers involved in the same incident with goal of identifying themes directly related to officers' decision to use or not to use deadly force.

By focusing on the decision-making processes of police officers participating in the same incident, the findings from this study shed light on reasons why, given the same situation, some officers decided to use deadly force against citizens, while other officers choose to hold fire. In addition, the way in which the data were collected provided an opportunity to assess if and how individual officers' decision-making processes were impacted by the presence and decisions made by other officers involved in the same incident. This is a critical addition to the deadly force literature, as past research on the topic has viewed the decision by a police officer to use deadly force as an individual choice and not as one potentially influenced by the presence of, or decisions made by, other officers on scene.