POLICE GUNFIGHTING

"The fascination with shooting depends on whether you are at the right or wrong end of the gun" (P.G. Wodehouse)

This lecture focuses primarily on state, county, and municipal police departments with regard to their in-service firearms training, proficiency, and performance. However, it's also an attempt at a liberal arts approach to this often-taboo topic in criminal justice higher education. Nothing is probably more vital to the police function, outside of being able to render first aid and save lives, than the proficient use of firearms, also called police *marksmanship, gunfighting,* or *pistolcraft,* which can save lives. My use of the term "gunfighting" is intended to draw parallels between much of what when on in the 19th century "Wild West" days and what goes on today. This is an academic document intended to make points that are relevant to the learning objectives of a college course on policing; it is not a document that should be relied upon for official figures, opinions, or statements that could be used as evidence in court by someone thinking about suing the police for wrongful death or anything like that. Especially for the topic of "suicide by cop" (SbC), this lecture is likely to be uninformative since knowledge is only beginning to be accumulated in this area and not much can be said other than some nonlethal strategies work and others don't (Lord 2005).

It should be realized there are a lot of "myths" in this area (as in other areas of policing, like police deviance and ethics, for example). Historically, the facts are these: the classic image of two gunfighters dueling it out at 20 paces during the "Old West" days is pure Hollywood; the 1881 shootout at the OK Corral did involve a face-off between "good" and "bad" guys but is not all that deserving of remembrance that it should become the mythical model upon which all gunfights followed. In reality, gunslingers preferred ambush, and it typically was a fair fight as long as the victim was wearing a gun and was shot from the front. Gunfighters were often acquitted because a jury felt the victim was dangerous and deserved it. Those are the historical facts.

Also historically, the situations and circumstances that lead to the most common use of police firearms are the same today as they have always been. That is, if one examines police history as far back as the 19th century, one finds the same categories of encounters involving firearms usage: resisting arrest, interruption of crimes in progress, escorting or transporting prisoners, conducting field interviews, and investigation of suspicious persons. The introduction of automobiles, of course, brought drive-by shootings, and the war on drugs as well as terrorism presented police with more well-armed adversaries. However, the nature of police gunfighting has changed little, and always seems to involve the worst of circumstances: *close proximity, poor lighting, foot chases, inadequate facts, and innocent bystanders*. In short, police are often involved in close-quarters combat shoot/don't shoot scenarios. "Combat" shooting is the same as so-called "practical" shooting, which involves running with a gun, past obstacles, and facing real-world shoot/don't shoot situations, such as attempting to hit the hostage-taker while sparing the hostage. Over the years, names for this type of police gunfighting have evolved from: COMBAT to SURVIVAL to PRACTICAL to TACTICAL to DEFENSIVE, but regardless of the name for the training program, it's all essentially the same thing -- shooting accurately under the worst conditions possible.

Research on police gunfighting is difficult to find. There is plenty of information on police use of force, brutality, and excessive use of force (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993), but almost no theoretical models exist for the scholarly study of police gunfighting. Indeed, police "science" in this area appears to draw heavily upon fads or fashions popular at the time in gun magazines or at shooting ranges. Police gunfighters also seem to be at the mercy of manufacturers and vendors who taunt the latest products in front of them. To verify this, simply engage in a conversation with any

police officer on this topic, and you'll instantly be inundated by a variety of pseudo-scientific ideas about what makes for the best caliber weapon, ammunition, stance, grip, trigger pull, and sight solutions. Each officer appears to have their own theory, despite efforts at standardization, and each are convinced of the superiority of their ways or the greatness of an instructor they once had.

It was Teddy Roosevelt who first instituted police training in firearms as New York City commissioner during the start of the 20th century. Police received little to no firearms training during the 19th century. Commissioner Roosevelt required the US cavalry standard of 15 to 20 shots fired twice annually, with more training sessions for those with inferior marksmanship scores. By the World War I era, handgun training caught on in police departments across America, and the National Rifle Association got involved during 1920 by establishing competition standards and range rules. The U.S. military provided the police with notions about what constituted a "qualified" shooter, such as "expert", "sharpshooter", "marksman", "rifleman" or "sniper" and various shooter associations have added "master" or "grand master" qualifications as well as instructor certifications. The following table represents the current NRA classification system along with what percentages of accuracy are required, although the lowest rating (below 75%) represents what the U.S. Park Service and other brave authorities have stated off the record as the point when a shooter is so bad, they threaten the safety of bystanders:

High Master	**97% or higher**
Master	**94-96%**
Expert	**89-93%**
Sharpshooter	**84-88%**
Marksman	**under 84%**
Danger to Bystanders	**under 75%**

The FBI embraced firearms training soon after their National Academy was founded in 1935. FBI training involves academic as well as practical learning, but perhaps the most well-known feature at the FBI academy is the famous Hogan's Alley complex, established in 1987 to be a realistic, urban training environment for street survival. Paint gun exercises are used in addition to regular ammo, and the targets are humanoid-shaped rather than bulls-eye shaped. It is generally believed by most experts on the subject that police training should involve humanoid-targets, or at least paper targets different from the standard bulls-eye targets (e.g., Colt, bobber, Prehle, silhouette, combat). There is also some consensus on the effectiveness of police training involving "running man" or combat village scenarios, such as those used at the FBI academy. Research also indicates the most effective distance for training police officers at combat shooting is at the 7-foot line since that is the range at which most encounters are experienced.

States began mandating police in-service firearms requalification in the early 1960's, and the movement toward mandatory requalification (once or twice a year, with officers having to shoot a "qualified" score, marksman or above) picked up steam in 1967 after the release of a report by the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice. By 1972, most states not only required extensive pre-service firearms proficiency (usually with at least a minimum of 20 hours of range time incorporated into the basic training curriculum) but also required annual requalification. By 1990, groups like IALEFI and ASLET as well as a number of private academies (in existence since 1969 first with the Smith & Wesson Academy, then Gunsite,

and then the so-called ultimate academy at Thunder Ranch in Mountain Home, TX) provided support for the continuation of police involvement in firearms training and requalification. Today, it is not uncommon to see basic training consist of as many as 80 hours (two weeks) of firearms training, and in-service training consisting of twice-yearly requalification.

Police firearms training typically includes qualification with a pistol, and also with a shotgun, general knowledge on the use of deadly force, some time on a training simulator such as FATS (Firearms Training System), and chemical agent training (using and getting sprayed) on oleoresin capsicum (OC pepper spray). Pistol qualification usually requires at least a 84% proficiency score on two or three consecutive runs of the Practical Pistol Course (PPC), and shotgun qualification usually requires 80% proficiency (which is also the passing score on most written tests). Officers who shoot at proficiency levels in the 90's usually become firearms instructors. Some departments exist that allow qualifying scores in the 70-80% range, and another small number of departments require all their officers to qualify in the 90-100% range.

THE PRACTICAL PISTOL COURSE (PPC) STANDARD

The protocol or drill for the Practical Pistol Course (PPC) has been around at least since 1970 and was originally developed by the FBI to describe shooting at man-silhouettes from a variety of distances and shooting positions. In practice, PPC refers generally to any sort of pseudo-competitive shooting event usually involving police or police-style "duty" weapons and live-fire tactical exercises. It is technically distinct from a basic marksmanship course which can be done with paintball or any caliber weapon. PPC has become the de facto standard in police firearms training. Many agencies have made modifications to the course of fire. The PPC is widely used in competitions (such as the one for Lambda Alpha Epsilon, a club for criminal justice students) and in advanced training (such as that for Federal Law Enforcement Officers). Either of these links should take you to tables showing the course of fire, which are not reproduced here, but simply alluded to.

There is some debate over how "practical" or real-world oriented the PPC is. For example, police firearms training *differs significantly from military firearms training* in that the military traditionally uses a "cold" approach (loading weapons immediately before firing and promptly unloading them afterwards). Police departments use a "hot" or "warm" approach, allowing the shooter to start a course with the handgun loaded and holstered. Military weapons are frequently full automatics. Police weapons are usually semiautomatics and to load the first round, one must pull back the slide to load a cartridge from the magazine. Another issue is the "stress" requirement (running a mile or so to build up the metabolism before shooting). Most police training has dropped or neglected this requirement. Stress shooting went the way of political correctness as the term "combat" was replaced by "practical." Yet another issue is known as the Comstock Count which means that during the run of a shooting course, the elapsed time is measured. As the officer moves around from position to position or during timed moments at different distances on a firing line, the point score is divided by the elapsed time. This amounts to a points-per-second evaluation of performance, and it makes it much harder to qualify or requalify. More police departments use the Comstock Count than those who don't. There are also debates between those who advocate the Weaver stance (head cocked slightly down, standing sort of sideways, and elbows bent) versus the Isosceles stance (standing straight up, facing forward, and elbows locked). Numerous other controversies exist, but consensus appears to be in place regarding the importance of a "boxer" stance (knees bent).

To pass or graduate from a PPC course, about half (50%) of departments rely strictly upon a

point system. You either score in the required proficiency range for the point totals on your type of target, OR you are suspended, dismissed, or relieved from normal duty after two or three chances at the course of fire (dismissal usually occurs only 30% of the time, and then only for "chronic" failure to requalify, and then often involving a disability, or courtesy, dismissal). Under the point-score system, your point score is recorded year after year in your personnel files. The other half (50%) of departments use a pass-fail system, where the instructor (or referee) only adds the points up in their head, and records whether or not the officer passed or failed the course. The purpose of the pass-fail system is to deny attorneys access to a record of point scores if and when an officer is charged with a civil action. Pass-fail systems (and other civil liability concerns) have had the effect of eroding the model of police professionalism, in regards to gunfighting skills, first charted out by the NRA and supported by many other groups over the years.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POLICE SHOOTING

It is important in police gunfighting to have well-placed effective hits. *The purpose is to stop somebody committing a felonious assault before they cause death or grievous bodily harm*, and this requires quality hits, not hits in the leg, ear lobe, or other non-effective places. This has to be done quickly, not slowly, but not so quickly the officer loses control. Quickness of movement is called for when moving toward cover and when reloading. Control (economy of motion) is called for when drawing the weapon, aiming (obtaining the sight solution), and squeezing the trigger. There is always a balance sought between speed and accuracy. Taking cover or obtaining concealment is an important part of police firearms training, and most PPC-like courses of fire do indeed include practice at shooting from the left and right side of a barrier. Proper handing of a handgun, such as drawing it from a holster and so forth, is called gunhandling (as opposed to marksmanship), and only a few police departments assess this.

However, there seems to be a consensus among practitioners and researchers alike that police marksmanship in real-life (scene of a crime) situations is less than desirable, something along the order of *one hit for every six shots* (Morrison 2002). This means that in gunfighting with actual criminals, the average police officer effectiveness is at the level of 17% proficiency. This is much less, as you will have noticed, than the 84% proficiency level required for qualification in police training. It also illustrates the problem, that real-life situations are so vastly different from training situations.

One might ask at this point if police officers are such bad shooters in real life, how good are the criminals? As far as determining the average proficiency of armed criminals, researchers typically distinguish between *determined adversaries* and *ordinary adversaries*. Most police encounters involve ordinary adversaries - those criminals who are on unfamiliar territory themselves, and typically firing shots over their shoulder while fleeing. From what limited research exists, we know that the average ordinary adversary effectiveness is something around the order of 10% proficiency (Morrison 2002). The proficiency of determined adversaries is presumably higher. It may or may not be reassuring that, in real-life situations, criminals are only 7% worse shooters than police.

Killings by police of felons is called justifiable homicide when it is done to prevent imminent death or serious bodily injury to an officer or another person. On average, police justifiably kill about 400 felons each year (Brown & Langan 2001). Typically (60% of the time), the race of these felons is white, but if you go back to before 1978, the vast majority were black. In 1998, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported that 62% of felons killed by police were young white

males while only 35% were black. However, blacks account for a larger percentage if you express the data in terms of risk and population size (since young black males only account for 1% of the population, they always account for a larger percentage when statistics are calculated this way). States like Florida, Illinois, and D.C. account for a large number of justifiable homicides, and the typical police officer (85% of the time) is white and about 33 years of age. Female police officers are only involved 1% of the time.

When felons shoot and kill police officers, this is called murder, and LEOKA (Law Enforcement Officers Killed or Assaulted) data is readily collected by the FBI's UCR and NIBRS programs. Since 1978, an average of 79 police officers are murdered annually in the line of duty. The typical police officer killed is a white male with about 9 years of law enforcement experience. The two most common situations are arrest (39%) and responding to a disturbance call (16%). The officer's own gun is used in about 12% of all murders. The felons who murder police officers are predominately young black males, this group outnumbering young white males by a ratio of six to one.

The youngest person that police have ever shot and killed was an 11-year old, and that incident happened back in 1981. Most felons shot by police are in their late twenties, and they are typically shot at and hit several times, but this is standard police procedure, and the way police are trained, to keep shooting until the person stops and public safety can be assured. Some typical situations are described below:

Officers arrive at a two-story apartment building to serve an arrest warrant on an upstairs resident, and the resident points a gun out the upstairs window at the officers. Officers draw, discharge, and fire their weapons, with one bullet striking the resident in the chest. He dies shortly afterwards on the apartment room floor before police can get upstairs.
Officers respond to a call about drug-related activity in a darkened alley (known high crime area) where they find a group of young people and order them to freeze and drop any weapons. One suspect flees, shooting at the officers as he runs. Police fire back and give chase. The suspect jumps in a vehicle stopped at a light, and orders the operator to drive. Instead the operator flees. Police surround the vehicle, and the suspect fires at police because the vehicle will not move. The officers shoot into the vehicle, hitting the suspect several times until he slumps over the steering wheel.
Officers receive a tip about a wanted felon on a bus. They stop the bus, and walk through it to make an identification. As they approach one passenger, he gets up and attempts to run off the bus past the officer. A scuffle ensues, and the felon pulls a pistol out of his pocket, firing one shot off. The other officer on the bus shoots the felon, barely missing the other officer and some other bus passengers.
Officers respond to a domestic disturbance call and are met by a female complainant across the street from the location. She states her estranged husband is in the house, in violation of a protection order, has gone crazy, and has several weapons. As officers approach the building, shots seem to be coming out of the house, one of them piercing the gas tank of a nearby vehicle. As officers are attempting to take cover and ordering bystanders to take cover, further shots ring out. Police and backup return heavy fire into the house, mortally wounding the husband.

BECOMING A CERTIFIED INSTRUCTOR

Most state, county, and municipal police departments have more than one firearms instructor on their force. In fact, the average is five (5) full- or part-time instructors. The ease (most all one has to do is shoot above the "expert" level and take an instructor course) of becoming a "certified" firearms instructor may very well make firearms certification the most popular form of certification in police work. About 75% of all states have a state-mandated firearms instructor certification course, and the remainder (25%) allow departments to self-certify their own instructors. Self-certification is most common at the state and federal levels. One of the things that creates an incentive to become a firearms instructor is the fact that *instructors usually need requalify only once annually*, while regular police officers must often requalify with handguns twice annually.

A few police departments send their instructors (or allow them to go) to privately operated schools, many of which are manufacturer-based. For example, in relative rank order of popularity, here are the training camps run by gun manufacturers which police firearms instructors go to: Heckler & Koch, Glock, Smith & Wesson, Beretta, and SigArms. These are in addition to the number of private camps, such as Chapman, Gunsite, and Thunder Ranch. There seems to be a preference by police chiefs to reimburse more expenses at manufacturer camps rather than private camps. Most likely, the department has selected a certain manufacturer for the standard issue duty weapon, and it makes sense to send firearms to that manufacturer site. It could be argued, however, that private camps make for a more sensible choice, since weapon design characteristics rarely play a role in improving police firearms proficiency. On the other hand, one might have the usual cautions about privatization in this aspect of police work.

ADVANCED GUNFIGHTING SKILLS

Perhaps the most important skill (along with stance and grip) to become a good shooter is aiming. Anyone who has ever held a gun knows how to line up the front sight with the rear sight (as in aiming at a bulls-eye target). However, due to the bad conditions surrounding most police gunfighting, training may consist of point-sighting rather than sight-aiming (the two basic types of aiming). It should be noted most police departments still use sight-aiming (lining up the sights), but point-sighting strives to discontinue use of sights altogether. It is more typical of the real-life situations police encounter. Point-sighting involves focusing upon the target rather than the sights, and it is akin to the "flash" technique of tracing where the bullet goes by aiming with the muzzle flash.

Below-eye-level shooting is another advanced skill, and in the Wild West days, was known as shooting from the hip or belly shooting. A few police departments may encourage development of this skill, but most do not. Of those that do, the most common training is at near eye-level.

One-handed shooting (with the weak hand) is a common part of police training. Departments frequently do NOT require their officers to qualify with their weak hand, but some shooting with it is part of the PPC along with a measurement of reloading time. There are many reasons why police would need to learn one-handed techniques. An injury to one hand may have occurred, or one hand might be required to do something else. Traditionally, the weak hand is primarily used for support, to reload, and/or clear malfunctions. Advanced training might involve other uses. For example, it is not believed there is any police department, anywhere, that supports training in simultaneous two-gun firing.

JUDGMENT TRAINING

The primary means by which police departments train their officers to achieve better judgment and decision making when it comes to gunfighting is by use of computer simulation. The most common computer simulation program is the FATS (FireArms Training Simulator), where one popular version is marketed by En-Mark, Inc., but some departments develop and use their own videos/movies and/or PowerPoint slides. A few other departments do role-playing with special firearms (or converted Glocks) that can fire "simunition" ammo, developed by Simunition Inc. This kind of special ammo, also known as FX (special effects) ammo, is basically paintball ammo for real guns. About 40% of police departments own (or lease) a FATS system, and despite competitors, it is the most common training simulator, having been around since 1984.

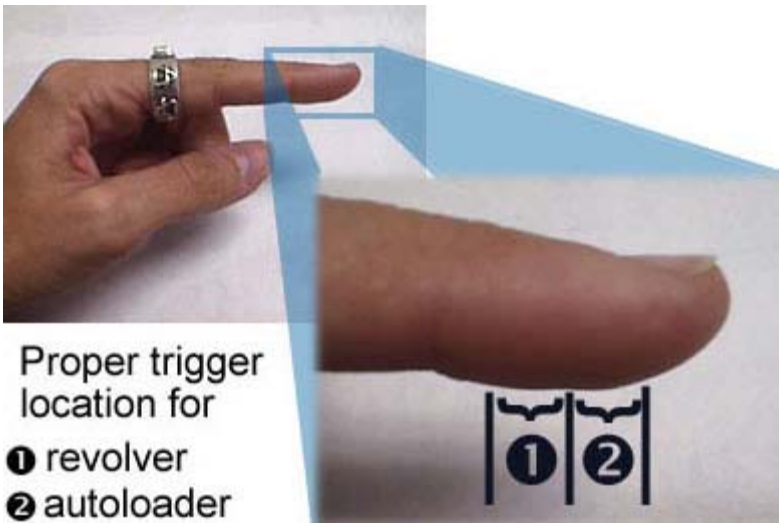
Simulators expose officers to about six or seven high-risk scenarios for training purposes. The machines can hold up to as many as thirty scenarios, and add-on scenarios are available on CD-rom, but for a smaller number of scenarios usually suffices for training purposes. In fact, you would probably want to exclude some of the "no-win" scenarios.

In summary, police gunfighting skills have evolved slowly and sporadically since the "Wild West" days, and despite the appearance of progress, most notably in the form of hubris, privatization, and some embracing of technology, very little has been found to dramatically improve accuracy and proficiency, or get the police at a skill level which is appropriate for their function in modern society. Part, if not most, of the problem is due to the relative lack of attention this topic receives from the academic community.

TECHNICAL TRAINING

It's amazing how many people are not the least bit familiar with the technical operation of firing a handgun accurately. Sometimes, criminal justice majors will say something like "I plan to go into police work, but I never want to fire a handgun," and it's just plain silly to say that. Guns are an integral part of most everything in criminal justice. Basically, it's a skill like anything else, and if you practice at it, you can become quite good at it. With that in mind, here are some sample charts to help the absolute beginner get started at becoming better.

"Targeting" chart



INTERNET RESOURCES

American Society of Law Enforcement Training (ASLET)
Chapman Academy of Practical Shooting
Firearms Tactical MegaLinks
Gunsite Academy
Handgun Drills, Standards, and Training Page
International Association of Law Enforcement Firearms Instructors (IALEFI)
Justifiable Homicide of Felons by Police and Murder of Police by Felons (pdf)
Marksmanship Awards and Classifications
MegaList of Firearms Training Schools
National Rifle Association (NRA)
UCR Reports on Law Enforcement Officers Killed or Assaulted (LEOKA)

U.S. Practical Shooting Association (USPSA)

PRINTED RESOURCES

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Syllabus for JUS 205

MegaLinks in Criminal Justice