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Author(s): Joel H. Garner ; Christopher D. Maxwell

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Understanding the Prevalence and Severity of Force Used By and Against the Police

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National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)
Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000

Executive Summary

Joel H. Garner
Joint Centers for Justice Studies, Inc.

and

Christopher D. Maxwell
Michigan State University

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Understanding the Prevalence and Severity of Force Used By and Against the Police

Study Design

Based on confidential self-reports from police officers in six law enforcement agencies in late 1996 and early 1997, this research measures the prevalence of physical force and the severity of force used in 7,512 adult custody arrests. This research determined the extent to which characteristics of offense situations, police officers, and arrested suspects are associated with increased prevalence of physical force or increased severity of force. This research expands upon prior research on force by using common measures and analyses in six jurisdictions, using multiple measures of force, and by including a broad range of characteristics that might be associated with increased use of force.

The law enforcement agencies participating in this research were the Charlotte–Mecklenberg County Police Department, the Colorado Springs Police Department, the Dallas Police Department, the Saint Petersburg Police Department, the San Diego Police Department and the San Diego County Sheriff's Office.

Study Findings

The ten most important findings of this study are:

1. Police officers use some physical force in 17.1 % of all adult custody arrests.
2. Suspects use some physical force in 11.9% of all adult custody arrests.
3. Using these two different measures of force, the amount of force used by police is at the low end of severity on each measure of force.
4. Weapons are used by officers in 2.1% of all arrests. The weapon most frequently used by the officers is pepper spray, 79 out of 7,512 arrests. (See Table 1).
5. Weaponless tactics were used by officers in 15.8% of all arrests. The tactic most frequently used is grabbing, with 589 out of 7,512 arrests. (See Table 2)
6. In 16.4% of the adult custody arrests, the police officers reported that they did not place handcuffs or any other kind of restraint on the suspect. (See Table 3).

Table 1: Weapon Use by Police

<u>Weapon Use by Police</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
None	7,354	97.9
Baton	6	0.1
Flashlight	23	0.3
Handgun	6	0.1
Chemical Agent	79	1.1
Rifle/Shotgun	2	0.0
Motor Vehicle	9	0.1
Canine	14	0.2
Other	19	0.3

Table 2: Use of Weaponless Tactics

<u>Use of Weaponless Tactics</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
No Physical Contact	6,328	84.2
Spit	21	0.3
Grab	589	7.8
Twist Arm	98	1.3
Wrestle	91	1.2
Push/Shove	80	1.1
Hit	12	0.2
Kick	3	0.0
Bite/Scratch	1	0.0
Pressure Hold	48	0.6
Carotid Hold	18	0.2
Control Hold	153	2.0
Other Tactic	70	0.9

Table 3: Use of Restraints

<u>Use of Restraints</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
No Restraints	1,234	16.4
Hand Cuffs	6,182	82.3
Leg Cuffs	67	0.9
More Severe	29	0.4

7. Based on a survey of 503 experienced officers, we ranked forty seven different types of police behaviors from the least severe to the most severe and found that most arrests involved police behaviors no more severe than using handcuffs. (See Table 4).

Police Behaviors	Officer		Arrests		
	Ranking	N	Percent	Cumulative	
No Actions Reported	0.0	62	0.8	0.8	
Speak in Conversational Voice	15.6	153	2.0	2.9	
Gently Hold Suspect	15.9	83	1.1	4.0	
Two Officers Present	20.6	668	8.9	12.9	
Command Suspect	22.0	99	1.3	14.2	
Shout/Curse at Suspect	22.5	3	0.0	14.2	
Spit on Suspect	23.2	2	0.0	14.2	
Chase Suspect in Helicopter	24.0	1	0.0	14.3	
Verbally Threaten Suspect	25.4	5	0.1	14.3	
Push Suspect	26.7	0	0.0	14.3	
Use Handcuff	28.2	4,305	57.3	71.6	
Chase Suspect on Foot/Bicycle	29.3	95	1.3	72.9	
Use Leg Restraints	30.0	14	0.2	73.1	
Threaten to Use Flashlight	30.9	0	0.0	73.1	
Threaten to Use Chemical Agent	31.7	1	0.0	73.1	
Possess Canine	31.9	10	0.1	73.2	
Threaten to Use Baton	32.0	1	0.0	73.2	
Grab Suspect	33.0	461	6.1	79.4	
Display Baton	34.6	4	0.1	79.4	
Use Pressure Hold	34.7	10	0.1	79.6	
Twist Suspects Arm	35.1	98	1.3	80.9	
Use Other Tactic	35.2	32	0.4	81.3	
Display Chemical Agent	37.0	7	0.1	81.4	
Use Severe Restraints	37.1	17	0.2	81.6	
Bite Suspect	37.7	0	0.0	81.6	
Display Flashlight	37.8	7	0.1	81.7	
Use Choke Hold	38.9	78	1.0	82.7	
Possess Shotgun	40.2	640	8.5	91.3	
Kick Suspect	40.6	1	0.0	91.3	
Hit Suspect	40.8	2	0.0	91.3	
Chase Suspect in Car	41.4	137	1.8	93.1	
Use Chemical Agent	45.9	31	0.4	93.5	
Threaten to Use Car as Weapon	46.0	0	0.0	93.5	
Threaten Suspect with Canine	46.1	5	0.1	93.6	
Wrestle with Suspect	48.2	184	2.4	96.1	
Use Flashlight	49.9	23	0.3	96.4	
Threaten to Use Shotgun/Rifle	51.8	1	0.0	96.4	
Use Canine	52.1	12	0.2	96.5	
Threaten Suspect with Handgun	52.4	2	0.0	96.6	
Use Baton	53.0	6	0.1	96.6	
Use Other Weapon	53.1	15	0.2	96.8	
Display Handgun	55.4	165	2.2	99.0	
Use Carotid Hold	56.0	31	0.4	99.5	
Display Shotgun/Rifle	57.4	23	0.3	99.8	
Use Car as Weapon	69.4	10	0.1	99.9	
Use Shotgun/Rifle	79.2	2	0.0	99.9	
Use Handgun	81.7	6	0.1	100.0	
Average Ranking Score	30.4	7,512			

8. Fifteen characteristics are associated with both the prevalence and the severity of force.

Characteristics Associated with Increased Use of Force	
Research Site	Younger Officers
Arrest on Weekend	Male Officers
Suspect Not Already in Custody	Prior Injury to Officer
Priority Call	Male Suspect
Officer Uses Lights and Sirens	Suspect Known to Carry Weapons
Officer Calls for Backup	More Bystanders
More Police at Scene	Suspect Antagonistic toward Police
	Suspect Uses Force

9. Twelve other characteristics are associated with either the prevalence of force or the severity of force but not both.

Characteristics Associated with Increased	
Prevalence of Force	Severity of Force
Location Known for Criminal Activity	Poor Visibility
Bystander Demeanor toward Police	Violent Offense
Police Initiated Contact with Suspect	Increase in Number of Suspects
Hispanic Officer	Police Demeanor toward Suspect
Suspect Not White, Black or Hispanic	Bystanders Stranger to Suspect
Suspect Not in a Gang	
Suspect Intoxicated	

10. Twelve characteristics were tested but found to not be associated with either measure of police use of force.

Characteristics Not Associated with Police Use of Force	
Location Known to be Hazardous	Number of Surveys Completed
Arrest Occurred Inside	Age of Suspect
Officer in the Patrol Division	Suspect Known to be Assaultive
Resident Initiated with the Police	Suspect Height*
Officer Off Duty	Suspect Weight*
Officer Height	
Officer Weight	

* Information not available in one site.

Implications of this Research

This research identifies several operational, officer, and suspect characteristics that are and are not associated with increased prevalence of physical force or increased severity of force. In this research, officers making arrests on weekends, responding to priority calls, and using lights and sirens use increased prevalence of force and increased severity of force. In addition, younger officers, male officers and officers with prior on the job injuries use more force. Police also use more force against male suspects, suspects known to carry weapons and when suspects use physical force to resist officers.

This research started when one police manager realized that his department was revising its use of force policies with no systematic information about how much force their officers used and under what circumstances officers used more or less force. This and other research has demonstrated that most arrests do not involve physical force and that when physical force is used it typically involves grabbing and other low severity weaponless tactics. Future training and policies might benefit from increased attention to the more frequently used but less severe types of force.

Future Research

This research was implemented, in great part, by the participating law enforcement agencies and it demonstrates that other agencies can conduct their own study of the prevalence and severity of force. In addition, after controlling for several dozen characteristics including the extent of resistance by suspects, this research found that there were still unexplained differences in the amount of force used in some of the six participating jurisdictions. This suggests that future research might more closely examine the characteristics of law enforcement agencies, their use of force policies, and their training programs to assess the extent to which they are associated with lower prevalence of physical force and decreased severity of force.

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