

GST, A True Investment in Community Relations

By Charles Fernandez

Recently, police across America have run headfirst into a cultural roadblock. Due to the widespread use of cellphone cameras, the public gets a front row seat to police force incidents at what would be an unheard-of rarity only a few years ago. The result is a public relations crisis for police departments. In the American culture, there are certain "rules" such as "don't shoot a man in the back" or "you don't shoot an unarmed man". While these rules speak to a general code of honor, they are commonly taken literally. America's police officers are not exempt from these rules. To violate one of these "rules" evokes suspicion, assumptions, and allegations of police wrongdoing or worse. Ultimately, a wedge is created between a community and its police - a wound that can take decades to heal from. Currently, we are witnessing our society struggle with the "you don't shoot an unarmed man" rule. This is exacerbated by the widespread cell-phone videos involving recent police force incidents. The impact of these videos cannot be understated. Even the director of the F.B.I. has recently addressed the impact of these [viral videos](#) on police officers and their communities. The public opinion has been swayed by these raw, but often context lacking videos. This, coupled with some high-profile police shootings involving unarmed attackers, has created a hostile environment for the modern police officer.

The question arises: what is the answer? To address any problem, one must first identify the cause. When a doctor observes a symptom, such as a fever, the doctor must first ascertain what is causing the fever. Society would not (or should not) tolerate a medical practitioner just blindly throwing medication at symptoms without first understanding the cause. In this vein, we must determine why an officer may end up shooting an unarmed person. When we look at many of the cases, it usually boils down to the officer not being trained in how to maintain a degree of control when the fight takes a "turn for the worse" or "goes bad". We must not underestimate the effects of stress on human decision making. Even critics of police force will shoot an unarmed person when they are under stress as can be seen when community activist Jerrett Maupin volunteered to go through some [police force scenarios](#). Viewers can observe, in what appears to be a low level of stress, both Maupin and the Fox news reporter each shooting an unarmed subject during their respective scenarios. At this point, I must emphasize that I will never say that officers should *never* shoot an unarmed attacker. Over two decades of police experience has taught me that there are some situations where there really are no alternatives. However, in most cases, there are alternatives if the department has invested in the right type of training and necessary time to develop a sufficient level of proficiency. I use the term "invest" purposefully as there are usually great pressures for administrators to "cut corners" when it comes to police Defensive Tactics or "DT" training. Because police DT training is usually less standardized than other types of training, such as firearms, it is easier to cut without an apparent immediate negative impact. Furthermore, the impact of this deficiency may not be seen for years until the lesser trained officer finds themselves in a critical incident such as being pinned down by a larger, stronger suspect striking them. Then, when the inevitable flailing exhausts the lesser trained officer, the officer has to resort to their duty weapon to nullify the threat. This is likely to result in one of the following outcomes:

- 1) Officer unholsters their duty weapon, only to drop it, or even worse, have it taken away by the suspect.
- 2) Officer is able to unholster their duty weapon and discharge it but misses the subject or hits the subject with a non-incapacitating shot.

3) Officer is neither able to unholster their duty weapon nor defend themselves, likely ending in tragedy.

4) The officer is successful in his or her firearms application. Even if shooting the unarmed attacker was 100% legally justified, we all know that the officer and their department will have an uphill battle to climb, during the coming months and years, in the court of public opinion.

However, by investing in effective training, the odds of a situation degrading to any of those outcomes are significantly reduced. The “return” on this investment is a police department avoiding incidents such as the types recently witnessed across the nation that alienate a department from the community it serves.

One recent discussion has been to compare the amount of firearms and defensive tactics training to the amount of de-escalation training that the average police recruit receives. This is a double edge sword. Although it is important to have a conversation about police training and how to best achieve the goals of a police department and its community, some people take this conversation to suggest that police decrease the amount of firearms and defensive tactics training in order to institute an equal increase in the amount of de-escalation training. To be clear, I wholeheartedly believe that police should receive more de-escalation training than they currently do. Clearly, de-escalation training can save lives when trained correctly. However, this absolutely should not take away from firearms and defensive tactics training time and resources. Police, as a whole, have always been under-trained in these areas. In Force Science Newsletter #312, they reported the results of a survey regarding this training deficiency. The report states: Close to 15% of officers said they are never required to do “defensive/control tactics-type training. For two-thirds (63.82%), such training is mandated only once a year (42.32%) or less (21.5%). Fewer than 2% must train hands on monthly. The men and women of law enforcement have always “made due” with this deficiency with only an occasional incident coming back and “biting them” and their agency. Take the example of Maupin and the reporter. Because they obviously did not have DT training, the gun was their only perceived option to maintain control. Imagine the same scenario with an officer who is confident in his or her DT skills. The officer would be able to deescalate from having their firearm out, to the lower level of force of “going hands-on” and dealing with the threat in a proportional manner thereby avoiding the shooting of an unarmed suspect.

Now, we are witnessing a sea change event in the recent technological advances of the cell phone. Virtually everyone has the ability to video record any incident at a second's notice. The cell phone is now exposing them to the results of this training deficiency of which they were not previously aware. We now have a situation where the public, who by and large does not know police tactics, statutory law, case law, general orders, or policy, is able to view an unprecedented number of police force incidents every day. Furthermore, in addition to not knowing the aforementioned rules, they are unfamiliar with having split seconds to apply these rules in what the Supreme Court has described as the “tense, uncertain, and rapidly evolving circumstances” of a police call. Although for the most part, the public is well-intentioned, they are now in a position to diagnose something about which they know very little. Consequently, some have erroneously concluded that officers actually receive too much defensive tactics and firearms training. This could not be further from the truth. This would be analogous to having a high number of plane crashes and concluding that we should reduce pilot training.

Having been a police trainer for a number of years, I have been involved in numerous types of police force training to include firearms, force on force scenario training, and defensive tactics training. Additionally, I

have run thousands of reality-based scenarios, in these various modalities, involving police officers from recruits to 35-year veterans, from desk-duty officers to high level tactical operators. I am all too familiar with the signs and behaviors that officers exhibit, regardless of tenure, when they lose control of a scenario. The most descriptive term that I can use would be "drowning". Anyone who has seen someone drowning in a lake or a pool can relate to the panic and desperation that a human can display in such a circumstance. We have all heard of situations of a drowning man panicking and either drowning, or almost drowning someone who was trying to rescue him. We can all agree that there is no culpability in such an incident- that the person drowning didn't mean to drown their rescuers. On one hand, society understands the limitations of human performance in such a situation. On the other hand, when it comes to a police force incident, an officer who "was drowning" receives no consideration or sympathy as to the dire straits that they were in. Rather, these officers are held to the standard established by Mel Gibson, Steven Seagal, and even TJ Hooker, as they perform their heroic deeds in an ocean of chaos and stress, with the overwhelming odds of no-win situations, easily dispatching hordes of stunt men and actors.

The current DT training deficit is no different than if police departments were sending thousands of police officers into aquatic environments without teaching them how to swim. Then, when one of them falls in the water and panics, everyone acts surprised and appalled as though they had sinister intent. Our hearts go out to the young Minnesota officer, who screamed for help as a suspect ambushed him, took him to the ground, and continue to beat him as he tried to take the officer's weapon. It was obvious that this suspect had murderous intent. Thankfully, a neighbor heard the cries for help and called dispatch for the officer as the suspect tried to take his life. It can be a terrifying feeling when one is ambushed and dragged to the ground by a suspect without having been properly trained on how to deal with such a dilemma. Some serious questions in these types of situations should be: did the agency do everything reasonable to prepare an officer for that contingency? Or did the agency ascribe to the philosophy of minimizing defensive tactics training in favor of more politically palatable training? Or did the agency believe that because "an officer should never be on the ground" therefore they should not receive training in that area? I am reminded of the Rener Gracie quote: "The best way to stay out of the pool is to learn how to swim". This makes a lot of sense because if one were to work around pools, it is not unlikely that one may accidentally fall into a pool. The difference is, if they know how to swim, they can always swim to the edge and get out without having to panic. In the Gracie Survival Tactics (GST) system, officers are trained how to "swim the waters" of worst-case scenarios. This knowledge can mean the difference of:

- whether or not the officer survives
- whether or not an officer has to escalate to deadly force
- whether or not the police department conveys the message of professionalism to the community.

An investment in this type of training tells the community that a police department values life - both the officers' and the suspects' life. As society changes with every age, so must its police. The time of administering a few hours per year of DT training to "check a box" is over. The police agencies that are slow to accept and adapt to this change will do so at the risk of damaging their already fragile relationships with their communities. Forward-looking police departments that understand this change will make the investment in effective DT training. This may be one of the most important investments a police agency can make.