



Training for combat:

**if we want well-prepared police officers,
this is the way forward.**

José Eleutério da Rocha Neto



TECHNICAL REPORT

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¹José Eleutério da Rocha Neto is a captain in the Military Police of Paraná and holds a master's degree in Psychology (Behavior Analysis) from the Federal University of Paraná, and is a researcher with the TFESP group.

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1.

Key points covered

- The most important point in training is to define clear and measurable objectives.
- Training must include the elements of the real situations for which the officer is being trained.
- Training that excludes stress factors tends to be inadequate.
- Inadequate police training significantly reduces the likelihood of a correct response to a threat.
- Assessment of a student's performance should take place through simulations of the real situations for which they are being trained.

2. Introduction

Policing is the only profession that holds the legitimate power to use physical force against citizens in situations that do not involve armed conflict. The use of force is central to police work, because, when applied inappropriately, it can undermine the relationship of trust between society and the institution. Although the use of force is essential to the police function, this does not mean that its application is frequent in day-to-day work; in many cases, the police response takes the form of verbalization or negotiation. Force is used only in self-defense or to maintain order, when other means prove insufficient.

Because of its centrality to police work, a large share of police training is devoted to preparing officers for it. A parenthetical remark is in order here: to avoid semantic disputes, the terms education, formation, training, capacity-building, and instruction will be used interchangeably in the police context. They refer to the process of making police officers able to perform their duties well. If we think specifically about the use of police force, we can define training as the process of enabling the officer to employ tactics, techniques, and procedures proportional to the suspect's resistance, in accordance with current ethical and legal standards.

One of the national references for police training is the Matriz Curricular Nacional (National Curricular Matrix; Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública, 2014). The document highlights the multidisciplinary

character of the training process, also underscored by the many fields of knowledge that produce literature on the subject. The National Curricular Matrix presents both theoretical and practical perspectives on the use of force. On the theoretical side, the use of force is addressed from different perspectives: legal, doctrinal, deontological, historical, sociological, and psychological. The practical aspects, in turn, are represented in the subjects of Approach, Police Self-Defense, Weapons, Ammunition and Marksmanship, as well as Restraint Techniques and Use of Handcuffs.

Inadequate police training significantly reduces the likelihood of a correct response to a threat. There are many reports of officers who, in situations of lethal risk, reacted with submission or hesitation, often with fatal consequences. On the other hand, there are also numerous cases of excessive use of force, triggered by mere verbal provocation from suspects. Other allegations concern social or racial bias in officers' decisions to use force.

For this reason, in recent years, training for the police use of force has drawn growing social and academic concern, both in Brazil and internationally. However, academic output does not yet reflect this concern. The literature on the effects of any type of use-of-force training is relatively scarce. One possible explanation is the closed nature of police institutions and the distance between academia and the police, created and sustained by both sides.

In Brazil, the situation is even more alarming. Many police forces have no training manuals, relying solely on instructors' experience, which prevents any standardization of training. Even the manuals that do exist lack scientific references and, at best, present basic bibliography lists.

One example is the so-called “Defensive Shooting in the Preservation of Life” – or “Giraldi Method” – created in São Paulo. The method is considered one of the leading training methods in Brazil, both for its systematization and for its wide dissemination, having been adopted by several police forces across the country. However, if we consult the method's manual, published by the São Paulo Military Police, we find that it includes no references section, contains serious conceptual errors, and makes recommendations that contradict the available scientific evidence.

The fact that this is one of the leading training methods adopted in the country indicates that a large part of police training in Brazil is based on traditions, imitation of other instructors or police forces, and instructors' practical experience. Copying practices or maintaining traditions is not necessarily harmful, since such practices reflect collective experience and adaptation over time. Nevertheless, the absence of scientific evidence validating these methods is concerning. In the absence of formal evidence, practical experience can be a valid source of knowledge, but evidence needs to be produced as soon as possible.

As already mentioned, the academic literature on police use-of-force training is somewhat scarce. Even so, it is possible to draw from it a number of principles and “good practices.” Below, we present some of them.

3.

Police Use of Force

The definition of force most widely accepted among police researchers was put forward by Alpert and Dunham (2004): “physical action taken to control the movement or freedom of another individual.” The rules governing the police use of force are established in international law – notably the United Nations document known as the “Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials” – as well as in domestic law.

In Brazil, the doctrinal principles guiding the police use of force were established by Interministerial Ordinance No. 4,226 of December 31, 2010, issued by the Ministry of Justice and the Secretariat of Human Rights of the Presidency of the Republic. They are: necessity, legality, proportionality, moderation, and convenience. Use of force in circumstances that do not meet these principles is, as a rule, considered illegitimate.

Brazilian law allows police officers to use force in defense of themselves or others. It also allows it in the exercise of their duties to overcome resistance to their action, when other resources prove ineffective. When the use of force is limited to one of these situations, the principle of necessity is satisfied.

The legality of the use of force is conditioned on strict compliance with the officer's duties. Any action arising from unlawful conduct is likewise considered unlawful.

Convenience refers to weighing the positive

and negative consequences that may arise from the use of force at a given moment. If the potential harmful consequences outweigh the potential benefits, the principle of convenience precludes the use of force.

The principle of moderation implies that force must be applied only to the extent necessary to overcome the resistance encountered. It must therefore cease as soon as the resistance ceases.

The principle of proportionality implies that the police force used is at the same level as the threat or resistance presented. The levels of a suspect's resistance and of police force make up what are known as police use-of-force models. There are various use-of-force models adopted in different parts of the world, such as the FLETC (**Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers**), **Remsberg**, and **Gillespie** models.

In Brazil there are various models, depending on the police force. As a rule, these models are based on the federal models of the Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública (National Secretariat for Public Security, SENASP/MJSP). SENASP's most recent model was created in 2021 (Figure 1), replacing the previous one (Figure 2). However, many police forces still rely on the old model. Even so, the MJSP (Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública, 2021) itself notes that the models are not the standard itself, but graphic representations of it. As a result, the variations between

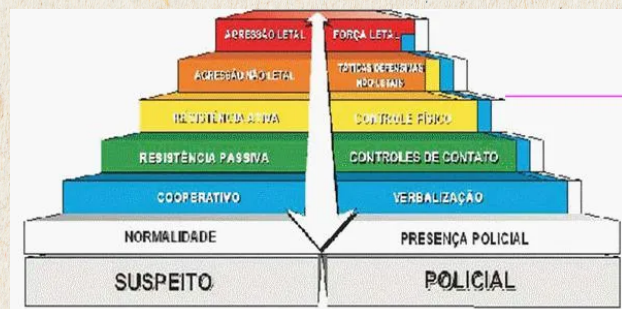
these models become less significant.

Figure 1
MJSP 2021 Model



Note. Reproduced from Ministério da Justiça e Segurança Pública (2021).

Figure 2
SENASP model in force until 2021



Note. Reproduced from Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública (2006). The low graphic resolution was already present in the original material.

The great difficulty in applying the principle of proportionality lies in properly classifying each act of the suspect and of the officer into a given category. This depends heavily on the doctrine and case law of each country, or even of each police force. Standards can vary as to what is considered acceptable within a given level. For example, in the United States a suspect who attempts to attack an officer with a baton is considered a potentially lethal threat, warranting the use of a firearm – something that, as a rule, would be viewed differently in Brazil. In addition, certain TTPs may be expressly prohibited. Some police forces expressly prohibit the use of chokeholds and techniques that constrict the trachea. Other TTPs may be mandatory, such as specific

protocols for hostage or explosive incidents, adopted by many institutions.

Another difficulty in assessing the principle of proportionality is the officer's subjective perception. Even when objective criteria are sought, the one responding to the threat is a human being who, when subjected to stress, experiences a range of perceptual distortions. Thus, the analysis of the level of force must be made objectively, but from the standpoint of the officer who made the decision and carried out the action, taking into account the elements present at the moment force was used. In the literature, this is called “subjective objectivity” (Alpert & Dunham, 2004).

4.

Defining Objectives

When we talk about training police officers, the first questions that come up concern the curriculum (what to teach) or training methods (how to teach). Yet all of these things make up a means, a path toward a given goal. It turns out that the objectives of a given training program are almost never defined clearly and measurably. And so we end up like the dialogue between Alice and Carroll's Cheshire Cat: for someone who doesn't know where they're going, it doesn't matter which road they take – every road is equally wrong.

So the first thing to do when discussing police training is to take a step back and begin by clearly defining the training objectives. Let's start with an example of how not to do it, taken directly from the Matriz Curricular Nacional. The syllabus for the Police Self-Defense course sets out the following objectives for the subject (Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Pública, 2014, p. 216):

Create conditions for the public security professional to be able to:

- Broaden knowledge in order to:
 - Understand the body's motor functioning, through basic notions of body mechanics;
 - Understand the body as a working tool.
- Develop and practice skills in order to:
 - Use non-lethal defense, control, and restraint techniques, in accordance with the

principle of proportionality;

— Use defense techniques without the use of a firearm.

- Strengthen attitudes in order to:
 - Recognize that self-defense techniques safeguard the physical integrity of both the individual and the aggressor.

These objectives may be valid from some perspectives. However, they are not very clear or measurable. How would we describe an officer who “understands the body as a working tool”? And how do we distinguish an officer who meets this criterion from one who does not? Or, better yet: how do we assess this in a student to know whether they achieved the subject's objective or not? The same applies to “Recognize that self-defense techniques safeguard the physical integrity of both the individual and the aggressor.”

On the other hand, “Use non-lethal defense, control, and restraint techniques, in accordance with the principle of proportionality” is a bit clearer, but still not clear enough. The way the objective is framed ignores the other principles of the use of force. Moreover, it does not specify what following the principle of proportionality means in a concrete situation.

A much more pragmatic framework, and therefore better suited to instructors' practice, was put forward and initially developed by Sílvia Paulo Botomé (1981).

Formulating a learning objective must be tied to behaviors that the student is expected to exhibit by the end of the training (or a given stage of it). Thus, the formulation of objectives is guided by the question: “What should my student be able to do by the end of the course/subject?”

The target behavior must be an observable and, in some way, measurable action. This means avoiding descriptions of behaviors that refer to the officer's internal states – such as knowing, understanding, or feeling. The student is expected to display the target behavior in a specific context or under specific conditions (also called a problem-situation). This context is made up of several different elements or stimuli. In this way, a learning objective can be defined as follows: “Given A, B and/or C, do X.”

But which situations should we train officers for? Well, the answer will depend on the hours available. We should prioritize the most frequent and the most critical situations. We consider critical those situations that can cause major damage to the institution's image, pose great risk to the officer, or that have shown higher failure rates.

To define the frequency and criticality of given situations, good data are needed. Ideally, this data should come from a solid method: surveys applied to personnel, analyses of incident reports, and/or series of case studies involving footage – if possible, while keeping an institutional database updated over the years¹. When this type of analysis is not possible or feasible, this information can be drawn from a group of experienced officers with good levels of skill and knowledge. It is not a robust method, but it is better than having no data at all. The situations listed should be ranked in order of priority, since it will probably be unfeasible to train for all of them; some selection criterion is needed.

The third and final element of a learning objective is the expected consequence of the student's action in that circumstance. When we talk about the use of force, the expected consequence is always the same: the suspect detained and/or neutralized, officers, victims, and bystanders without serious injuries, and a legal outcome tending toward the favorable². For this reason, when we draft learning objectives for any use-of-force training, we can omit the expected consequence in favor of more concise wording. However, we must not forget that consequences are also part of the objective. The impact of the action on the institution's image should be considered in planning, but it cannot be included as part of the learning objectives, since it is affected by factors external to the officer's conduct³.

Each learning objective must contain an action within a context. If we are talking about different alternatives within the same context, or the same action in different contexts, we have different learning objectives. Objectives can be defined at every level: from objectives for individual training sessions to objectives for entire subjects or courses. Initially, one or more general objectives (also called terminal objectives) are drafted. These are then broken down into intermediate objectives, which cover all the combinations of context and action that need to be trained.

Below, we list some (non-exhaustive) examples of general objectives for a Police Self-Defense course. Notice that for objectives whose consequence is not the neutralization of the suspect, we describe the expected consequence:

- Given a suspect's movement, recognize the imminence of an assault;
- Upon the imminence of an assault, apply police defense techniques, following the force model currently in effect at the agency;

- Given the need to use force, control a suspect with a maximum of two to three officers;
- In environments or circumstances where escalation in the use of force is more likely, request operational backup in anticipation of the escalation of events;
- In a situation where there is no imminent assault against the officer or third parties, adopt de-escalation techniques before adopting any level of force;
- While carrying out restraint, handcuffing, and escort techniques, verbalize with the suspect, if possible, aiming at de-escalation;
- Upon arriving at an incident, adopt a stance such that mere police presence inhibits aggressive behavior by those present;
- Upon the imminence of a lethal assault, immediately use the firearm (lethal force), minimizing the risks to the officer and, above all, to third parties;
- When faced with insults and other forms of disrespect, adopt a stoic stance, waiting for backup to arrive in order to make the arrest of the offenders in adequate numbers.

Below, we present some examples of intermediate objectives:

- Upon the imminence of an assault, execute projection techniques with control of the legs (single leg or double leg).
- Upon the imminence of an assault, correctly execute low kicks, front kicks, and knee strikes.
- When within a suspect's range of action, correctly execute a high guard, protecting the face and torso.

One of the most relevant stimuli that make up the context of the use of police force is combat stress, or, more precisely, the

in excess, or expose themselves to unnecessary risks.

Threat identification needs to be trained in a variety of situations, each one increasingly close to reality, both in appearance and in speed. Some points to consider here relate to the suspect (inside or outside a vehicle, of different sizes and ethnicities), to the environment (different light levels, weather, in cities or rural areas, with no bystanders, with peaceful or aggressive bystanders, etc.), and to the nature of the threat (an uncooperative suspect, flight, assaults with hands or with weapons such as rocks, sticks, batons, and even firearms, varying in appearance, size, position, and manner of carrying).

In a real situation, it is important that the threat be recognized quickly. To achieve this, officers need to train to respond quickly. Over time, they will learn to anticipate the detection of a possible threat through other stimuli/signs – such as a suspect who glances nervously from side to side before running during a stop.

The cessation of the use of force has two sides. The first concerns excess. The officer must recognize that the threat has been neutralized – whether through loss of consciousness or through a manifestation of willingness to cooperate – and immediately cease the use of force⁵. The second concerns the officer's own safety. By failing to verify whether the threat has, in fact, been neutralized, an officer may cease the use of force too soon, exposing themselves to risk. This is where the phenomenon known as “the dead man's ten seconds” comes in.

5.

Defining the Curriculum

Once we have ranked the main situations for which officers should be trained, we can move on to the next steps: specifying the number of training hours required – or checking what fits within the hours available – specifying the stimuli to which officers will be exposed, and the TTPs that will be taught as possible responses to them.

Officers need to be exposed to as many variations of the same situation as possible. This is particularly important in training threat detection, as mentioned in the previous section. It is also important that the stimuli present in the suspect's actions likewise vary, so as to become unpredictable.

As for the TTPs to be taught, the first point to consider is the **KISS** principle – **keep it simple, stupid**. Under stress, there is a deterioration in the performance of fine movements (involving small muscle groups or requiring precision), of complex movements (independent movement of more than one limb at the same time), and of very long movement sequences. Thus, TTPs involving fewer steps should be chosen, preferably ones that do not require coordinated or precise movements. For example, a front kick requires less coordinated movement than a roundhouse kick; and an L-shaped arm lock requires far less fine motor control than a wrist lock.

The point here is that even if a given technique is effective, the officer may not be able to execute it under stress after the

(limited) number of training hours to which they were subjected⁶. Moreover, the training frequency needed to keep the performance of such a technique at an acceptable level may not be feasible. And expecting the “average” officer to keep training on their own time off... well, we can dream, but I prefer to deal with things as they are.

Another relevant topic regarding the TTPs to be taught is giving students technical alternatives. Ideally, two to three techniques of each type should be presented (e.g., two projection techniques, two grip variations, two punch or kick sequences, etc.), taking into account different physical characteristics (strength, hand size, weight, reach, flexibility, etc.). Students who have difficulty learning a given technique may find another one easier.

However, it is essential that students choose one of the alternatives and train only that one. According to Hick's Law, an increase in the number of alternatives leads to an increase in the response time involved in making a choice (Hick, 1952). Let us not forget that we are dealing with police training, not sports training. Therefore, having a very varied repertoire of TTPs becomes less relevant than the ability to execute them well and with a short reaction time.

Finally, the analysis of students' progress should focus on the outcome, not on the execution. If a given TTP is proving effective⁷, it does not matter whether the

movement pattern was perfect or not. Execution should be corrected only if it is affecting the TTP's effectiveness. The same focus on outcome should be adopted in the formal assessment of student performance, as we will see below.

6.

General Training Principles

The scientific literature on police training is relatively scarce. Even so, it is possible to draw from it some “good practices” – that is, training procedures with evidence of being effective. Almost all of the good practices involve, in some way, exposing police trainees to situations similar to those they will face on the job. Another practice that appears to be effective is breaking the training of more complex skills down into small steps. Including periodic simulated tests with proper feedback from the instructor appears to improve training effectiveness and reduce the decay of performance over time.

Training with staged simulations featuring stressors typical of police work has produced good results. In particular, a study conducted in China (Liu et al., 2018) showed a notable habituation effect regarding hostages positioned close to the suspect being shot at. This effect was observed after only three training sessions in that scenario. Staged simulations are cheaper and can be just as good as, or even better than, video simulations or fully immersive virtual reality. There is evidence of the effectiveness of such equipment, but any acquisitions should be carefully planned given the costs involved.

The use of **biofeedback** together with simulations appears to enhance the effects of training. **Biofeedback** consists of allowing the student to monitor their own vital signs, letting them perceive, through these signals, the onset of stress. Upon detecting stress,

the student can adopt techniques and procedures to reduce it, helping them control their body's reactions.

Training that focuses solely on repeating police self-defense or shooting TTPs is effective only up to a point. It is limited precisely because it trains only one of the elements of the use of police force: execution. Complete training must also allow for decision-making about using force and about ceasing its use.

There are some fairly simple and inexpensive training options. The practice of martial arts with simulated sparring has great benefits, both for physical and mental health and for performance in police self-defense. There is also good evidence for the use of imagery techniques, in which officers mentally rehearse what they would do in a real situation before actually being in it. Threat recognition can be effectively trained using short videos or images.

Finally, there is a debate about “demilitarizing” police training. The definition of what would constitute “militarized” training is not clear in the literature. Consequently, neither is the definition of what would constitute “demilitarized” training. We can adopt the definition of Li et al. (2021, p. 1), according to whom militarized training is one that features “intense physical demands, psychological pressure, and that prepares officers for aggressive reactions to possible threats in the field.” In this case, the best

available evidence points precisely to the effectiveness of these practices in improving officer performance. Moreover, the evidence on the effects of so-called “demilitarized” training is of low quality and shows no positive results: a relationship was observed between this type of training and increased police lethality, along with a non-significant increase in the number of injured officers.

7. Evaluation

From the outset, we proposed a pragmatic approach to police use-of-force training, and evaluation will be no exception. Certainly, the most frequent error in assessing police trainees' performance is assessing the execution of a TTP alone. Many instructors assess the execution of a police defense technique on a passive colleague, or performance in shooting at paper or metal targets on a firing range. Yes, it is obvious that assessing the quality of execution is important, but this should never be the criterion for saying whether a given officer is more or less capable. In other words, although it is important to assess execution, we believe this assessment should not count toward the student's grade.

Let us return to our objectives. If we have properly drafted the learning objectives, they will have a format more or less like this: "Given a suspect who [action], employ [TTP]." The way to assess this becomes obvious: expose the officer to a suspect who behaves in the predicted way and check whether they respond as expected. This exposure should not be isolated, but should take place in a simulation with stimuli (and intensity) as close to real ones as the available means and safety allow.

All objectives must be assessed in some way throughout the training process. However, for the formal assessment that will count toward the police trainee's grade, it is neither necessary nor feasible for all foreseen situations to be assessed. It is necessary, however, that all of them be

capable of occurring, introducing uncertainty as one more element of reality.

This brings us to a second common error: the use of stimuli that do not correspond to reality. A good example is the use of static targets to assess decision-making about whether or not to shoot, whether these are images of armed people or, worse still, black-and-white images or targets marked with an X. As we said earlier, we want officers to develop the ability to anticipate threats. This means being guided by stimuli that precede the threat itself, such as the suspect's movements and demeanor. The only way to incorporate this into an assessment is through simulations.

The officer's performance in the simulation will be assessed by the instructor using an evaluation instrument (or scoring sheet, if you prefer). The sheet should cover the criteria the institution deems necessary, but always with a focus on the effectiveness of the action taken. I believe that errors related to the illegitimate use of force should result in automatic failure, just as would happen in a real situation.

When drafting the evaluation sheet, I recommend that it be minimally subjected to inter-rater reliability tests (whether two or more instructors assess the same test in a similar way) and intra-rater reliability tests (whether instructors assess the same test in a similar way at different times). These are fairly simple tests to run⁸, and they will ensure the reliability of the evaluation

instrument. It is also worthwhile for a panel of instructors to discuss the evaluation instrument and run a *sniff test* (that is, testing to see if it “smells right”). The test is quite intuitive: (1) Does a performance that looks good to the instructors receive a good grade? (2) Does a performance that looks poor receive a low grade? (3) Does a performance that looks average receive a grade between the good and poor performances? (4) Does a performance that looks minimally acceptable receive a grade close to the minimum passing mark? (5) Is an apparently deficient performance actually being failed by the instrument? These questions will be better answered with practice; as the instrument is used, it can incorporate new suggestions for improvement.

8.

Notes

1. For example, the FBI maintains LEOKA, an extensive database on officers killed and assaulted in the United States (<https://ucr.fbi.gov/leoka/>).
2. Given the serious legal uncertainty afflicting the country, a genuinely favorable legal outcome depends on the analysis of prosecutors and judges, which can be highly subjective or biased. For this reason, we chose the phrase “tending toward the favorable” – the well-known “it’s basically fine,” in street police jargon.
3. An experiment conducted by Meares et al. (2016) revealed that the public’s perception of the legality of a police action is independent of the actual legality of the action. In fact, an action tends to be seen as legal if it is perceived as fair, regardless of whether it is factually legal or illegal.
4. Part of the literature refers to these same effects as anxiety. Here, we will treat stress and anxiety as synonyms.
5. The word “immediately” must take into account that there is a reaction time – the time between the stimulus being emitted and the officer recognizing it.
6. The number of training hours needs to be put into perspective. The Matriz Curricular Nacional allots 40 hours of training in Police Self-Defense. That amounts to little more than 3 months of training, considering three one-hour sessions per week. And we are overestimating this figure, since a class “hour” usually lasts 40 to 50 minutes, not a full hour. In any martial art, after three months a student is not even considered a basic-level practitioner; they are still regarded as a beginner.
7. It is important to consider whether the

student is being systematically effective, or merely “got lucky.”

8. The statistical part, which may seem complicated, is done automatically by software, which returns the values based on the collected data. It is much simpler than it seems.

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