

Maintaining Professional Competency

How Effective Is Your Training?

By Richard Kay

Recent research revealed that many suspects believe officers train two to three times a week with their firearms. In reality, most agencies only train about once or twice a year, averaging less than 15 hours annually. In contrast to this frequency of training, those same suspects revealed that they practised on average 23 times a year (or almost twice a month) with their handguns.

If you ask officers how often they train with their duty weapons, the standard response will be 'to requalify' – most likely only once a year. However, firearms training needs to be relevant and realistic and it must also be conducted regularly, occurring close enough to incidents to assist officers in making proper tactical decisions.

So the question is, "How often should officers be training with their duty firearms?"

No court of law has ever addressed that specific question. While there are a lot of cases that have addressed the content of training, no court has come right out and said how many times officers need to actually train or qualify. Most often, that magic number is left to the various state regulators and most only address 'basic' firearms training.

Notwithstanding those mandates, officers should train at least four to six times a year with their firearms. The International Association of Law Enforcement Firearms Instructors, a body of professional firearms trainers, set that level of training for good reason; the psychomotor skills needed for firearm manipulation is such that without constant and frequent reinforcement, those skills will deteriorate. Many legal authorities suggest that annual, or even semi-annual, firearms training is insufficient for the purposes of avoiding liability.

If you fall into the category above – having firearms training once or twice a year – you may want to take a look at what authoritative bodies are saying about that level of frequency in addition to the substantive issues regarding that training.

Content

What should be covered during these training sessions? In addition to classroom instruction of deadly force policy and procedure and other topics, most trainers suggest the range work should include:

- Clearing stoppages with either hand
- Drills that simulate malfunctions
- Emergency tactical reloading with either hand
- Manipulation of safeties and de-cocking levers with either hand

As well as the usual and customary range topics like:

- Low-light and judgmental (decision-making) shooting
- Shooting while moving to cover
- One-handed firing
- Giving verbal challenges
- Firing and clearing malfunctions from various 'officer down' positions
- Engaging multiple targets

In the US, the message from the courts is that training should cover 'whatever officers can reasonably be expected to confront', and therefore include at minimum:

- Frequent training
- Moving targets
- Reduced light
- Judgmental training
- Use of cover
- Realistic environments
- Policy reinforcement
- Force level integration and transitions
- Relevance to assignments



The current industry requirements for officer safety, while an improvement on past standards, still fall short of the mark to adequately prepare officers for ‘operational reality’.

New research by the Force Science Institute indicates that time and cost concerns ‘significantly compromise the suitability and sufficiency’ of current physical force training. The findings result from a three-year assessment of public safety training in the US, Canada and UK. The research evaluated the foundation of training paradigms, curriculum and teaching methodologies for officer safety performance in use of force situations, and offered recommendations for improvement. To create a meaningful context, the status of training in several countries was assessed, as public safety practices across western societies are generally very similar.

The average officer, within months of leaving initial training, will be able to describe how a given control technique should be used, but will have ‘little ability to actually apply it effectively in a dynamic encounter with a defiantly resistant subject’. At the rate training is typically delivered, it could take the average officer up to 45 years to receive the number of hours of training and practice in officer safety techniques that a student athlete gets in competitive sports during the usual high school career.

Many training programs are not employing modern research-based methods of successfully teaching psychomotor skills, a shortcoming compounded by the fact that current record-keeping fails to capture even the most elementary relevant information about the dynamic nature of real-world assaults on officers. Wherever they are based, if officers are unprepared to meet the various threats and levels of resistance and violence they face, it can impair their ability to make good judgments, to affect control, and to avoid injury or death to themselves and to innocent civilians.

The research team included internationally recognised authorities in biomechanics, kinesiology, exercise physiology, forensic psychology, and other relevant disciplines. Their bottom-line conclusion: time and cost concerns are so restrictive that they significantly compromise the suitability and sufficiency of current physical force training. An unintended consequence is that current training may leave

officers more vulnerable, despite the best attempts by trainers and agencies to deliver an effective training package.

Competency Obligations

Creating training with appropriate content and ensuring it is conducted regularly for appropriate skill acquisition and maintenance is a critical first step that needs to be seriously addressed. The next step is in putting officers through the training and determining competence at the other end.

‘Competent’ implies that they are capable of ‘doing the task required’. However, there is a vast difference between ‘passing a course’ and being ‘operationally competent’. The key difference lies firstly in the validity of the training content relative to the job task, and secondly in the decision of what ‘standard’ is deemed to be competent.

The goal of a tactical instructor is to prepare officers for that aspect of their jobs that has the potential to put them in harms way: To prepare officers to survive violent confrontations. This can be expressed as three essential criteria – safety, survivability, consequence. To prepare officers any less is to fail to prepare them at all. A critical aspect of fulfilling this obligation lies with assessing competence in all aspects required for effective operational duty.

If an officer has good physical skills, but doesn’t understand the operational guidelines regarding when and how they may use these skills, they are not yet competent as they do not possess the complete range of required skills. Conversely, if they have a comprehensive understanding of operational guidelines, but their physical skills are not up to the required standard, they are not yet competent as they are still missing an essential part of the required content. If they have good skills and competent knowledge, but don’t possess the ‘character’ to make critical decisions within the context of violent confrontations, they are, again not yet competent for certification to operational status.

Instructors would be remiss in their professional duty to that officer, other officers, and the public, if they certify an officer to operational status for

use of force if they are not yet competent in some aspect of the training. If they are not ready the instructor has an obligation to make the decision to deem them ‘not yet competent’, pending remediation and/or counselling.

To maintain competency, realistic, appropriate and regular training combined with proper attitude and awareness is essential. Strategies should be tested under stress to see if they will work under realistic conditions similar to those encountered on the job (stress inoculation). If officers don’t train this way chances are they won’t be prepared for the reality of a violent confrontation.

The current industry requirements for officer safety, while an improvement on past standards, still falls short of the mark to adequately prepare officers for ‘operational reality’. Compare this with law enforcement and military agencies around the world, which utilise tactical and reality-based training to properly prepare their people for real operations. While most public safety agencies undertake training of this nature, and therefore obviously recognise the benefits of it in preparing officers, this doesn’t flow on to the security industry. Many instructors and training providers fall short of fulfilling their duty of care to officers by not training them appropriately. In the future this aspect will no doubt raise concerns and may well be tested in courts, as it has already in the US.

Violence is violence, and while the context of application may vary between job role and function (the skills for empty hand, handcuffs, batons, firearms being consistent) the better trained officers are, the safer they and the community are, and the more professional their workplace conduct will be. ■

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