Factors affecting Dyfed-Powys Police officers' decisions to use force

Exploring if single/double crewing, response time, urban/rural areas, gender, personality and other factors influence officers when deciding to use force.

Key details

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Research context

There has been a lot of media scrutiny in recent years when looking at officers using force. Often, short videos are taken by members of the public which are taken out of context. However, there has been insufficient research looking into what influences officers when they decide to use force.

The ONS (2022) shows that the most common reasons for police officer use of force is to protect the officer (70%), and alcohol (39%). However, use of force forms do not record certain officer characteristics and available resources.

A literature review highlighted factors that could be influencing decisions to use force:

- Single and double-crewing: There is limited research showing crewing status does influence use of force outcomes, but it is not understood if it influences the officer's decisions to use force (Houdmont and others 2019, Quinton and others 2020).

- Urban and rural policing: Overreporting of crimes in urban areas by the media could be influencing officers in urban and rural environments (Bulovec and Eman 2021, Hacin and Eman 2019).
- Officers personality: Influences officers' decision making (El Othman and others 2020; Erjavec, Popovic and Trkman 2019) – is this the same when deciding to use force?
- Gender: Female offenders are more likely to have unarmed skills and to have used improvised techniques, whereas males are more likely to be restrained and have equipment used (Dyfed-Powys Police 2021). Officers' gender also influences their performance (Detrick and Chibnall 2006) – could this be the same for use of force?

Understanding why officers decide to use force can help identify reasons for disproportionate force and help highlight why officers are getting injured, to inform training developments and policies to support officers.

Research methodology

Two methods of data collection were identified as necessary – questionnaires and interviews.

Questionnaires

111 Dyfed-Powys officers completed a questionnaire. The questionnaire had four sections: officer characteristics, a personality test, two scenario questions and a list of possible influencing factors.

Officer characteristics that were measured were:

- gender
- age range
- rank
- department
- years of experience
- years since being a response officer
- urban or rural policing area as a response officer
- worked at another force
- response officer at another force

The personality test was a 44-item big five inventory (BFI) personality test measuring openness, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and neuroticism (John, Donahue and Kentle 1991,

John, Naumann and Soto 2008, Benet-Matinez and John 1998). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale.

Scenario-Based Questions

The scenarios were designed to mimic realistic policing situations:

- Scenario 1: Report of a suspected drug deal and they find the suspect. Additional units are 30 minutes away.
- Scenario 2: Report of theft and they find the suspect. Additional units are 20 minutes away.

Following each scenario, they selected what option/force they would use and asked to rate between 1 and 5 how safe/comfortable they felt in the scenario.

Each scenario had an escalation and additional unit time away reduced to 10 and 5 minutes respectively.

Four conditions controlled the suspects' gender and crewing status which meant that each officer had a scenario with a male and female and each officer was single and double-crewed.

Finally, officers rated how influential various factors were on their decision when using force – highly influential, influential, no influence or unsure.

Interviews

Officers completing the questionnaire were asked if they were interested in further research to expand on their views, experience of using force and further support needed. 15 participants aim to take part in one hour in-person or online interviews.

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