

FORCE SCIENCE[®] NEWS

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I. New report: 1 city's experience with less proactive policing

What happens when LEOs—frustrated, angry, discouraged, vengeful, or apprehensive about anti-police outbursts from communities they serve—turn a blind eye to self-initiated, pro-active law enforcement?

The city of Baltimore is one place to look for an answer—and the newspaper *USA Today* has done just that in a recent investigative report with sobering implications.

Back in 2015, Baltimore cops came under siege after a black arrestee, Freddie Gray, died of injuries he sustained during transport in the back of a police van while he was handcuffed but not protectively restrained by a seatbelt.

Protests erupted, then fiery riots. Local politicians heaped invective on the police, within days prosecutors charged six officers for Gray's death, and months later the federal DOJ loosed a hailstorm of accusations against the troops, alleging rampant and ingrained civil rights violations on the street.

“Immediately upon the riot, policing changed in Baltimore, and it changed very dramatically,” says Donald Norris, an emeritus professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy who reviewed *USA Today's* investigative findings.

The effect, the newspaper says, was “swift and substantial. Officers in nearly every part of the city appeared to turn a blind eye to everyday violations. They still answered [911] calls for help,” and did so as quickly as ever. “But the number of potential violations they reported seeing themselves [on-view offenses] dropped by nearly half. It has largely stayed that way ever since.”

“DRIVING WITH HORSE BLINDERS.” Digging through more than 5,000,000 police records from 2013 to 2017, *USA Today* researchers established plentiful evidence that

officers, in the words of a retired detective, began “just driving looking forward [with] horse blinders on,” initiating far fewer encounters than customary.

- After the Gray incident, “dispatch records show the number of suspected narcotics offenses police reported themselves dropped 30%,” the newspaper reveals.
- The “number of people [officers] reported seeing with outstanding warrants dropped by half.”
- “The number of field interviews...dropped 70%.”

“Where once it was common for officers to conduct hundreds of car stops, drug stops, and street encounters every day, on May 4, 2015, three days after city prosecutors announced that they had filed charges against six officers over Gray’s death, the number fell to just 70,” the paper reports.

“The average number of incidents police reported themselves dropped from an average of 460 a day in March to 225 a day in June of that year, even though summer weather typically brings higher crime. By the end of last year, it was lower still.”

DEADLIEST CITY. What’s up is crime. “The outcome of the change in policing,” says Prof. Norris, “has been a lot more crime in Baltimore, especially murders. And people are getting away with those murders.”

“Violence in the city [has] leapt to historic highs,” *USA Today* states. “The number of shootings in some neighborhoods has more than tripled.” The murder rate “reached an all-time high last year” when 342 people were killed.

“The surge of shootings and killings [has made] Baltimore easily the deadliest large city in the United States.”

Some other criminal activity has flourished as well, the newspaper reports. A minister whose church is in a neighborhood where at least 41 people have been shot remarks on “so many young men selling [drugs] so brazenly in so many places” now as lawbreakers take advantage of “a newly timid police force.” Drug dealers “are taking control,” the minister says. “We have a community that is afraid.”

WIDER PATTERN? Experts quoted in the paper’s report caution that there’s no proven cause-and-effect connection between reduced proactive policing and increased crime. But the correlation is described as “troubling.”

And, *USA Today* suggests, the situation in Baltimore is likely not an isolated phenomenon. The police reaction there “fits a wider pattern,” the paper says. “Nearly three-quarters of police officers who responded to a Pew Research Center survey last year said high-profile incidents had left them less willing to stop and question people...who seem suspicious.”

To a retired lieutenant from Baltimore, a retreat from aggressive policing is clearly understandable, given the tenor of the times. “Nobody,” he says, “wants to put their head in a pizza oven when the pizza oven is on.”

Editor’s Note: An academic research team is currently finalizing a study on the broad-based impact of “de-policing” related to high-profile suspect deaths. Their work will examine the phenomenon in 47 US cities, with an in-depth examination of circumstances in St. Louis. Their work is expected to show a Baltimore-like pattern of fewer arrests and spiking homicides after the protest-provoking fatalities of black suspects. We’ll be reporting on this study once it is concluded.

Meanwhile, at about the time *USA Today* published its Baltimore report, angry demonstrators in Chicago marched in protest of police fatally shooting an armed suspect who was reaching toward his gun as he wrested away from officers during a field interview. Some of the crowd hurled stones and glass bottles filled with urine at officers. Among their demands: the immediate abolishment of the Chicago Police Dept.

II. New study: How video games may impact your target selection

Could “practicing” your firearms skills with violent video games that reward headshots adversely affect your performance with a real gun?

A new report on an experiment at Ohio State U. raises that question.

What are known as “first-person shooter games” (FPS) are “often used to train soldiers and police officers,” notes Dr. Brad Bushman, an OSU professor of communication and psychology who specializes in studying human aggression and violence.

But his recent findings about FPSs, he writes, “suggest that such games might train individuals to hit the wrong part of the body” in a real encounter.

His study, he says, is consistent with a behaviorist theory called “operant conditioning”—the fundamental idea that “people are more likely to repeat behavior that has been rewarded and less likely to repeat behavior that has been punished.”

GAME OPTIONS. Bushman’s research team individually tested nearly 300 college students. About half were male, nearly 90% had never owned a real gun, and a slim majority had never fired a real gun.

They were randomly assigned to learn and then play one of three video games:

- 1) A violent FPS that rewards players for shooting and killing realistic human targets that have become zombies. Higher points are awarded for headshots since the most efficient way to kill zombies is to destroy their brains.
- 2) A nonviolent shooting game in which players are rewarded for *avoiding* bull’s-eye targets that have human faces on them.
- 3) A nonviolent, nonshooting game that “rewards players for collecting stars and completing challenging levels in a creative, animated world.”

Participants were told to “score as many points as possible” in their game in a 20-minute period.

Immediately after playing, each volunteer was given a realistic training pistol to shoot 16 Velcro “bullets” at a life-size male mannequin positioned 20 feet down a narrow hallway. Participants were told to “hit the mannequin with as many bullets as possible, but they were not told where to aim.”

HIT OUTCOME. Some shooters struck the dummy every time and some missed every time, but overall about 75% of the rounds fired impacted the target.

“Based on operant conditioning theory,” Bushman explains, “participants who played [the] violent shooting game that rewarded headshots were expected to have the greatest number of hits to the mannequin’s head.”

And indeed that did prove to be the case. Those who played the violent game that rewarded headshots had “26% more hits to the mannequin’s head than did participants who played the other two video games,” Bushman writes.

Thus, he believes, “the behavior that was rewarded within the game ‘bled over’ ” into shooting a realistic gun after the game was turned off,” even after just 20 minutes of gameplay.

Men had more mannequin head hits than women. And “participants whose favorite video games [in real life] were violent shooting games also had the most hits to the mannequin’s head,” suggesting a long-term effect of playing violent games that reward headshots, Bushman says.

How many guns the volunteers had owned or fired previously, as well as their general attitude toward firearms, did not prove to be “significantly related” to where on the mannequin they aimed, Bushman says.

“POOR STRATEGY.” Interactive video games can be “excellent teachers,” Bushman states. But, he suggests, “FPS games also have a serious drawback when it comes to training people to shoot a gun. Namely, FPS games train people to aim for the head, which is a poor strategy if you want to hit your target.

“The head is the smallest lethal target on the human body, and if you miss the head you are likely to just hit air.... The torso is the largest lethal target on the human body, and if you miss the torso you might hit another body part rather than just hitting air.

“Thus, it is best to aim for the torso when firing a gun in the real world. If violent shooting games are going to be used to train soldiers and police officers, it would be better to use violent shooting games that reward torso shots rather than headshots.” Some FPSs can be easily modified accordingly, he says.

Bushman acknowledges limitations in his study. Also, he points out, exposure to violent video games “is just one factor among many that can influence” where a shooter aims when firing a gun for real.

More research is needed in this under-studied area, he says, to better define “the long-term, cumulative effects of playing violent shooting video games on the use of real guns” by police officers and offenders alike.

A paper on Bushman’s study, titled “ ‘Boom, Headshot!’: Violent First-Person Shooter Video Games that Reward Headshots Train Individuals to Aim for the Head When shooting a Realistic Firearm,” has been accepted by the journal *Aggressive Behavior*. At this writing, the publication date has not been announced.

Dr. Bushman can be reached at: bushman.20@osu.edu

Our thanks to Dr. Dawn O’Neill, a behavioral scientist with the Force Science Institute’s Division of Research, for helping to facilitate this report.

III. Mark your calendar: LEO Hall of Fame induction

Force Science analyst Chuck Humes has been selected to receive this year’s Lifetime Achievement Award by the Law Enforcement Officer Hall of Fame.

A retired 32-year veteran of the Toledo (OH) PD, Sgt. Humes has gained international prominence as a creative and dedicated officer-survival trainer whose writings, instructional videos, and personal presentations have been popular staples of venues such as PoliceOne, the annual conferences of the International Law Enforcement Educators & Trainers Assn., and a wide variety of police publications.

Presentation of his award will be made by Chuck Remsberg, editor of *Force Science News*, at a luncheon induction ceremony Sept. 13 at The Pinnacle in Maumee, OH. Six other LEOs “who have gone above and beyond in the line of duty” will be honored in other award categories at that time as well.

For more information, contact Megan Stockburger, co-chair of the event, at: mstockburger@gorillas-gazelles.com or visit the Hall of Fame’s website at: <https://www.leohof.com>

IV. Update: All charges now dropped after grand jury exoneration

In our special edition of 7/30/18, we reported a Las Vegas grand jury’s decision not to indict a former officer who was charged with manslaughter in the arrest-related death of a struggling suspect. The grand jury’s “no bill” was credited in part to analyses of the case by two Force Science experts.

The district attorney’s office has now announced that it will no longer pursue any criminal charges against former officer Kenneth Lopera. The grand jury listened “to many hours of testimony over several days,” the DA’s statement said. Considering that the jury did not find even “slight or marginal evidence to support a criminal charge, it is highly improbable that a crime could be established beyond a reasonable doubt.”

Police union president Steve Grammas, who earlier said that Force Science played a “fairly heavy” role in the case, congratulated DA Steve Wolfson on “doing the right thing.”

An Advanced Force Science Specialist, trained in the human dynamics of force encounters, testified before the grand jury. And a Force Science medical expert challenged a coroner’s finding that the suspect, who had an enlarged heart and was under the influence of methamphetamine, died of asphyxiation at the hands of Ofcr. Lopera.

The dead man’s mother continues to pursue a federal lawsuit.

Our thanks to police writer Keith Bettinger for monitoring this case.