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The Science of Training

with [David Blake](#)

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8 ways to prevent blue-on-blue shootings

Academic research and real-world incident reviews provide a foundation for evidence-based practices and training

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Editor's Note:

The PoliceOne Academy features more than six hours of firearms courses for law enforcement officers. Complete the courses to improve and retain critical skills, which enhance your chances of surviving and winning against an attacker. Visit [PoliceOne Academy](#) to learn more and for an online demo.

In 2010, the [New York State Task Force on Police-on-Police Shootings](#) published an in-depth analysis of blue-on-blue shootings. The report provides details of 26 police officer fatalities that occurred between 1981 and 2009, and indicates near-miss situations occur more frequently than we realize.

The report contains a compelling statement that should be visible in all police stations and training facilities: “Most police-on-police shootings are preventable, but only if supervisors, trainers and officers themselves understand how they have happened in the past.”

The question is have police leaders and police trainers summarily ignored this report and other research evidence that could mitigate “blue-on-blue” fatalities? Contemporary evidence indicates that

may be the case based on police-on-police shooting incidents occurring within the last several years:

- In 2016, [an Albuquerque, New Mexico, supervisor](#) shot an undercover officer during a narcotics operation. Media reports state the supervisor did not attend the operational briefing, but interjected himself at the last moment.



- In 2016, [an Oakland, California, supervisor](#) was shot by his partner during a residential search. Reports indicate the officers were not sufficiently trained for the task.
- In 2012, [a Lakewood, Colorado, officer was shot by a SWAT member](#). An intensive after-action review attributed blame to supervisory control and communication among other factors.

We should also include the November 2017 [“gun displaying” brawl](#) that recently broke out between two Detroit undercover narcotics units and consider how it happened, how it could have been prevented and how bad the outcome could have been.

WHAT THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE SAYS

Each of these cases provides evidence of organizational (latent conditions) and individual human error (active conditions) as causal factors.

Human error is a fact of life; however, the rate of human error can be reduced through protective measures at the organizational, supervisory, training and individual levels.

Protective measures should be evidence-based and combine what laboratory research tells us with findings derived from the review of real-world incidents.

Therefore, let's look at the evidence.

The NY State Task Force found several trends in blue-on-blue shootings:

- No agency is immune as blue-on-blue shootings have occurred all over the country in both small and large agencies;
- Almost all the victim officers had firearms displayed, and many reportedly failed to comply with commands when they were shot;
- A portion of the officers shot had some type of police identification displayed upon their person;
- There is an indication that black officers are at a higher risk when off-duty and engaging in armed enforcement.

A [2016 Federal Law Enforcement Training Center Study](#) evaluated the interaction between “on-duty” and “plain-clothes” officers using the Force Options Simulator (FOS).

The plain-clothes officer in the simulation had several different badge configurations (e.g., neck and waist) and used different verbal responses to on-duty officer challenges. The results provided important information for policy, procedure and training that may reduce these types of incidents.

The FLETC study findings matched the real-world events reviewed by the NY State Task Force:

- Many plain-clothes officers engage in a “reflexive-spin” when confronted by a uniformed officer;
- A portion of the plainclothes officers failed to comply with commands while providing varied verbal responses such as “police,” “friendly,” or giving their agency name;
- Eye tracking data found that on-duty officers always looked at the plainclothes officer's gun/face, but often did not look at their waist or chest (where badges are sometimes displayed).

The [Kansas City Police Department conducted research](#) regarding “badge placement” for undercover and off-duty officers. The department placed the badge at waist and neck levels on no-shoot targets while exposing officers to decision-making training in full and low light conditions (live fire). No-shoot targets (mimicking undercover officer) were shot more often in low light conditions and no-shoot targets with badges at the waistline were shot more often than those with neck-level badges.

In summarizing the research and real-world evidence, we must all consider how the plainclothes officer appears to responding patrol officers in the context of a chaotic and dangerous environment.

Plainclothes officers may be armed and facing away or at an angle from responding patrol officers. Angles, movement, lighting and concealing clothing ensure any position of badges or other police-

related markings typically utilized by plainclothes officers may be difficult or impossible to see.

Plainclothes officers operating in the moment may not respond to commands as they see themselves as law enforcement officers and not potential suspects. Plainclothes officers may also reach for their badge or turn toward responding officers (or both) reflexively when confronted.

Responding officers may not hear announcements of “police” by plainclothes officers or may not see a three-inch badge when responding to a stressful and rapidly evolving incident.

Any of these conditions occurring within the context of split-second decision making and reasonable perception may result in a blue-on-blue shooting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the many possibilities for human error resulting in a mistake of fact blue-on-blue shooting, law enforcement should consider the following evidence-based recommendations:

- 1.** Do not take enforcement action off duty if there is an alternative; be a witness unless someone’s safety is at stake.
- 2.** If you must intervene off-duty, notify the local jurisdiction (e.g., 911) and provide your description, that you are armed and in plain clothes (if possible).
- 3.** Display your badge prominently and frequently communicate that you are a police officer in a loud and clear voice. An outer garment with 360-degree police markings is recommended.

If you are confronted by on-duty law enforcement officer:

- 4.** Assume commands such as “Police, don’t move” or “Drop the weapon” are meant for you.
- 5.** Resist quickly spinning to face the officer, or reaching toward your badge to identify yourself.
- 6.** Identify yourself as a police officer (loudly) and obey all commands – to include dropping your weapon.

Training:

- 7.** Officers should receive evidence-based training on how to conduct themselves when engaged in law enforcement activities while in plain clothes. FLETC indicates that the [Undercover Investigations Training Program](#) contains training based on its research findings.
- 8.** Officers should receive reality-based scenario training in which they are both the off-duty officer and the responding officer.

Unfortunately, after-action findings and research related to blue-on-blue shootings are not consolidated and distributed nationally as the foundation for standard practices. The concepts are

rarely trained to patrol officers in a scenario environment and may not even make it in to the briefing room.

Some may disagree, but I feel knowledge of a safety issue without action indicates a level of leadership culpability when something goes wrong. The information and links within this article provide a foundation for evidence-based policy, practice and training that I hope each of you will consider.

About the author

David Blake is a retired California Peace Officer and certified Ca-POST instructor in DT, Firearms, Force Options Simulator, and Reality Based Training. His experience includes SWAT, Force Option Unit, Field Training, Gangs/Narcotics, and Patrol. He is a certified Force Science Analyst© and teaches the Ca-POST certified courses entitled Force Encounters Analysis and Human Factors: Threat & Error Management for the California Training Institute. He also currently facilitates the Ca-POST Force Options Simulator training to tenured officers from multiple jurisdictions. Dave is an Expert Witness / Consultant in Human Performance & Use of Force.

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