Deadly Discretion: The Failure of Police Use of Force Policies to Meet Fundamental International Human Rights Law and Standards

Follow this and additional works at: https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/ihrc

Recommended Citation
https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/ihrc/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Chicago Unbound. It has been accepted for inclusion in Global Human Rights Clinic by an authorized administrator of Chicago Unbound. For more information, please contact unbound@law.uchicago.edu.
DEADLY DISCRETION: The Failure of Police Use of Force Policies to Meet Fundamental International Human Rights Law and Standards
DEADLY DISCRETION: The Failure of Police Use of Force Policies to Meet Fundamental International Human Rights Law and Standards

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CLINIC, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO LAW SCHOOL

Table of Contents

Introduction 1
Scope and Methodology 5
Summary of Findings and Recommendations 6
International Human Rights Law and Standards 11
U.N. Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials 12
U.N. Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials 12
International Standards on Police Use of Lethal Force: Legality, Necessity, Proportionality and Accountability 13
Evaluation of Police Department Use of Lethal Force Policies in the 20 Largest U.S. Cities 17
Use of Lethal Force Policy Grading System and Grade Results 18
Figure 15: Overview of Use of Lethal Force Policy Grading System 36
Conclusion 37
Appendix A 38
Appendix B 40

---

1 A digital copy of this report may be accessed at https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/ihrc/14.
Acknowledgements

This Report was researched and authored by students, faculty and staff of the International Human Rights Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School during the academic years 2015-2018. This Report represents the views and perspectives of the authors. It does not represent an institutional position of the University of Chicago Law School.

The student research and drafting team includes: Cornelius Cornelssen ('16); Anna Duke ('20); Josia Klein ('20); Brittany McKinley ('19); Ryan Maher ('18); and Shelbi Smith ('18).

The faculty research and drafting team includes: Claudia Flores, Associate Clinical Professor of Law; Brian Citro, Lecturer in Law (now Assistant Clinical Professor of Law, Northwestern Pritzker School of Law); and Nino Guruli, Lecturer in Law.

The Report was also edited by Elizabeth Lindberg and Molly Blondell, Legal Assistants.

Special thanks to David R. Morrow and Peter Salisbury for providing some of the photos used in this report.

Copyright © 2020 University of Chicago Law School
All Rights Reserved
ISBN # 978-1-7334730-4-0.
Report Design by Lynne Nagel
This Report is being published in the midst of a long series of horrifying incidents of police abuse of power in the United States. The deaths of George Floyd, Lacquan McDonald, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Breonna Taylor and many others, have echoed throughout the communities of this nation and prompted protests across the country. The video and testimonies from these incidents provide grim illustrations of the power law enforcement officers have over the people they are sworn to serve and protect, and the deadly consequences when they abuse that power.

Society vests law enforcement with the responsibility to protect public safety and enforce the law when necessary. For these reasons, and these reasons only, law enforcement officers are granted the immense power to use force, including lethal force. This authority—state sanctioned violence—necessarily comes with limits and obligations to ensure those who enforce the law do not abuse it. These limits and obligations require that police use their power in a manner that protects and serves the entire community that has vested them with this privilege. The exercise of this authority also requires accountability when abuses occur. Without accountability, state sanctioned violence is nothing but the exercise of arbitrary brute force, a common tool of tyrannical and despotic governments.

Yet, as endless reports and studies have indicated, the police in the United States do not always use their power in a manner that reflects the restraint, care and humility promised to its people. The many and terrible deaths of unarmed African Americans, the targeting of poor communities and communities of color, and the absence of a mandate to protect individuals from domestic violence, all sanctioned by the Supreme Court of the United States in the name of police discretion, have scarred many and raised questions of whether the police sufficiently serve their mandate.2

---

Even as the evidence of criminality and misconduct permeates the news, drives thousands to the streets, and garners national outrage, the exact scope and scale of lethal use of force remains unknown. The United States does not count the number of lives lost nationally due to police use of force. And police departments vary as to how and whether data on officer use of force, including the discharge of police firearms and deaths, is collected and published. This absence of comprehensive reporting and publishing of data on police use of force severely limits our ability to see the full picture and to accurately evaluate police misconduct. It also constrains our ability to identify practices and institutional mechanisms in need of reform. The failure by states and the federal government to address this lack of transparency and accountability tells its own story and is, on its own, a cause for great concern.³

The human rights of people living in the United States are profoundly affected by how law enforcement officers carry out their duties. Police use of force implicates the basic rights of every individual subject to this power—the rights to life, security of person, freedom from discrimination and equal protection of the laws. These rights, established following the atrocities of World War II in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, form the cornerstone of the human rights system. The challenge of managing police power is a global one. People in every country face the difficult and complex balance between granting police the discretion and resources needed to achieve their purpose, while holding them accountable when they abuse their power in violation of the human rights of the communities they serve.

To address this global challenge, the 193 member states of the United Nations, which include the United States, have developed principles and standards to constrain, direct and ensure the proper use of lethal force. These principles—legality, necessity, proportionality and accountability—have been developed and concretized in various forms in the international system, and have been articulated in resolutions by the U.N. General Assembly, rules by committees of experts, and findings by U.N. Special Procedure Mechanisms. These principles and the rules they establish represent the best global effort to consider how police discretion and accountability can contribute to a just and humane society that respects and protects the rights of all its individuals.

In the United States, some of these principles have been adopted and articulated by our courts and law makers.⁴ However, this country lacks a comprehensive and effective national legal framework that places specific conditions on the use of force and establishes mechanisms of accountability.⁵ While the Constitution sets some limits on the use of force, the standards set by the Supreme Court in its case law fall woefully short of meeting the international standards, and Congress has failed to take action to fill this critical gap in federal law.⁶ Due to the decentralized nature of law enforcement in the United States,

---


and the failure of national leadership to set uniform, federal standards, the main restrictions on police use of force exist at the state and local level. State law and police departmental policies provide the principles and standards on use of force and the consequences for when that authority is abused.

While, in many states, legislation provides some direction on the use of force to police departments, research and data indicates that state laws have overwhelmingly failed to do so in an effective manner. In 2015, Amnesty International, USA released “Deadly Force: Police Use of Lethal Force in the United States,” evaluating state laws’ compliance with international human rights standards. Alarmingly, the report found that not a single state’s law fully complied.

This Report builds on Amnesty’s findings by examining the other main source of accountability for the use of force: police department policies. To capture a large portion of the population and a diverse set of contexts, this Report evaluates the police policies from the 20 largest cities in the United States during 2017 to 2018.7 These internal departmental policies provide the primary guidance to police officers on when and how they may use lethal force.8 They are intended as manuals for officers on how to execute their duties, written by police leadership and, for the most part, adopted by the governing police boards.9 These policies provide the substantive standards that officers are trained on and the principles that departments must operationalize. Policy violations trigger internal and sometimes external reviews and possible disciplinary measures.

While police policies vary, a use of force policy generally establishes the magnitude and nature of the threat that must exist, and the level of certainty police officers must have, to justify the use of lethal force.10 Some policies call for a gradual escalation of the use of force; some list a series of measures an officer must or should take before resorting to lethal force.11 They also prescribe what must happen after force has been used, who must be notified, and how an investigation unfolds.

This Report reviews and analyzes these policies to better understand how and whether police departments provide meaningful and effective direction to officers on the use of lethal force in a manner that respects the rights of the people they are charged to protect and serve. To evaluate use of force policies, authors developed and applied a grading system based on international law and standards on police lethal use of force. Through this evaluation, authors found that the policies in all 20 cities reviewed fail to meet international human rights law and standards. These use of force policies grant police undue discretion and insufficient guidance on when lethal force can be used, and they fail to establish strong enough accountability mechanisms.

7 The authors requested and examined use of force policies in effect from January 1, 2017 to June 20, 2018. As of June 1, 2020, some of the 20 police departments have amended their policies. Indianapolis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Philadelphia, Dallas, Columbus and San Antonio police departments made no changes to their use of force policies. Austin, San Jose, Denver, Seattle, Phoenix, Chicago, Fort Worth, San Diego made some changes to their policies, though many appear to be minor. Analysis and grading of these changes is beyond the scope of this report. Authors were unable to confirm whether Jacksonville, Charlotte, Houston and El Paso departments made changes to their use of force policies after June 20, 2018.
8 See Appendix B.
9 The authority of police boards and processes for adopting police policies are typically provided for in the relevant municipal codes. See e.g. Municipal Code of Chicago, Chapter 2-84, §010-030; Los Angeles City Charter, §§ 570-576.
10 See analysis in Use of Lethal Force Policy Grading System and Grade Results infra.
11 Id.
Part I of this Report provides summary of findings and recommendations for the development of a robust mechanism to constrain police lethal use of force. Police departments across the country allow for the use of force in circumstances where there is no immediate threat to life, such as allowing exceptions for the capture of a fleeing suspect. And almost none of the city policies provide adequate oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Part II presents the international law and standards governing police use of lethal force in the United States. It highlights the four main principles derived from these standards—legality, necessity, proportionality, and accountability—and explains their application to police use of force policies.

Part III uses these four principles to analyze and grade the use of lethal force policies of the 20 largest U.S. cities. Like the laws of the 50 states, not a single policy fully complied with international human rights law and standards. In fact, some policies fell well below full compliance, for example, failing to require that lethal force only be used in response to the immediate threat of deadly force.

Ultimately, deep, structural reform of the United States’ law enforcement system is needed. The police in the United States kill more people than any of our peer nations.12 In a 24-day period in 2015, police in the United States shot more people than the police did in England and Wales in 24 years.13 By all measures, the current system is broken. As this Report demonstrates, the very laws and departmental policies that are meant to guide police officers on how to make the difficult, life and death decisions that are required of them, do not comply with human rights. Structural reform to end police killings of unarmed black and brown men and women must start in the police departments themselves with human rights-compliant use of force policies.

13 Id.
This report was researched and drafted by the International Human Rights Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School ("authors") during October 2015 to August 2018. The authors collected “use of lethal force” policies of police departments in the 20 largest U.S. cities by population in 2018. A summary of these policies is available in Appendix B. To determine the 20 largest cities in the United States by population in 2018, the authors used The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2018. This almanac relies on data from the United States Census Bureau. The 2018 almanac’s most updated population data is from 2016, and the U.S. Census Bureau had not yet released updated data on the largest cities by population as of July 2018. These cities are (in order of population size): New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Phoenix, Philadelphia, San Antonio, San Diego, Dallas, San Jose, Austin, Jacksonville, San Francisco, Columbus, Indianapolis, Fort Worth, Charlotte, Seattle, Denver and El Paso.

Use of lethal force policies were then analyzed and graded using a system the authors developed based on international law and standards, including: the U.N. Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials; U.N. Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials; and the 2014 report of the former U.N. Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Christof Heyns, on protection of the right to life during law enforcement.

The authors collected police department 2017-2018 use of lethal force policies online—on police department websites and at useofforceproject.org—by informal email communications with police departments, and through official public records requests via the relevant state freedom of information act statutes.¹⁴ In the event that a police department modified its use of lethal force policy during 2017-2018, and had multiple policies during the year, all relevant policies were obtained and assessed to determine if the changes impacted the policy.

The human rights at stake in policing — the right to life and personal security as well as the freedom from discrimination— are bedrock guarantees, essential for the enjoyment of other fundamental human rights. Out of the 20 city police departments surveyed in this study, not one met the minimum standards established by human rights law. Even the two cities that had the best scoring policies, Chicago and Los Angeles, did not guarantee basic safeguards (i.e. necessity, proportionality and accountability) in the law.

**Legality:** No city satisfied the requirement of legality because no state has a human rights compliant state law. The failure to enact legislative standards on police use of force undermines the rule of law, frustrates accountability for misuse of state power, and weakens police department policies.

**Necessity:** Twelve city policies satisfied the necessity requirement, mandating immediacy of a particularized threat and the use of force as a last resort. Of the states that failed to satisfy this standard, eight policies contained various exceptions to the necessity requirement, such as permitting force when used to prevent a suspect’s escape. Indianapolis, which failed on each of the three necessity subcategories, allows for the use of force to prevent the commission of a felony. But the policy does not specify the kind felony or the nature of the threat posed by the felony, thereby allowing the use of lethal force when it may not be necessary.

**Proportionality:** Use of force must be proportional to the threat or resistance the officer confronts. Seventeen city policies met the proportionality standard. Others permitted the use of deadly force in cases of self-defense or to prevent the commission of a felony without specifying that the threat to the officer must be proportionate to the force used.

**Accountability:** Finally, compliance with the requirements of necessity, proportionality, and effective legality require accountability mechanisms that guarantee effective and independent investigation for all instances of the use of lethal force. While all 20 cities have internal reporting requirements, only two cities—Los Angeles and Chicago—require mandatory external reporting for all instances of the use of lethal force.
lethal force, as required by international standards. Internal reporting and review processes are important for police departments to self-evaluate and discipline their own. However, independent, external oversight mechanisms are necessary to ensure thorough investigations, achieve true accountability, and secure the public’s trust.

**Recommendations**

**LEGALITY** Use of force policies must sit within a human rights compliant federal and state legislative framework that properly balances security needs with individual human rights.

1. The federal government should ensure federal, state and local policing complies with international human rights standards and commitments of the United States. U.S. Congress should deploy its legislative and spending powers to ensure police use force in a human rights-compliant manner, including requiring that police use of force policies meet the standards of necessity, proportionality and accountability, and that law enforcement officers protect and enable individual human rights.

2. State legislatures should enact legal limits on police use of force that comply with international human rights and standards of necessity, proportionality and accountability and protect and enable individual human rights.

3. In light of extensive evidence of excessive use of force by federal, state and local law enforcement during lawful demonstrations, government at all levels should re-evaluate the presence of armed police during lawful public gatherings. Alternatives to law enforcement and unarmed and specialized community engagement police units have been shown to be more effective in providing assistance in organized events and public gatherings than armed units in other countries, as documented in *Defending Dissent: Towards State Practices that Protect and Promote the Rights to Protest* (IHRC/INCLO 2018).
NECESSITY  All law and policies on police use of force must comply with the necessity requirement and only allow for force when “absolutely necessary” to save the life or prevent serious bodily harm of an officer or civilian as a “last resort” to other alternatives.

4. U.S. Congress should revise the standard under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 permitting police officers to use force from a “reasonableness” standard to “only as a last resort and when absolutely necessary to prevent death or serious bodily harm.”

5. U.S. Congress should legally require all federal law enforcement officers to use identified de-escalation techniques to de-escalate all threats posed to officers and others prior to the use of force and mandate all state and local law enforcement agencies accepting federal funds to require use of such techniques. De-escalation techniques include communication and verbal engagement, warnings and clear instructions, avoiding taunting or menacing language, evaluating the situation to identify alternative causes for lack of compliance (e.g., mental impairment, intoxication, fear, and language barriers), use of time and distance to create room for the situation to calm down, taking cover or disengaging.

6. U.S. Congress should eliminate by law the use of “no knock” warrants during all federal law enforcement investigations because they have led to the use of lethal force when it was not necessary or proportional.

7. State legislatures and state and local law enforcement agencies should require, by law and in departmental policies, that law enforcement officers use de-escalation techniques to de-escalate all threats posed to officers and others prior to the use of force. De-escalation techniques include communication and verbal engagement, warnings and clear instructions, avoiding taunting or menacing language, evaluating the situation to identify alternative causes for lack of compliance (e.g., mental impairment, intoxication, fear and language barriers), use of time and distance to create room for the situation to calm down, taking cover or disengaging.

8. State legislatures and state and local law enforcement agencies should require, by law and in departmental policies, any officer standing by while another officer uses unlawful force on a subject to intervene to stop the use of force.

9. State and local law enforcement agencies should remove from their policies any exceptions that permit the use of lethal force when the situation does not present an immediate and particularized threat of lethal force or serious bodily harm, and where the use of lethal force is not absolutely necessary as a last resort. This includes eliminating all “escaping suspect or fugitive exceptions” and all “blanket self-defense or prevention of crime
exceptions” that allow the use of lethal force to capture a suspect, in self-defense or in response to the commission of a felony of any kind, regardless of the nature of the threat posed by the subject.

**PROPORTIONALITY** In addition to being necessary, the use of force must always be proportionate to the threat the officer confronts and weighed against the fundamental human rights of the individual, including the rights to life and security of person.

10. U.S. Congress should condition all federal funds for state and local law enforcement agencies on the agencies’ review and elimination of the use of police techniques, tactics and technologies that pose a risk of death or serious bodily harm but that are not necessary or proportional to the threats posed to officers or others, including chokeholds, carotid holds, neck restraints, tear gas and rubber bullets, among others.

11. State legislatures and state and local law enforcement agencies should eliminate, by law and in departmental policies, the use of police techniques, tactics and technologies that pose a risk of death or serious bodily harm but that are not necessary or proportional to the threats posed to officers or others, including chokeholds, carotid holds, neck restraints, tear gas and rubber bullets, among others.

12. State and local law enforcement policies should require that all use of force be strictly proportionate to the threat confronted, removing all exceptions or equivocations.

**ACCOUNTABILITY** Accountability requires an independent, external review of each use of lethal force by the police as well as departmental transparency of use of force policies and practices.

13. U.S. Congress should require by law that the Department of Justice establish a program to collect, store, analyze and make public, data on police actions, including all incidents involving the use of lethal force, from the 50 U.S. states and territories, and mandate all state and local law enforcement agencies to report periodically with accurate and comprehensive data on police actions to the Department of Justice.

15. U.S. Congress should revise 18 U.S.C. § 242 to lower the standard of criminal intent required to convict law enforcement officers of a criminal violation of constitutional rights from “willfully” to “knowingly or with reckless disregard.”

16. U.S. Congress should legally require all uniformed federal officers, at all times, to wear body cameras and use dashboard cameras and mandate state and local law enforcement agencies receiving federal funds to ensure their use by all state and local law enforcement officers.

17. State legislatures and state and local law enforcement agencies should require, by law and departmental policies, all state and local law enforcement officers, at all times, to wear body cameras and use dashboard cameras.

18. State and local law enforcement policies should mandate full reporting to an external, independent civilian oversight body empowered to conduct independent, publicly accessible investigations for every incident involving the use of deadly force, including any time an officer discharges a firearm or uses a technique, tactic or technology capable of causing death or serious bodily harm.

And to strengthen international norms and institutions to ensure policing protects and promotes international human rights, authors recommend:

19. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. António Guterres, should convene a High-Level Panel on Law Enforcement and Human Rights to address police abuse of human rights around the world comprised of global leaders, eminent experts, people affected by police abuse and law enforcement representatives tasked with, among other things, reviewing and updating the U.N. Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and developing a set of actionable recommendations to ensure policing is grounded in the protection and promotion of international human rights.

20. The United Nations General Assembly should convene a High-Level Meeting on Law Enforcement and Human Rights to address police abuse of human rights around the world during which Heads of Member States are called upon to review their national policies and practices and commit, through a Political Declaration, to ensuring all policing is grounded in the protection and promotion of international human rights.
International human rights law provides the primary basis for global standards on police use of lethal force. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the two fundamental international instruments protecting human rights, establish the rights to life, equality, liberty and security of person, freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and freedom from discrimination. To ensure protection of these rights, experts have developed and U.N. bodies have adopted a set of international standards on police use of force during the past forty years. The Supreme Court of the United States has also developed legal standards for use of force derived from the United States Constitution that align with and support its international commitments.

The international standards used to assess police use of lethal force policies in this report are derived from the three main sources: the U.N. Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials; the U.N Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials; and a 2014 report by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions on protection of the right to life during law enforcement. These are the three most important interpretive sources on police use of force in international law.

The sources used to develop the grading mechanism employed in this report are briefly summarized below. The summaries are followed by explanations of the four principles that guide the grading system – necessity, proportionality, legality and accountability.

---