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Police shooting in The Netherlands: incidence, practice and examination
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International surveys indicate that police officers are increasingly often confronted with serious crimes that involve the use of violence (e.g., Barclay, Tavares, Kenny, Siddique, & Wilby, 2003; Timmer & Pronk, 2011). In The Netherlands, this situation is not different (e.g., Naeyé, 2006; Naeyé & Bleijendaal, 2008; Timmer, 2005). In response to this development, police officers more often draw their firearm. In most cases merely drawing a firearm is enough to stop violence. However, sometimes it is necessary to release a warning shot or – in extreme cases – deliberately shoot at an offender.

In the Netherlands, police officers are only allowed to deliberately fire those situations in which the use of firearms is justified by their objective and in which the objective cannot be reached by any other means (Police-law [Politiewet], 1993; Article 8). Analyses of annual violence reports indicate that over the last 30 years approximately 45 cases of officer-involved shootings were reported per year (Naeyé, 2005; 2006; Timmer, 2005). Generally, this includes cases in which officers or bystanders are deliberately threatened to get hit with a vehicle (44%), shot with a firearm (19%) or stabbed with a pointed weapon (17%). Every year, around 700 officers get seriously wounded or injured as a result of the violence that is inflicted by civilians. At the same time, police shootings annually result in 3 casualties and 14 wounded civilians (Timmer, 2005).

Stressful Circumstances

Because serious acts of violence have serious consequences, police work can be very stressful (e.g., Anderson et al., 2002). This also appears from the following two quotes of officers who got involved in a (near) shooting incident:

“We knew that the driver had been drinking. In addition, the security of the parking garage told us that it seemed like he had a firearm. I immediately called the emergency room to ask for back-up. Then my partner and I both drew our weapon and we walked down into the garage. Downstairs we saw that instead of one, there were two persons: the driver and another guy. The driver was about to hit the other guy on his head with a metal bar. I pointed my weapon and shouted that they both should lie on the ground. When both guys were on
the ground the driver tried to reach with his hand to his pocket. It seemed like he wanted to pull-out his firearm. I shouted that he should keep his hands in front of him, but he kept trying. Every time he moved with his hand to his pocket I shouted. Three days later my throat still hurt. My finger was on the trigger and several times I thought: ‘Here we go...’. After four long minutes our backup arrived and both guys could be arrested. Afterwards it became clear that the driver didn’t have a gun. He had been using drugs and pretended to have one.”

“We were in pursuit of a young man who was trying to get away with a stolen scooter. While my partner stopped the car I jumped out and ran towards the building where we thought he had stopped. When I arrived I just saw him step into a doorway. I think I caught up with him in a couple of seconds. As I put him against the wall he suddenly wrenched loose. I saw him reach for his belt. My heartbeat went up, I immediately moved backwards and for a moment I thought that he might have a firearm. I put my hand on my weapon and shouted that he should show his hands. His eyes were aggressive and he started challenging me. He was quite big... Shortly after that I again saw him reach for his belt and suddenly he held a large silver-colored handgun. Before I knew it I had pulled my own weapon and pointed it to his chest. He was not pointing his gun at me but kept it down, next to his body. If he had fired immediately I am sure that I would have been too late... His eyes were raging with anger. I shouted that he should drop his gun. Then suddenly he looked a bit to the side. He slowly raised his gun, I started pulling the trigger and then I heard a loud bang... “My partner!” I thought.... I had totally forgotten about him.... Then the guy collapsed and I slowly released my finger from the trigger. I kept staring at the guy. It was not until later, back at the office that I started to shake and suddenly realized what had happenend...”

(Nieuwenhuys, Willemsen, & Oudejans, in press)

**Examination and Practice**

Although it may seem hard to aptly perform under such stressful circumstances, the fact that police officers have weapons that allow them to decide over matters of life and death, gives them an enormous responsibility. In The Netherlands, this responsibility is recorded in the Police-law (in Dutch: ‘Politiewet’, 1993) and the official job instruction (in Dutch: ‘Ambtsinstructie’, 1994). Regarding the license to legitimately carry weapons, article 4 of the official job instruction reads:
“The use of a weapon is only allowed to an officer:
a. who received that weapon by law, for as long as he fulfills the task for which the weapon has been assigned to him, and
b. who is skilled in using that weapon.”

What is meant by the concept ‘skilled’, is recorded in the regulation for the examination of law-enforcement skills for the police (in Dutch, ‘Regeling Toetsing en Geweldsbeheersing Politie’ [RTGP]), which was introduced in January 2002. Based on this regulation, police officers in The Netherlands have 32 hours (4 days) per year for the examination and practice of their law-enforcement skills.

Within the available 32 hours, police officers’ shooting ability is officially examined twice a year. This occurs by means of the RTGP shooting test (see Table 1.1). As can be seen in Table 1.1, the RTGP shooting test examines police officers’ ability to hit specific targets (see Figure 1.1) from various distances (i.e., 2-15 meter) and positions (i.e., from stance or kneeled), within a reasonable time limit. To pass the test, officers have to be able to hit at least 90% of the targets. Passing the test is a prerequisite for being allowed to carry a firearm on duty.

Figure 1.1: Targets during the RTGP shooting test.
In addition to the shooting test, police officers also receive firearms training. However, because shooting is not the only skill that needs to be maintained (i.e., officers are also tested on their arrest and self-defense skills, knowledge and application of the law, and physical fitness), very little time is available for appropriate practice. As a result, firearms training is usually restricted to practicing or preparing for the RTGP shooting test (Adang & Timmer, 2002).
Representative Practice?

From the perceptual-motor literature it is known that in order to adequately measure someone’s skill (e.g., shooting ability), test circumstances need to be representative of the real world (e.g., Dicks, Button, & Davids, 2010; Mann, Abernethy, & Farrow, 2010). However, contents of the RTGP shooting test (see Table 1.1) show striking differences with how shooting occurs in real-life. First, the RTGP shooting test focuses only on shot accuracy, while in real-life situations, shooting also involves decision making (e.g., shoot or don’t shoot?). Additionally, during the test, police officers shoot in full light, fire at static targets, and do not run any (physical) risk of being hurt by an assailant. In real-life situations, on the other hand, police officers mostly shoot in the dark, usually fire at targets that are in motion, and run a serious risk of getting hurt (Adang & Timmer, 2002; Oudejans, Nieuwenhuys, & Willemsen, 2010). As such, shooting during the RTGP shooting test is relatively predictable and far less complex than in real-life.

Based on these differences, one might question to what extent police officers’ shooting ability during the RTGP shooting test is representative of their ability in real-life situations. Indeed, annual reports show that hit percentages during the RTGP shooting test are well above 90%, while in real-life shot accuracy rarely exceeds 50% (Timmer, 2005). As such, it seems likely that factors such as the threat of being hit negatively influence police officers’ shooting ability in real-life.

In this thesis I will quantify this influence and – moving beyond shot accuracy – also test the impact of threat on decision making (e.g., shoot or don’t shoot?) and the effectiveness of different shooting strategies. Finally, intervention studies are conducted to examine if more representative training methods (i.e., training with anxiety) are functional in helping officers to perform better under stressful circumstances (see also Oudejans, 2008).