

The Impact of Suspect Resistance, Informational Justice, and Interpersonal Justice on Time Until Police Use of Physical Force: A Survival Analysis

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Photo by Faruk Tokluoğlu: <https://www.pexels.com/@faruktokluoglu/>

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Key Takeaways

- Systematic social observation of body-worn camera footage and survival analysis tested the effect of suspect resistance and officer adherence to informational and interpersonal justice on time until police use of physical force
- Officer adherence to informational justice was significantly associated with longer time until both first use of force and highest level of force
- Suspect weapon possession was significantly associated with shorter time until use of the highest level of force
- Suspect resistance did not achieve statistical significance in any model
- Overall results suggest police officer actions more greatly influence time until force than does suspect resistance

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Research Summary:

While colloquial discussions of police use of force revolve around notions of “split-second judgments” such a framework may not reflect the reality of use of force events. Police-citizen encounters involving force typically extend across fairly lengthy time periods, with successive actions and reactions of officers and citizens influencing the likelihood of force. Empirical perspectives from psychology further explain how use of force events unfold over time. *System 1 thinking* involves quick, subconscious decisions. This contrasts with *system 2 thinking*, which consists of slower, more deliberate modes of processing information and determining a course of action. Within the context of use of force, police should operate with the goal of minimizing the need for *system 1 thinking* to allow for the careful deliberation that classifies *system 2 thinking*.

Suspect actions can impede officer de-escalation efforts in a manner that requires increased use of *system 1 thinking*. Suspect resistance has received perhaps the most empirical attention as a factor that significantly impacts police officer decisions to use force. Prior research demonstrates an empirical link between suspect resistance and police use of force.

Using tactics that “create time” can help officers delay the need for physical force. A point of emphasis in de-escalation involves officer adherence to procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice principles. Procedural justice refers to the perceived fairness of the procedures involved in decision-making and implementation. Interpersonal justice refers to officers treating civilians with respect and dignity and informational justice refers to providing civilians with information that is accurate and useful. Dimensions of fairness are difficult to examine at the situational level because they are largely perception-based and heavily influenced by social contextual factors. In contrast, indicators of interpersonal and informational justice are particularly useful avenues for exploring possible situational-level impacts as these forms of justice are more amenable to observation.

The current study tests the effect of suspect resistance and police officer adherence to interpersonal justice (i.e. officer not using verbally antagonistic language) and informational justice (i.e. officer explaining reason for the encounter to the suspect) on time until use of force in police-citizen encounters. The study involves the systematic social observation of 91 use of force events recorded by BWCs between December 2017 and December 2018 in Newark, NJ. Four cases were removed because the start point and failure points occurred at the same time, bringing the final sample to 87 cases.

The analysis focused on two separate dependent variables: *time until first use of physical force* and *time until use of highest level of force*. Models controlled for suspect weapon possession, officer ethnicity, suspect ethnicity, and the type of physical force used (highest observed).

Police officer adherence to informational justice significantly increases time until the first use of physical force and the highest level of physical force. In cases in which the officer explained to the suspect why the suspect was being detained, the median time until first use of physical force is 3.33 minutes, compared to 0.83 minutes for those in which an explanation was not given. In cases in which the officer explained to the suspect why the suspect was being detained the median time until the highest level of force was used is 5.5 minutes, compared to 1.5 minutes for those in which an explanation was not given. Suspect weapon possession was also statistically significant, decreasing time until the highest level of force is used. The median time until highest level of force is 3.17 minutes when there is no weapon and 1.17 minutes when the suspect is in possession of a weapon. Suspect resistance is not significant in any of the models.