



## **My View: Police Need to Stop Using Profanity during Stops and Critical Incidents**

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This past week I have had the opportunity to view an exceptional amount of police body-worn camera footage. Following incidents like that in Ferguson and with Eric Garner, there was a big push to install body-worn cameras on officers.

While the hope was that the cameras themselves would deter unnecessary use of force, research has shown that not to be the case. Watching the footage, you can see why. They still have not created a system to ensure compliance of officers—and departments are reluctant to discipline cops who fail to deploy their recordings.

Moreover, it is often dark, the camera is easily inadvertently obstructed, and the camera shot itself is often in too tight to really determine what happened. We need to continue their use, but reformers should think about more reliable ways to capture a complex and dynamic scene.

Here I discuss something seemingly more mundane, but still rather important. The use of profanity by cops during critical scenes.

In one, they were screaming, “don’t f—ing move.” Another, “keep your f—ing hands up.” Another, “I’ll f—ing shoot you.” Body camera footage has captured far worse.

From my perspective this jumped out at me—if you want a police officer to calm a situation down before it ends in the use of deadly force, shouldn’t they themselves attempt to de-escalate the situation? And yet, yelling profanity, as we shall see from research, actually does the opposite—it escalates the situation.

Moreover, from my perspective, it conveys three important qualities. First, the officer is highly emotional and operating from fear and adrenaline which is not what you want in a crisis, even though it is understandable in a way. Second, it confirms in the minds of many that the police are out of control in moments of critical incident. And finally, it is unprofessional.

When I asked Davis Chief Darren Pytel about it, he agreed.

“It pretty much does always sound unprofessional,” he said adding, “unfortunately it seems to come out when stress hits which is the worst time for it to come out.”

The public doesn't like it.

A 2016 CATO Institute/ YouGov survey found that nearly 20 percent of Americans (that's one in five) report a police officer having used profanity with them. Three of four believe they should be prohibited from using profanity or swearing at citizens while on the job.

Richard Johnson, with a PhD from the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati, writing a Research Brief for the Dolan Consulting Group, notes that this issue has been debated in law enforcement circles for years.

“Most law enforcement leaders argue the use of profanity with members of the public is unprofessional and should be avoided whenever possible,” he writes.

But not everyone agrees, as some argue “officers often need to use the “language of the street” in order to be understood and viewed as authoritative by some segments of the population.”

I think this misses the point, it is one thing to use it in casual conversations, but in a crisis situation screaming profanity is problematic.

Johnson notes that other research shows “the use of profanity generally has negative repercussions in various social settings.”

The issue of police use of profanity, though, has been unstudied, but research conducted by a team at West Virginia University, in the Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology, examined the influence of profanity on public perception of police use of force.

“The findings revealed the participants were more likely to believe that the officer's use of force was excessive in the scenario where the officer used profanity,” he writes.

Psychologist Christine Patton, writing in Psychologists in Public Service in 2018, wrote that prior studies conclusively “have established that the use of profanity in a professional capacity can lead to unfavorable or outright negative evaluations of performance.”

In her study, she found, “When profanity was used by police during a mock arrest scenario, participants were significantly more likely to negatively evaluate performance and to rate force as excessive.”

She writes, “Results indicated that participants who rated force as excessive had significantly less trust in police performance and in police use of force. That is, they doubted whether police agencies would fairly investigate citizen use of force complaints, felt police did not always choose the appropriate amount of force during an arrest, and did not believe police treated members of the public with respect or effectively reduced crime in their neighborhoods.”

These findings make a lot of sense. It is basically demeanor evidence. If someone is calm, in control and professional, the viewing public is more likely to see the officer in control, acting professionally, and so when they use force, it is far more likely to be seen as legitimate.

Whereas if they are screaming profanity and issuing threats, it feeds into a perception that police are operating on adrenaline and are out of control at best—and at worst confirming the fears of many that police are simply out to get segments of society.

This is illustrated in a 2012 incident in Davis where two UC Davis students were tased and the officer was ultimately found not to have used improper force, but instead used unprofessional language.

Former Chief Landy Black in a [report released in 2019](#) through SB 1421 writes: “Officer Benson begins his interactions with the people he encountered at the wrong end of the escalation/de-escalation continuum. Without provocation, the first words out of Officer Benson’s mouth are rude and uncivil; issuing orders in a manner and tone that could reasonably be expected to cause most recipients to recoil and act indignant. And Officer Benson ultimately reaped the crop he’d sown.”

Chief Black writes: “Threats of arrest and continuing to use harsh, uncivil, unprofessional language—telling (him) to ‘Shut up!’ for instance—further did nothing to deescalate tensions...his, other officers, suspects, or members of the public.”

What you see in a lot of these incidents is that the situation escalates to the point where the use of force becomes authorized, but better de-escalation techniques could probably have avoided the use of force in the first place.