

# Guardians, Not Warriors: A New Era of Police Training After Ferguson

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**Abstract:** After the high-profile killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, and subsequent high-profile police shootings started to be covered extensively by American media outlets, more attention has been focused on police militarization and the warrior mindset among officers. Many training academies now adopt a guardian approach instead of a warrior mentality approach for their trainees' socialization and culture. While the warrior cop versus guardian police debate continues, evidence has begun to emerge indicating that police executives and training academy directors have made a shift from high-stress military training to a lower-stress training environment since these shootings occurred. Recent research focuses on the root causes of racial tensions, police use of force, and racial profiling. In contrast, the current study sought to fill the gap in the literature by uncovering whether the police have made positive changes in response to these shootings. The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics disseminated self-report questionnaires to police academies in 2011 and then again in 2022 using the same questionnaire. These data are used to develop an explanation of the culture surrounding police training and to examine the shift in the prevalence of academies abandoning the high-stress militarized training approach following the 2014 shooting.

**Keywords:** Police Militarization, Guardian Versus Warrior Mindset, Police Training Reform

## Introduction

Police legitimacy is a traditional marker used to examine the public's perception of the police. The institution of policing has faced calls for reform for many years. Recent research has uncovered the link between racial prejudice and police militarization. Police executives are aware of the change in public sentiment and backlash against a militarized police force in their communities (Jimenez et al., 2022). Political polarization and views among the public that officers lean heavily toward the right end of the political spectrum have raised concerns among policing scholars that police legitimacy could suffer long-term damage. In a nation divided among party affiliation and political ideology nearly down the middle, it would seem inevitable that the public's perception of police legitimacy would suffer if more than half of the officers in the profession leaned one way or the other, both politically and morally (Li et al., 2020).

Since the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, police-citizen encounters in the United States have come under greater scrutiny and increased media attention. The view of the police as warriors gave way to a guardian mentality among many police training academies, although many did, and continue to, embrace the warrior concept. In 2013, 51% of police academies still used the militaristic stress model of training (Li et al., 2020). After the events in Ferguson, training academies with non-stress, campus-style learning environments began focusing on de-escalation techniques and conflict resolution behaviors (Lockwood et al., 2018). While the high-stress militarized model of police training has many downsides, there are positive aspects as well. Trainees who experience similar ordeals, both mental and physical, can form tighter bonds and comradery throughout the training (Pielmus, 2013).

Socialization into the profession, bonding with other trainees, a sense of in-group loyalty, and commitment to shared values can all create collective effervescence and improve morale. In contrast, in-group loyalty could lead to dogmatic views and orthodoxy, which can stifle creativity and shut down new solutions to solve pressing problems (Haidt, 2020). The same militaristic views and insistence on commitment to the in-group, which invariably leads

to mistrust of the out-group, could indirectly reinforce the warrior mentality by promoting mistrust of the public among the officers being trained.

Research into citizen's perceptions of the militarization of police (Lockwood et al., 2018), whether racial prejudice predicts militarization (Jimenez et al., 2022), and texts criticizing increased federal funding to enhance the warrior mentality (Balko, 2013), focus their research on the militarization of policing from an operational standpoint. However, little research has explored the influence training cultures have on militarization. Existing research examines media and public reactions to policing, with some research specifically focused on the world-view of citizens as it is shaped by social media and closely held ideological beliefs (Breton & Swensen, 2020). This study explores whether the police, after extensive media outcry and public sentiment since the killing of Michael Brown, move away from a highly militarized training experience to a campus-based, low-stress environment where de-escalation and problem-solving skills are reinforced.

### **Training Academy Cultures**

Just as cultures vary in society, they can also vary within police training academies. In a culture, individual members can either rebel against the norms of a culture or integrate into that particular culture and become a part of the larger group (Elster & Gelfand, 2020). Some cultures do this relatively fast, while others take longer, sometimes many generations, particularly when exploring migrant groups entering a country. Police academies have a firm culture before a police recruit arrives (McCarty & Lawrence, 2014). After the first day, the recruit is under no illusions that they will be given adequate time to adjust (Simon, 2021). Conformity is expected, and it is expected right away, particularly in a high-stress paramilitary atmosphere.

According to Gelfand et al. (2011), tight and loose cultures evolve primarily based on threats from the outside. Societies primed for attack by invaders are under constant threat and typically evolve to have tight cultures where rules are important, in-group loyalty is demanded, and norm violations are discouraged. These social norms create and maintain a sense of order, trust, and cooperation necessary for the survival of the people. In organizations, it is unsurprising that employees band together and cooperate more often when their jobs depend on it. Outside threats in non-policing organizations (i.e., decreased sales, layoffs, market crashes) can create threats that require an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual for the organization to weather the storm (Haidt, 2012). In response to outside threats, populations typically develop psychological adaptations to self-regulate and conform.

In-group loyalty and tight cultures are important in the military war zones, when disobeying a command could get others killed. Military leaders recognize the importance of following orders and maintaining a command structure on the battlefield (Sinek, 2014). Therefore, their basic training regimen needs to reflect the environment in which the soldier will serve. In police agencies, in contrast, military command structures are not typically followed after initial training. Police officers routinely work alone and make discretionary decisions without orders from above. Police agencies have recently begun to use more militarized equipment, uniforms, long guns, and tactics, but the military command structure in policing is mostly symbolic with the exception of special tactical units or riot control teams. Nevertheless, many training academies adopt a militaristic approach during the training phase, which causes the police recruits to undergo protocols that mirror basic military training. Even when faced with evidence that public safety is not enhanced by increased militarization and citizens' attitudes toward the police trend downward as agencies become more militarized, training academies continue to utilize high-stress militarized training methods. Recent research suggests this trend may be reversing (Mummolo, 2018).

One impediment to moving toward a guardian low-stress training environment is academy staff hesitance to eliminate order and discipline during the training phase. An

emphasis on differences from others and adherence to a specific code of conduct undoubtedly leads to fewer problems for police academy staff, more orderly instruction, and fewer rule-breaking behaviors during the training phase. However, research has not demonstrated that those rule-following behaviors continue after the officer graduates from the academy and returns to their department to begin work (Burkhardt & Baker, 2018). The police socialization process begins immediately after the recruit starts the training program, but the emphasis on differences from others may continue throughout the recruit's career. In other words, the benefits of teamwork and collective effervescence created during the training phase may be beneficial in easing the work of training academy staff. However, those differences could leave the officer feeling isolated, mistrusting other community members, and withdrawn from people who are not immediate family members or other police officers (Li et al., 2020).

### **The Recruitment Challenge**

According to Li et al. (2020), police culture is responsible for resistance to many positive changes widely adopted in other professions, such as attention to diversity. A culture change by adopting non-stress training modalities could attract a more diverse set of applicants to the profession. However, as long as the dominant culture of police organizations remains resistant to change and insists upon high-stress militarized training without evidence that it produces better officers, the recruitment crisis may continue indefinitely. An overlooked drawback to paramilitary police training is that many potentially effective police recruits only apply for positions if they wish to enter a paramilitary organization. Many see themselves as problem solvers and peacemakers and are genuinely called to public service; however, they may be repelled by the culture of masculinity often associated with paramilitary training of all kinds (Prokos & Padvic, 2002). Police advocates contend that they are experiencing a recruiting crisis, and many agencies have limited calls for service due to staffing issues. Perhaps this recruiting crisis is self-inflicted, to a degree, caused by an adherence to a dated militaristic training modality that may produce well-behaved recruits, but lacks demonstrated effectiveness at producing better officers in the field. The guardian police model is becoming more popular and, in some instances, is replacing the warrior mindset in police training academy curriculum design.

Research by Nix et al. (2017) suggests that many police executives are highly concerned about their department's portrayal within the media and among the general public. Police executives may wonder if they are limiting the recruitment of a large segment of society by adopting a militaristic training environment. Many police departments use military rank structure and insignia, yet do not follow military command protocols day to day. In short, police officers may look the part, but do not function as a platoon of soldiers. On the contrary, most decisions made by the police are made by a single officer at a scene, not a platoon commander issuing orders (Balko, 2013). Moreover, police executives may explore various other options to improve public perception including community review boards (CRBs), procurement of body cameras, and other ethical training instead of demilitarizing basic recruit training (Wyandt, 2024).

Another challenge to the widespread adoption of the guardian police model is that in the United States, the police are primarily controlled at the state and local levels. In many other countries, policing is highly centralized and a decision to implement change is made at a high level. The decision or directive then makes its way down to regions and states. Important changes in the United States must be made at the organizational level of thousands of sheriff's departments and municipal agencies (Strah et al., 2022). The shift from a warrior to a guardian mentality may seem relatively easy on paper. A new police chief or sheriff may issue directives, policies, or general order addendums declaring that officers within a particular agency adopt a guardian approach. While this new guardian style may be slowly adopted, in many cases, the decision was made by a single individual, the executive. Training academies, in contrast, many of which are regional academies, are often operated by

numerous agency heads who have input or sit on boards that govern the direction of the academy. Oftentimes, those directives are more complicated and the mindset of a collective executive board is more varied and difficult to gain a majority consensus on a particular direction.

According to Strah et al. (2023), the militaristic attitudes held by many police officers and police executives contributed to the civil unrest and dissatisfaction with the police over the past decade. Shifting the public's perception from viewing the police as citizen soldiers to viewing them as members of the community and public servants would better serve the interest of society, and ultimately, it is in the best interest of the police themselves. Other studies, however, have found that overall citizen satisfaction and trust in the police do not change significantly after high-profile police shootings. However, the public's perception of the individual officers involved in a publicized shooting has changed (Chermak et al., 2006). In other words, research shows that citizen's typically do not hold all members of the profession accountable for the actions of a few officers. For this research, however, it is the police executive's or academy director's views about public perception that can change an academy's approach to training regardless of the public's actual perception. If the chief or academy director thinks public sentiment and support for their agency is declining, they might be more inclined to take measures to mitigate the loss of support by adopting stances more conducive to community policing and abandon the warrior mindset.

The number of conservatives dwarfs left-leaning officers currently working in the field. Paramilitary police academy culture perpetuates tribalism, especially among conservative leaning recruits. While this culture appears to draw more conservative leaning applicants, the culture may further entrench the officer's views after academy socialization. Policing stands out as a profession that needs to push back against political and cultural extremism (Nix et al., 2017). Citizens' views that the police are able to serve as independent and non-partisan actors are paramount to improving police-citizen relations. A lack of perceived legitimacy in the eyes of the public has the potential to promote violence against the police and bring harm to the officers who serve (Lockwood et al., 2018). Many police leaders understand that hyperpolarization among their officers is a concern and take policy steps to mitigate the appearance of partisanship within their departments. While this may be nearly impossible when some police leaders are elected officials themselves with party affiliations, such as sheriffs, many non-partisan police leaders could enact meaningful reforms. Training focused on problem-solving and adopting the guardian mentality is one proposed solution to improving citizens' views of the police. Furthermore, this shift could also be beneficial in the recruitment challenge faced by many agencies by appealing to a broader society as an open and welcoming profession regardless of demographic or ideological factors.

## **Methodology**

Data for the current study were collected through qualitative analysis of existing datasets compiled by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 2013 and 2022. The Census of Law Enforcement Training Academies compiles data regarding the structure of training academies from all over the United States. The results are published roughly every four years since 2002. The latest data set was published in 2022. This study will examine data from 2013 and 2022 to investigate whether high-stress training has increased or decreased since 2013 to determine if academy directors are receptive to demands on decreased militarization and public outcry over high-profile police shootings. Eight hundred fifty-seven training academies were identified, and 747 of those academies were deemed eligible by the researchers to respond to questionnaires. In 2022, 602 responses were received (an overall response rate of 81%). Police academies were asked to respond and rate the degree to which their implemented curriculum followed a stress model (associated with a militarized training model), a non-stress model, or a combination of the two.

**Findings**

U.S. Department of Justice et al. (2021) demonstrated a significant decrease in the number of academies reporting “all/mostly” stress training models on the questionnaire. Notably, 60% of the police recruits were trained under a balanced model, as opposed to only 34% trained under that model in 2013. 23% of trainees were trained under the mostly stress model in 2013, one year before the Michael Brown killing, which decreased to only 5% in 2022. In the intervening years since the Ferguson shooting, police academies drastically abandoned the high-stress militarized modality for a more moderate approach to training.

Table 1. Changes in Training Modalities Since Michael Brown Shooting

<b>Type of training model</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2022</b>
All/mostly stress	23.3%	4.8%
Slightly more stress than nonstress	23.8%	11.3%
Balanced stress/nonstress	34.2%	60.2%
Slightly more nonstress	10.3%	21.8%
All/mostly nonstress	8.3%	1.7%

These data suggest a decline in high-stress militarized training among the academies included in the survey, with 60% of responding academies reporting a more balanced model of training when compared to only 34% reporting the same in 2013. While academies may remain hesitant to eliminate all high-stress and militaristic elements within their training, the majority have embraced moderation and balance.

**Discussion**

The data suggest a gradual change among police training academies toward a combined stress/non-stress training environment. It is important to note that not all police agencies independently operate a training facility. Many agencies, particularly those in rural areas, are members of regional training academies where multiple agencies combine resources to train and graduate officers in a class composed of many different agencies. The shift away from a high-stress training environment during initial instruction may not correlate with the militarist operational model of the agency (Burkhardt & Baker, 2018). A police recruit could undergo a paramilitary cultural socialization process at a high-stress training facility, then graduate and enter a municipal agency that does not operate militarily or vice versa. In other words, a particular training modality may or may not be further reinforced after graduation and follow the officer throughout their career.

It remains unclear if there are any performance differences among officers who attend the various training styles including use of force instances, complaints, ethics violations, and civil litigation involving the officer’s actions against the department. An empirical research study examining the attitudes of officers who attend a high-stress training academy juxtaposed with a low-stress campus-style training academy could help to answer the strength of this contention. With the current data, conclusions could be drawn that police executives and academy directors have shifted away from high-stress training since 2013, but causality cannot be determined. The current data does not ask academy administrators to provide the reason(s) they made the shift away from a militarized model. Moreover, it will take time to determine whether officer performance has been reduced or enhanced since this shift.

Without directly measuring officers' attitudes, some studies have suggested that non-stress training academies reduce instances of lethal force used by the officer, as well as a reduced chance of the officer being injured or killed in the line of duty (Langworthy, 1986; Smith & Holmes, 2003). The rules followed by the police are important, particularly since they are expected to enforce the rules of society. Within police departments, police executives

who are concerned about police civil liability may see the benefits of creating a culture of order on day one of police training to reduce liability issues among their officers. If a jury in a criminal trial believes an officer did not strictly follow the rules of arrest or search and seizure protocol, then it could vote to acquit a criminal. Therefore, officers must be accustomed to and committed to following rules, and day one of police academy training is a good place to start. Evidence exists to support the notion that non-stress academies may attract more independent-minded, well-rounded, and centrist applicants who are open to the very reforms that plague police departments, such as embracing the guardian police mentality as opposed to the warrior mentality (Koslicki, 2022). Furthermore, time spent meticulously making a bed using a ruler, participating in line inspections, shining shoes, participating in military marching and drills, and running in cadence could provide more instructional time for de-escalation technique training, diversity and ethics discussions and lessons (Custodio, 2023). In other words, it may not be that paramilitary training is in and of itself a vice. However, it may be the time it takes away from other vital training necessary to develop stronger community bonds, citizen relations, and equal enforcement tactics.

## Conclusions

This study examined past and current data to determine if police academies have changed training modalities since 2014. The data collected involved a questionnaire distributed to police training academies by the United States Department of Justice. In 2011, 47.1% of police recruits experienced an "all/mostly stress" or "slightly more stress than non-stress" militarized police training program, but by 2022, only 16.1 % of recruits had that experience. The questionnaire did not attempt to uncover why many of the training academies changed their mode of delivery, so the reasons remain elusive. Moreover, while there was a shift away from high-stress training, further research is needed to determine if the performance of individual officers changed depending on the type of training they received.

After many highly publicized calls for police reform, police training directors may have been concerned about the appearance of warrior-style training and either reduced some of the more militarized components of high-stress training or responded to the questionnaire with a lower-stress response without changing the curriculum at all. The existing data fails to answer why the changes occurred in the first place, whether the changes impacted recruit performance, and most importantly, whether or not the training environment changed officer use of force in the field after graduation. Further research is needed to examine whether public perceptions improved in localities that made the change from high-stress to non-stress training. Police training and operations may vary from one agency to another, especially if the police academy is a regional academy serving many departments with unique cultures and structures (Koslicki, 2022). Some larger departments own and operate their police academy, where the training and operational cultures remain relatively similar. Therefore, it is challenging to separate officers who have experienced a high-stress militarized training modality from those who have entered a non-militarized workforce after graduation.

Further research is needed to determine if the shift away from militarized police training will continue or whether there is a gradual or sudden retreat back toward paramilitary, high-stress academy modalities. Even if training regimes are less militarized, it is unclear if this shift will appeal to more moderate and left-leaning recruits. Moreover, many other variables could lead to a recruiting crisis independent of training modalities. According to Donahue (2023), political party affiliation, which is overwhelmingly Republican as opposed to Independent or Democrat among police officers, is another challenge to overcome when recruiting. Identifying and employing a broad spectrum of society may become increasingly challenging if a profession is viewed as increasingly polarized and political. Suppose nearly half of society views a profession as hostile to their political beliefs. In that case, the result may be a diminished applicant pool and a strain on the already limited number of applicants.

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