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DAVE YOUNG

CHANGE YOUR THINKING ABOUT GUN GRABS

Do you have the training and gear to protect your duty weapon or are you just hopeful nothing will happen?

As a law enforcement trainer, I often ask my students the following question: "If you were to go home tonight and see an envelope on your pillow with an invitation inside that says: 'You are going to be attacked at this location at this time and by this subject, and you are going to have your gun taken away,' would you change your lifestyle today?" Every time I ask this question all reply with a confident "Yes." My answer is to follow up with: "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Stories of gun grab attacks against law enforcement officers almost always read the same. On a specific date and time an officer was overpowered, assaulted, and disarmed. The facts of what happens after the officer is disarmed also have a similar ending and a tragic one. The officer is shot with his or her own firearm, innocent bystanders are killed, and/or the subject commits suicide with the officer's gun.

The 2015 Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) report from the FBI says the average age of officers killed in the line of duty is 40 with a time in service of 12 years. These are not newly hired officers right out of the police academy. They are seasoned veterans with experience and professional maturity.

Every police agency in the country has training in handgun protection (before the disarm) and retention (during the disarm). However, the performance standards differ greatly from one agency to another. Many agencies choose to give their officers what fellow police trainer Gary Klugiewicz calls "fire talks over fire drills." What he means by that is they talk about what to do rather than having the officer physically do it in real time.

Many typical questions asked after tragic gun grab attacks range include:

1. How did the subject get the gun?

2. How did the subject escape from the officer?

3. If another officer was on the scene, why didn't the second officer shoot?

4. What went wrong?

5. Whose fault was it?

ASSIGNING BLAME

Who do you blame for the death of an officer caused by a gun grab attack? I believe there are four entities with responsibility.

The Agency—All agencies have policies to follow and procedures to adhere to. These policies and procedures ensure every officer attends training in the law and use-of-force options. But to blame the agency for not ensuring its officers are adequately trained is not entirely fair. The depth and breadth of training offered by an agency is always affected by budgeting, manpower issues, and politics.

Training dollars usually compete with other priorities in government and since the importance of training is usually only measured in hindsight when tragedies occur, we are left with the false impression that so long as everything is going smoothly our men and women of law enforcement must be adequately trained. Then a tragedy happens and people want corrective action.

The Trainers—Every training division has a duty-bound obligation to ensure its officers are prepared with the proper training needed to help keep them safe and that includes weapon protection and retention. But state-imposed requirements often consume the manpower and funding available for in-service officer training.

Further, training is often provided



PHOTOS: DAVE YOUNG

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by in-house staff, and their approach to training may never evolve. Many agencies continue to use outdated training methods and equipment year after year. Their failure to keep up with industry standards limits officers' ability to respond to critical incidents with modern tactical knowledge.

The Manufacturer of the Gear—Before any gear is purchased, agencies need to conduct research and provide a list of guidelines outlining the performance expectations. But gear alone cannot prevent gun grab attacks.

Today's security holsters are designed to keep the firearm in the holster and free from unwarranted access. However, these holsters require significant training, thousands of draws to allow the officers to get their sidearms out smoothly and quickly. And sometimes, when the subjects are goal oriented enough, they can defeat the holster by figuring out how it works or by simply stripping the gun out with extraordinary force.



In addition to the standard power lock technique to prevent a gun grab, you can also use your elbow.

Officers need to have contingency plans in place to deal with sudden violence and not become totally dependent on the performance of their equipment. A security holster generally can retain a gun for maybe 5 or 10 seconds against a determined attack, which means the officer has to have a plan to react in that time frame.

The Officer—"Training without Practice is a fool's bet." Yet many officers continue to roll the dice on gun grabs anyway. But to blame the officer who was involved in the encounter is not entirely fair since.

Officers receive equipment and training from their agencies and trust that it is adequate to handle any circumstance



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they might face. Also officers have now been preconditioned to be kinder and gentler in their actions.

Further, the public demands a softer, gentler response to subject resistance and is quick to criticize officers who take decisive action against violent threats. That works against officers who need to end violent confrontations with resistant subjects before they can escalate into gun grab attacks.

So the blame for why officers are getting killed in gun grab attacks has to be shared. Some agencies are not providing the training, some gear fails, some officers don't seek practice the skills they learn in training, and mandated training standards are shortchanging officer safety training. What we need to do is listen to what the facts tell us, then take the necessary action to improve officer safety.

COLD TRUTHS

Here are some things you need to know about gun grab attacks.



The power lock secures the threat's hand on the firearm, while still giving them the ability to open their hand, release, and break off. It can be performed in any position.

- At any time during a physical encounter where the officer and subject are in a struggle, the subject has the same access to the firearm as the officer.
- Officers are killed with their own handguns.
- According to the Uniform Crime Report, if an officer has a firearm taken during physical encounter, the officer stands a very high chance of being shot with it, or other innocents or officers may be shot in the area.
- Handgun retention training, due to budget and overtime factors, is at times

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not provided by the departments, especially during in-service programs.

- Handgun retention techniques are not practiced by officers.
- Many officers because of the hours they work, the foods they eat, and the pressures of family life do not maintain fitness throughout their careers. Most departments have no physical standards for the size and fitness of their officers. So the subjects officers deal with in violent confrontations may be larger and in better physical condition than the officers.

GROSS MOTOR SKILLS

According to Dr. Bill Lewinsky of the Force Science Institute, during times of stress it is proven that officers operate in the mid brain. That means you revert to gross motor skills. I am sure you would all agree that faced with a weapon disarming or even drawing a weapon from a holster to defend your own life is a stressful encounter.

Some of the companies within the industry have taken some vital steps to



You can use a modified power lock from the ground. You don't need to worry about your balance. Completing the move pulls the attacker down to the ground.

provide the industry with holsters that provide retention and allow the officer to make an effective draw under stress and others haven't. Also, not every piece of gear is suitable for all officers. That means you can't just choose your gear based on the opinions of others. You need to take the equipment in hand, use it yourself, and evaluate it to make sure you have the right holster for you. Remember: "Gear only speaks true when it is being used."

If your agency issues duty gear that you don't like and you aren't given other options, you have to find a way to overcome your concerns about that holster. If it doesn't offer the retention you want, then you need to focus extra hard on training against gun grabs and practice that training. If you find it difficult to make a smooth and fast draw from that holster, then you need to work to overcome that issue.

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GUN GRAB RESPONSE

Handgun protection and retention has evolved over the years. I would like to share with you three simple steps in retaining your firearm that give you the options to:

- Disengage from the threat. Disengagement is typically your best option when possible.
- Stabilize the situation to limit the threat. If you are unable to disengage from the threat, then stabilizing the situation when possible gives you an advantage.
- Escalate when needed. If we are unable to disengage from the threat or stabilize the situation, then having the ability to escalate is necessary to protect life.

The tactic I recommend for response against gun grab attacks is a simple and effective one because it does not depend on the type of holster, size of the attacker, or firearm you are carrying. Officers can also use it to secure any of the items on their duty belts and it gives you the ability to disengage from the threat, stabilize the

situation, and escalate when needed.

Here are the steps.

Control Your Weapon—Using your strong hand, reach under the attacker's arm and grab your belt. As you step back with your rear foot to maintain balance, lean into the attacker's body, turning your head away from the threat.

This tactic is called a "power lock." You can accomplish it with either hand. The tactic secures the threat's hand on the firearm, while still giving them the ability to open their hand, release, and break off. The power lock can also be executed from any of the common or uncommon positions in which you operate. Once you have secured the attacker's hand and arm, you have the ability to disengage, stabilize, or escalate.

Disengage and Evaluate—Verbalize, maintain balance, pivot, and evaluate.

Escalate—When you go on the attack, think legs, arms, and weapons other than your duty gun. Legs: Stomp the attacker's heel, knee the attacker, and/or deliver

some kicks. Arms: Strike with your fists, hands, elbows, and forearms (bite and poke). Other weapons: Use whatever you can access. This is a deadly force situation; your life and lives of others are on the line.

Remember to train and practice your weapon retention techniques. You cannot depend on rescue by other officers or your gear. The primary retention feature of a retention holster is the person wearing it. ☒

Dave Young is a longstanding member of the POLICE Magazine Advisory Board and the founder and director of Arma Training (www.armatraining.com) and US Fighting Systems (www.usfightingsystems.com) and a co-founder of Vistelar (www.vistelar.com). Young has more than 30 years of combined civilian and military law enforcement experience and training. He has served as a sworn corrections and law enforcement officer, a patrol officer, a watch commander, a special investigator, and a tactical team member and leader.

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