WHAT IS A POLICE USE OF FORCE?
USE OF FORCE 101

HOW DO WE DEFINE USE OF FORCE?

A use of force can be defined as any "Physical effort to compel compliance by an unwilling subject above unresisted handcuffing, including pointing a firearm at a person. " However, definitions can cary by department. Many departments and key law enforcement experts also advocate expanding the definition to include more intangible elements of force. For example, just the presence of an officer can be something that compels people to behave differently--isn't that a force acting on them?

DEFINING
LEVELS OF FORCE

Force is usually described in levels that correspond to their severity. Low-level uses of force are those that don't result in harm, but are nonetheless serious. For example, pointing a weapon constitutes a Level 1 use of force.

As the possibility to cause harm increases, so does the level of force, up to the highest level which would be any action resulting in death.

Use of Force policies are usually available online, which promotes transparency. Find out whether your department has strong, clear definitions on use of force.

WHY IT
MATTERS

When an officer approaches a scenario, there's a matrix of type and severity of force available at their disposal. Understanding the levels of force and a department's policy helps provide a guide for an officer approaching a situation that might result in force. Levels of force also dictate what the reporting requirements are.

However, it's important in training, policy and culture to situate force in its proper context. Force is just one tool in an officer's toolbelt, and is often an ineffective tool. It should only be used as a last resort, and an officer should have strong de-escalation skills to reflect the needs of the vast majority of calls for service.

To learn more about when force should be used and how to promote safe, effective, and procedurally just use of force, check out our ELEFA Academy Use of Force page.

WHY CAN POLICE USE FORCE?
USE OF FORCE 101

THE HISTORY OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE CONSTITUTION

In the US, the constitution describes the mechanisms by which the law should be enforced in the courts, but not much is said about policing until later amendments. As the US expanded and solidified as a nation, policing remained a patchwork, often informal institution with little standardization. It's important to note that often, local policing was created in the context of slavery and protecting the interests of slaveowners. Policing didn't take on a recognizably modern approach until relatively recently in the United States, beginning in the mid-1800s in cities on the East Coast and modeled off of the London police force. However, police and their abilities have since been established in Amendments and court interpretations.

Police have the ability to uphold the law in the US, as established in the Tenth Amendment, which places that power in many circumstances in the hands of the states rather than the federal government. Court rulings have also agreed that police can use force to uphold the law, particularly in Graham v. Connor which interpreted the Fourth Amendment. The idea is that the right to make an arrest necessarily carries the right to use force to achieve that arrest, broadly defining the force appropriate as that which could be seen as "objectively reasonable". This is called the Graham standard. To learn more, check out our resources on Authorization!

SERVING THE
COMMUNITY

It's also important to recognize that when polled, **the public generally believes that the police ought to be able to use force to protect** from crime, and particularly to protect people in a crisis.

However, the degree to which police can or should use force in a given scenario is rightfully debated. We've seen so many cases of force being used inappropriately, **particularly against marginalized communities and people of color.**

So, if our departments have the right and a broad mandate to use force in a way that protects public safety, how do we ensure that police are using force safely? Elements of policy, training, culture, and law are all being reimagined with this goal in mind by departments around the country with the help of activists, nonprofits, federal intervention, and most importantly, driven by the demands of their communities. To find out more about the projects happening around the country, check out our Resources & Links page.

Effective Law Enforcement for All is dedicated to promoting safe, effective, and procedurally just policing for all communities. To help achieve that goal, we've created resources to help educate the public on the key elements of better policing.

Information can help equip activists and interested members of the community to partner with their local departments on equal footing and drive change that we all want. Because everyone wants to get home safely.