



OC exposure during training: A survival must?

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Yesterday at 2:02 PM

Some trainers believe that if you're not exposed to oleoresin capsicum during training, you're being cheated out of a very valuable training experience. But some officers fight taking an OC hit as was the case with one southern officer who refused to be sprayed after claiming he feared possible long-term adverse effects of OC. He was subsequently fired.

His chief, who along with the other members of the agency took a single 2- to 5-second burst from about 6 feet away as a one-time training exercise, said, “The public has access to this product and can use it against us. You have to know how to defend against it.”

A federal judge in North Carolina ruled that spraying correctional officers with OC does not violate the officers' constitutional rights after a CO argued that being exposed to pepper spray was “dangerous and painful and thereby violated her due process rights.”



What is the most effective way to expose officers to OC in training? “Use it to reinforce survival skills and a survival mindset,” a trainer recommends. (YouTube/Pennington County Sheriff's Office)

In a ruling against the officer, the judge stated that inmates in the prison where she worked have “a constitutional right to be free from bodily injury that is brutal and harmful.” But this right does not apply to correctional officers because, unlike inmates, an officer “has the freedom to choose not to be subjected to the spray” by seeking other employment.

Many trainers believe that OC exposure is an officer survival issue, plain and simple: If you've had the right kind of training exposure, your chances of gaining the edge in a life-threatening street confrontation are significantly improved. [\(Share your thoughts on this issue in the comment box below.\)](#)

4 BENEFITS OF A WELL-DESIGNED OC EXPOSURE PROGRAM

A prominent DT trainer cited what he believed to be four benefits of a well-designed OC exposure program:

1. "Most importantly, exposure to OC gives you a unique opportunity to see how you function when you are in a compromised situation," he said. "The point is not just to understand how bad it hurts or how quickly you can be incapacitated. We know OC works. We want to discover in training if YOU work. Once you're sprayed, can you continue to defend yourself and fight for your life?"

2. Exposure does show officers how this weapon works and how fast it works – and (perhaps even more valuable) how fast it doesn't work. "In many cases, OC does not take effect immediately," the trainer explained. "A subject can stay functional for several seconds, and in some cases never be affected."

"Many officers when they are sprayed in training get really angry and feel that if they ever get ahold of the person who sprayed them, they'll kill 'em. Understand that this may be what is going through the mind of a bad guy who you sprayed, too."

"This will help remind you that once you spray a subject, keep your distance until he is incapacitated. Be ready to spray repeatedly if necessary or use other force options. A good number of people sprayed still need empty-hand control tactics to neutralize their behavior after spraying."

3. Knowing from first-hand exposure how OC is likely to affect you, you may be in a better position legally should you later end up having to shoot someone on the street who is attacking you with OC. "Your training experience will help you articulate exactly why you felt your life was in jeopardy from the assault," the trainer says.

Also, if your training is more comprehensive than just a "spray-and-wipe" exposure, you will be reassured that you can make rational – rather than panicky – force decisions during an OC attack.

4. You experience first-hand what it takes to properly decontaminate someone exposed to OC, including yourself and other officers. "Decontamination used to take 30 to 40 minutes," said the training. "Now it can usually be done within 5 minutes" using specially designed neutralizing agents. "Water, which used to be touted as the counter to OC, simply isn't very effective in getting rid of it," he said.

Police Recruits Get Pepper Sprayed



WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO EXPOSE OFFICERS TO OC IN TRAINING?

"Use it to reinforce survival skills and a survival mindset," the trainer recommends.

In an OC exposure course he designed, participants are first given basic "academic" information on oleoresin capsicum: how it works, how to draw the canister, how to deliver various spray or stream patterns, etc. Then each participant, while wearing his or her duty belt with all its normal gear, is exposed to the type of OC the officer carries, with a 1-second burst to the eyes at the distance recommended for effective application.

Now the survival aspect of the training kicks in. Immediately upon being sprayed, the officer is attacked by a role player wearing protective gear and with at least two safety coaches standing by. The assailant attempts to disarm the officer, and the officer must fight back with knees, forearms and elbows while simultaneously defending his or her firearm and trying mentally and physically to forestall the incapacitating effects of the OC.

In preliminary instruction, participants are coached that the attack will occur and that they are to defend themselves, despite pain and visual impairment. "Goal-oriented people tend to accomplish their goals before they succumb to the effects of OC," the trainer explained. "So, we try to instill the officer ahead of time with strong task-and-goal conditioning: namely, protecting their weapons and fighting back."

Is OC exposure valuable during training?

Neither agree nor disagree



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◀ **Negative** **Positive** ▶

Slide either way to express how you feel

As the officer is able during the attack, he must get his radio out and call dispatch for help, giving his location and status. If he is still functional beyond this point, he may then need to repel a second attack from the role player. This may necessitate using his own OC, impact weapon, or firearm loaded with training rounds.

"The officers see how to properly use OC under stress, reinforcing the burst concept rather than continuous spraying, for example," he said. "They see if they can use their impact weapon and if they can draw their firearm responsibly and protect it and make a righteous deadly force decision."

Once the officer has fought back and "survived," a role-player acting as first responding officer on the scene then assists with the decontamination process while encouraging the officer to supply information about the "assailant" - his or her description, whether weapons were involved, line of flight, etc. "This helps keep the officer's mind off the negative aspects of being sprayed," the trainer explained.

By the time the exercise is completed, officers understand clearly that OC is not an "instant knockout" either for an assailant or for them. "In taking hundreds of officers through the program, I have never seen anyone who was instantly incapacitated," said the trainer. "All were able to keep fighting to some degree. Some can go for 10 seconds, others a full minute. Maybe 5% are not affected at all."

"But the important message is: You can fight back if you get sprayed, no matter how uncomfortable it is for you. You don't have to fall down and just take whatever the assailant has in mind next."

Pepper Spray



AN OC ATTACK IS NOT JUST A TRAINING FANTASY

An officer in the south was halfway through handcuffing a trespassing suspect in a railroad track area when “a violent scuffle ensued.” The suspect grabbed the officer’s OC canister and doused him with a “massive amount of pepper spray.” Then he tried to take the officer’s Glock.

Like a graduate of the class explained above, the officer protected his firearm and fought back as the two wrestled in the gravel on the tracks. Eventually, he was able to shoot his attacker four times, including once in the head. According to authorities, “at least two, maybe three, of the shots were fatal.” Fortunately, the officer escaped with only numerous minor injuries.

Attacks like this happen. Are officers sufficiently trained to survive them?

POLICE1 READERS RESPOND

- In February 2022, I was working as a police officer in Ontario, Canada and I was involved in an officer-involved shooting. The suspect sprayed my partner with a big bottle of “bear spray” containing OC. When I went to hit the guy with my ASP (at that time we didn’t have TASERs), I got sprayed. Obviously suffering the effects, having been exposed to the OC exposure I relied on my training to open my eyes. The moment I opened my eyes, I observed the suspect pulling a knife from a sheath. The suspect then ran at me attempting to stab me. I transitioned from baton to my firearm and fired 4 rounds hitting the suspect and stopping him 2 feet from stabbing me. The suspect ended up dying. If I hadn’t been exposed to the OC spray prior I would have for sure been stabbed and may not be here today. That OC exposure training saved my life. Feel free to refer to the oversight agency investigation and public report for an accurate representation of what happened that day on February 28 [here](#). Use as you please to support the exposure of new recruits to OC.
- I went through OC exposure as part of my firearms qualifications as a corrections officer. It was a very valuable experience. That was not long after 9/11 and I'd volunteer to do it again.
- It's a necessity, point blank. You need to know if you can mentally and physically fight through it and defend yourself. I do it yearly. On the streets and in the state prison system being prepared to fight through it has saved me at both locations. It's not a game you need to be prepared. You fight how you train.
- I think if you carry it you need to know what it will/won't do and then you can explain to the person that you sprayed and help them through the decon process, and not just laugh at them while they're burning from the OC which I have seen officers do. I feel the same way for TASER, you need to take an exposure so you don't just hold down the trigger.
- I worked in NYCDOC for 21 years, and 8 as a Captain in ESU, I firmly believe that you MUST be subject to Oleoresin Capsicum exposure, so you know how to fight through it. I wouldn't want my first exposure to be when I was fighting for my life. I basically got to a point, where I could "eat" the stuff, which helped me immensely when chemical agents were deployed, I could still function at a high level.
- Absolutely we need training exposure to OC spray. If you have never been exposed you might not realize how painful the initial experience can be and therefore you won't have experience fighting past the discomfort to defend yourself, take someone into custody, or whatever else you need to do. A

controlled environment like training is the place to face this, not on the street in the middle of a contact. Not only that, but it helps you in court when you are facing a potential lawsuit for excessive force. You can truthfully explain to the court that you have been exposed to OC, you know the effects it would have on the subject you sprayed, and you used it as the least force necessary to gain compliance or control.

What are YOUR thoughts on exposing officers to OC during training? A must? Dangerous? Not that big a deal? Any of your own experiences to share? Comment in the box below.

About the author

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