

Syreeta Lund, deputy editor, is taught some safety training moves by Special Branch trainer Barry Mitchell



# Streetwise

Confronted with a violent offender, officer safety training can save lives. Syreeta Lund reports from Kent Police's staff safety training unit.

Someone is shouting in your face; loudly; aggressively; they are drunk. As a police officer, it may be familiar territory, as a probationer it could be your first time on a late shift dealing with the weekly debris of a Friday night's drinking.

What you choose to do next is crucial, it could influence the aggressor to hit out at you or another member of the public, even to brandish a knife, it could make them turn and run or it could help them to calm down and to think about the situation. Your decision and the way you respond to any of the above scenarios is critical.

You could try to talk to them, but if it doesn't work, you'll need to be prepared for the worst but, essentially, you can only use 'appropriate force', says Mark Williams, deputy manager of Kent Police's staff safety training unit.

"You don't want to give an 18-year-old probationer a pair of handcuffs and parva spray when they could end up responding like it's armageddon if someone shouts at them. For some of them, it's only the first time someone other than their mum will shout at them and they need to be prepared," explains Mr Williams.

The unit, based in Maidstone near the force's headquarters, will see hundreds of probationers pass through its doors every year. Around 300 police officers are recruited each year and many police support staff will also be taken through the ropes.

The safety training is delivered as part of the Kent Student Officer Programme, a 56-week course run in partnership with Canterbury Christ Church University which mixes both academic work and practical training.

The safety training element of the course will be delivered over a two-week course, in line with the 12 hours recommended in the ACPO Personal Safety Manual of Guidance.

Around 40 probationers will be undergoing training during each two-week period, with the group being split into half to train on the first or second week so they can work under the close supervision of safety instructors.

Students will learn about the legislative framework, such as how to carry out a search and reasonable use of force, how to report a use of force, first aid training, effective communication skills, tactical handcuffing, baton skills and control techniques, such as the transport wrist lock.

There are eight trainers at the unit, soon to rise to 16 trainers, and they offer training to probationers as well as many different police staff, such as the custody nurses, front counter staff, police community support officers and scenes of crimes officers, to name a but a few.

Rob Foreman, one of the trainers who helped to set up the probationer training, says that the force was one of the first to take over training locally from Centrex, the

Trainers Graeme Hill and Vickie Sampson demonstrate safety moves to probationers



national police training centre where candidates underwent a residential training course.

“The course is designed for complete novices,” says Mr Foreman. He explains that probationers who go to train at the unit will have been in the job for a minimum of eight weeks and a maximum of ten weeks and will not have been out on the streets.

He explains: “We are teaching probationers from the stage of effective communication skills with the public and how to approach any given circumstance. The golden threads are building up their natural behaviour and adding technical skills to it.”

As well as classroom-based academic work, the course teaches the students technical skills relating to restraint techniques and puts students into realistic role play situations.

Mr Foreman says: “We are trying to aim at the sum of the parts; it doesn’t amount to the whole so we break it down into areas such as handcuffing, parva and baton training.

“We try to make sure they know that the decision making process they will have to go through is incredibly important. Students look at aspects like maintaining safe distances from the public and speaking in an appropriate manner in particular situations. It’s about communication skills; not the ability to wield a baton.”

The course uses realistic role play scenarios where the student does not know what is going to happen but will be expected to react in line with the skills they are learning. For example, a recruit may be given a briefing and told there has been a spate of burglaries on their patch with a description of the suspect. They are then told that while on foot patrol in their area they spot the offender.

“It might involve giving that person a stop and search, they could try to run away or get aggressive or hit out, depending on how the student communicates and behaves towards them. We look at trying to combine knowledge of legislation, communication skills and the technical aspects like how to handcuff,” says Mr Foreman.

He adds: “The communication aspect is incredibly important because use of force is unlawful unless necessary, so the objective is not to use force if possible. It’s about teaching them the ability to predict or pre-empt what might happen in a particular scenario, it’s crucial.”

George Appleby, chairman of the Police Federation’s operational policing sub-committee, told the Federation’s annual conference in May that some forces are still not giving recruits the recommended 12 hours of training at a time when officers face increasing danger from violence, knife crime and guns.

A Police Federation survey, carried out this year, found that some forces were still not offering the recommended 12 hours of safety training, despite findings from a separate survey carried out by the Federation which revealed 40 per cent of officers felt they had been in ‘serious danger’ over the last two years.

Of the 47,328 officers who responded to the survey,

around a third, 28 per cent, said they had been threatened with a knife over the last two years and 38 percent by another kind of weapon.

Mr Foreman says it is important that the training is realistic so officers get a good idea of what they are likely to face on the street: “If we don’t expose them to something that’s reality, the first time something happens, you haven’t prepared them properly. We make sure we expose them to high levels of aggression, both mental and physical, because that is what they are likely to face. There is no point having people shouting at them saying ‘you cad, you bounder’, it’s just not realistic”

Mr Foreman: “We have had probationers saying, ‘imagine if we had to do this for real?’ or ‘Can we use fists?’ so a big part of what we do is teaching them the reality and responsibilities when carrying out their duties.

The physical strength of officers and staff coming through the door may also differ greatly, so Mr Foreman says communication is increasingly important, rather



Photography: Kent News and Pictures

Special Branch officers practise techniques to protect VIPs

than relying on brute physical strength.

“The officers we are getting through the door are reflective of the community; they are not the 6ft officers of yesteryear. There are still physical aspects to the job but we are going down the road of being more integrated into the community so it’s important we reflect that.

“The levels of fitness required by the police have not changed but statistics would suggest that levels of aggression towards police officers have remained the same or increased. We have a duty to do the physical training, that’s imperative for both public protection and for the protection of officers. We try to expose students to operational policing as clearly as we can.”

The level of training can differ depending on the role undertaken by an individual; front office counter staff may be risk assessed as being more in need of training to deal with violent situations than an administrator in a back office, but officers on the street are likely to need more training and knowledge of particular techniques.