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Unruly citizens and streets brimming with guns make risk-tolerance a very hard sell

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One week after that, Alfred Okwera Olango, 38, a Ugandan refugee, **was shot dead by an officer in El Cajon** (Calif.) His sister had called police and reported her brother was acting strangely. Two officers confronted Olango: one pointed a Taser, the other a gun. A video still from the moment at which they fired depicts Olango in a shooting pose, aiming what turned out to be an electronic vape device at one of the cops. Olango **had been convicted in the U.S.** for transporting and selling drugs and for being an armed felon, and Uganda refused to take him back. “My son was a good, loving young man,” his mother lamented. “Only 38 years old, I wanted his future to be longer than that. I wanted him to enjoy his daughter.”

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Incidentally, our vision of Tasers and bean-bags as preventive tools probably clashes with some agency guidelines. Bringing down an uncooperative someone with a less-than-lethal weapon is best done the instant it’s possible. Waiting for additional justification can turn into a death warrant. So reworking the rules governing the use of less-than-lethal force may be called for.

Constructs such as “productivity” and “proactivity,” while perhaps defensible in other occupations, are a lousy fit for policing. We have repeatedly argued against the widespread use of strategies such as stop-and-frisk, and even suggested that it is sometimes best to simply leave petty offenders alone. (For a comprehensive overview see [“Good Guy/Bad Guy/Black Guy, Part II”](#).) Aggressive law enforcement practices mesh poorly with the social fabric, and their use has badly damaged relations between citizens and police. Should a paradigm be called for, we suggest [“craftsmanship.”](#)

Finally, many of the incidents described above can best be described as “clusters.” (Yes, we mean it in the vernacular.) To minimize the use of force a well-organized response is essential. [That’s why patrol shifts must regularly train together](#). (Those who think that notion odd or too expensive are directed to the million-dollar awards and settlements mentioned above.) And once cops are on scene, someone must, regardless of rank, take charge and remain in control until there’s an orderly handoff.

Policing is an imperfect enterprise conducted by fallible humans in unpredictable, often hostile environments. Limited resources, gaps in information, questionable tactics

and the personal idiosyncrasies of cops and citizens have conspired to yield horrific outcomes. Still, countless cop-citizen encounters occur every day. Many could have turned out like the examples above but, thanks to very craftsmanlike police work and considerable risk-taking, they're resolved peacefully. Indeed, [as we've repeatedly pointed out](#), if officers were completely risk-averse dead citizens would line the sidewalks at the end of each shift:

What experienced cops well know, but for reasons of decorum rarely articulate, is that the real world isn't the academy: on the mean streets officers must accept risks that instructors warn against, and doing so occasionally gets cops hurt or killed. Your blogger is unaware of any tolerable approach to policing a democratic society that resolves this dilemma, but if he learns of such a thing he will certainly pass it on.

Unfortunately, [ever-more-lethal firearms](#) keep flooding the streets (for how that takes place see our related article, below). Here's a brand-new example. Three days ago, on October 1, LAPD officers [pulled over a vehicle](#) they suspected was stolen. A passenger in the back seat reportedly ducked down. As the car slowed to a stop an 18-year old black male jumped out while "holding his waistband as if he was supporting something." Thinking he might be armed, officers gave chase. (Watch the surveillance video. As it turns out, the cops had it right.) When Cornell Snell allegedly turned to face them, gun in hand, they opened fire. Snell was shot dead. A .40 caliber pistol was recovered, fully loaded, round in the chamber. Posted 10/5/16

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Constructs such as “productivity” and “proactivity,” while perhaps defensible in other occupations, are a lousy fit for policing. We have repeatedly argued against the widespread use of strategies such as stop-and-frisk, and even suggested that it is sometimes best to simply leave petty offenders alone. (For a comprehensive overview see “[Good Guy/Bad Guy/Black Guy, Part II](#)”.) Aggressive law enforcement practices mesh poorly with the social fabric, and their use has badly damaged relations between citizens and police. Should a paradigm be called for, we suggest “[craftsmanship](#).”

Finally, many of the incidents described above can best be described as “clusters.” (Yes, we mean it in the vernacular.) To minimize the use of force a well-organized response is essential. [That’s why patrol shifts must regularly train together](#). (Those who think that notion odd or too expensive are directed to the million-dollar awards and settlements mentioned above.) And once cops are on scene, someone must, regardless of rank, take charge and remain in control until there’s an orderly handoff.

Policing is an imperfect enterprise conducted by fallible humans in unpredictable, often hostile environments. Limited resources, gaps in information, questionable tactics and the personal idiosyncrasies of cops and citizens have conspired to yield horrific outcomes. Still, countless cop-citizen encounters occur every day. Many could have turned out like the examples above but, thanks to very craftsmanlike police work and considerable risk-taking, they’re resolved peacefully. Indeed, [as we’ve repeatedly pointed out](#), if officers were completely risk-averse dead citizens would line the sidewalks at the end of each shift:

What experienced cops well know, but for reasons of decorum rarely articulate, is that the real world isn’t the academy: on the mean streets officers must accept risks that instructors warn against, and doing so occasionally gets cops hurt or killed. Your blogger is unaware of any tolerable approach to policing a democratic society that resolves this dilemma, but if he learns of such a thing he will certainly pass it on.

Unfortunately, [ever-more-lethal firearms](#) keep flooding the streets (for how that takes place see our related article, below). Here’s a brand-new example. Three days ago, on October 1, LAPD officers [pulled over a vehicle](#) they suspected was stolen. A passenger in the back seat reportedly ducked down. As the car slowed to a stop an 18-year old black male jumped out while “holding his waistband as if he was supporting something.” Thinking he might be armed, officers gave chase. (Watch the surveillance video. As it

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turns out, the cops had it right.) When Cornell Snell allegedly turned to face them, gun in hand, they opened fire. Snell was shot dead. A .40 caliber pistol was recovered, fully loaded, round in the chamber.

Bottom line: thanks to the ready availability of powerful guns, the real and perceived risks of everyday policing have risen to unprecedented levels. With risk tolerance becoming a very hard sell, implementing a “tolerable” approach to policing seems increasingly out of reach.