

# Study links low self-control, use of deadly force

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Police officers who exhibit low self-control in their personal lives are more likely to use deadly force on the job, according to a University of Texas at Dallas study.

The study, published online in the journal *Police Quarterly*, analyzed the responses of 1,935 Philadelphia Police Department officers to determine each officer's level of [self-control](#).

Researchers measured self-control based on eight indicators including whether the officer had financial problems or had been in a car accident. Each indicator increased the likelihood of an officer's involvement in a shooting by 21 percent, according to the research.

Dr. Jon Maskaly, assistant professor of criminology, and Dr. Alex Piquero, Ashbel Smith Professor of Criminology and associate dean for graduate programs in the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, co-wrote the study with researchers at other universities.

"We know that self-control plays a role in many aspects of a person's life," Maskaly said. "We wanted to explore the relationship between self-control and police use of deadly force."

Only 5 percent of the officers studied had been involved in shootings, reflecting the national average. Officers were more likely to be involved in deadly shootings if they scored lower in self-control based on the following factors: a history of a suspended driver's license, involvement in a [motor vehicle accident](#), had ever been behind on paying bills, had loans or debts over \$1,000, been under any type of court order, been divorced or separated or received a traffic ticket in the past five years.

The findings suggest that [police](#) departments should consider paying more attention to behavioral markers that may reflect lower self-control and increase the use of psychological exams and interviews to better screen candidates, researchers said.

An officer having one or two of the indicators could be attributed to bad luck, but a pattern might indicate that more screening is needed,

Maskaly said.

"What we see in criminology more generally is that a pattern of indicators tends to raise more of a yellow flag but not necessarily a red flag," Piquero said.

"But [police departments](#) can and should develop and employ screening devices to help them identify applicants who may need more additional vetting as well as continue to monitor their officers' behavior and provide additional screening and training over the course of the officers' careers," he said. "Done well, this should help departments recruit and retain the best officers who can work with the community to keep our cities safe."

**More information:** Christopher M. Donner et al. Quick on the Draw, *Police Quarterly* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/1098611116688066](https://doi.org/10.1177/1098611116688066)

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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