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# Use of force continuum

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The examples and perspective in this article **deal primarily with the United States and do not represent a worldwide view of the subject**. You may [improve this article](#), discuss the issue on the [talk page](#), or [create a new article](#), as appropriate. *(May 2018)* ([Learn how and when to remove this template message](#))

A **use of force continuum** is a standard that provides [law enforcement officers](#) and [civilians](#) with guidelines as to how much **force** may be used against a resisting subject in a given situation. In some ways, it is similar to the [U.S. military's](#) escalation of force (EOF). The purpose of these models is to clarify, both for law enforcement officers and civilians, the complex subject of [use of force](#). They are often central parts of law enforcement agencies' use of force policies. Various [criminal justice](#) agencies have developed different models of the continuum, and there is no universal or standard model.<sup>[1]</sup> Generally, each different agency will have their own use of force policy. Some agencies may separate some of the hand-to-hand based use of force. For example, take-downs and pressure point techniques may be one step before actual strikes and kicks. Also, for some agencies the use of aerosol pepper spray and electronic control devices (TASER) may fall into the same category as take-downs, or the actual strikes.



Operations Specialist 1st Class Dennis Marholz apprehends a mock suspect after being hit with [pepper spray](#) while Aviation Electronic Technician 1st Class Pete Ingram keeps close watch during a pepper spray testing evaluation that marked the final stage in a three-week series of training involving non-lethal weapons and the use of force continuum.

The first examples of use of force continuum were developed in the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>[2]</sup> Early models were depicted in various formats, including [graphs](#), semicircular "[gauges](#)", and linear progressions. Most often the models are presented in "stair step" fashion, with each level of force matched by a corresponding level of subject resistance, although it is generally noted that an

officer need not progress through each level before reaching the final level of force. These progressions rest on the premise that officers should escalate and de-escalate their level of force in response to the subject's actions.<sup>[3]</sup>

Although the use of force continuum is used primarily as a training tool for law enforcement officers, it is also valuable with civilians, such as in [criminal trials](#) or [hearings](#) by police review boards. In particular, a [graphical](#) representation of a use of force continuum is useful to a [jury](#) when deciding whether an officer's use of force was reasonable.<sup>[4]</sup>

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## Example model [\[edit\]](#)

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While the specific progression of force varies considerably (especially the wide gap between empty hand control and [deadly force](#)) among different agencies and jurisdictions, one example of a general use of force continuum model cited in a U.S. government publication on use of force is shown below.<sup>[5]</sup>

1. Officer presence – the professionalism, uniform, and utility belt of the law enforcement officer and the marked vessel or vehicle the officer arrives in. The visual presence of authority is normally enough for a subject to comply with an officer's lawful demands. Depending on the totality of the circumstances, a call/situation may require additional officers or on scene officers may request assistance in order to gain better control of the situation and ensure a more safe environment for all involved. It also will depend on the circumstances of the situation. For example, depending on how many people are at the scene with the officer, a larger presence may be required. However, if 10 officers arrive at a scene with only a single suspect, the public may perceive the situation as an excessive use of officer presence within the use of force continuum. <sup>[6][7][8]</sup>
2. Verbal commands/cooperative controls – clear and understandable verbal direction by an officer aimed at the subject. In some cases, it is necessary for the officer to include a consequence to the verbal direction so that the subject understands what will happen if the subject refuses to comply with the officer's direction. The verbal command and the consequence must be legal and not considered excessive according to the continuum. For example, an officer could not order a disabled person in a wheel chair to stand up or be sprayed by Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) Pepper Spray. <sup>[7][7][9]</sup>
3. Empty-hand submission techniques, PPCT – Pressure Point Control Tactics, Control Tactics, techniques – a level of force that has a low probability of

causing soft connective tissue damage or bone fractures. This would include joint manipulation techniques, applying pressure to pressure points and normal application of hand-cuffs.<sup>[7][9][10]</sup>

4. Hard control Techniques/Aggressive response techniques – the amount of force that has a probability of causing soft connective tissue damage or bone fractures or irritation of the skin, eyes, and mucus membranes. This would include kicks, punches, stuns and use of aerosol sprays such as oleoresin capsicum (OC) pepper spray. Some models split these techniques between empty hand, soft control and intermediate weapon techniques but only include 5 levels of the continuum.<sup>[7][9][11][12]</sup>
5. Intermediate weapons – an amount of force that would have a high probability of causing soft connective tissue damage or bone fractures. (e.g. [expandable baton](#), [baton](#), [pepper spray](#), [Taser](#), [beanbag rounds](#), rubber fin stabilized ammunition, [Mace \(spray\)](#), [police dogs](#), etc.) Intermediate weapon techniques are designed to impact muscles, arms and legs, and intentionally using an intermediate weapon on the head, neck, groin, knee caps, or spine would be classified as deadly or lethal force.<sup>[7][9][11]</sup>
6. Lethal force/Deadly force – a force with a high probability of causing death or serious bodily injury. Serious bodily injury includes unconsciousness, protracted or obvious physical disfigurement, or protracted loss of or impairment to the function of a bodily member, organ, or the mental faculty. A firearm is the most widely recognized lethal or deadly force weapon, however, an automobile or weapon of opportunity could also be defined as a deadly force utility.<sup>[7][9][10]</sup>

The U.S. Navy teaches a six-step model: Officer presence, Verbal commands, Soft controls, Hard controls, Intermediate Weapons, and Lethal force. Hard controls includes the use of tools such as hand-cuffs, while soft controls equates to empty hand above, describing techniques where the officer may engage a resisting detainee. When escalating, voluntary submission to cuffs is a viable way to prevent the need for empty hand submission techniques which place the officer and the detainee at physical risk. When de-escalating, hard controls (i.e.: cuffs and isolation in the rear seat of a cruiser) gives officers a reasonable and achievable goal after altercation with a detainee during which higher levels of force may have been required.<sup>[9][13][14]</sup>

## Subject classifications [\[ edit \]](#)

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In all use of force continuum models, the actions of the subject is classified in order for the officer to quickly determine what level of force is authorized and may be necessary to apprehend or compel compliance from the individual. Listed below are examples of how subjects are classified.

- Passive compliant – a person who recognizes the authority of the officers presence and follows the verbal commands of the officer.<sup>[9][15][16]</sup>
- Passive resistor – a person who refuses to follow the verbal commands of the officer but does not resist attempts by officers to take positive physical control over them.<sup>[9][15][16]</sup>

- Active resistor – a person who does not follow verbal commands, resists attempts by the officer to take positive physical control over them, and does not try to inflict harm on the officer.<sup>[9][15][16]</sup>
- Active aggressor – a person who does not follow verbal commands, resists attempts by the officer to take positive physical control over them and attempts to cause harm to the officer or others.<sup>[9][15][16]</sup>

Generally, the passive subjects and active resisters fall under levels 1–3 of the use of force continuum, while active aggressors fall under levels 4–6. The officers are trained to apply the proper measure of force within the continuum based on the actions and classification of the subject.<sup>[17]</sup>








## Reasonableness standard [ edit ]

The [United States Supreme Court](#), in the case of *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386, (1989), held that when engaged in situations where the use of force is necessary to effect an arrest, or to protect an officer's life or that of another, a law enforcement officer must act as other reasonable officers would have acted in a similar, tense, rapidly evolving situation.<sup>[18]</sup> Such situations, once known as use of force incidents, are now commonly referred to as response to resistance incidents, because a law enforcement officer must respond to resistance offered by another. In order to determine what actions officers find reasonable in similar situations, some experts utilize surveys with law enforcement officers, who are provided with certain scenarios to determine what actions they would take if placed in certain situations. Knowing what other officers and citizens deem reasonable helps to craft a solid response to resistance continuum.<sup>[19]</sup>

## See also [ edit ]

- [Friedrich Glasl's model of conflict escalation](#)
- [Reasonable force](#)

## Footnotes [ edit ]

- <sup>1</sup> ↑ Stetser, 2001, p. 36.
- <sup>2</sup> ↑ Stetser, 2001, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>3</sup> ↑ Stetser, 2001, p.38.
- <sup>4</sup> ↑ Grossi, 2um006.
- <sup>5</sup> ↑ "[Garner and Maxwell](#)"  (PDF). *ncjrs.gov*. p. 37.
- <sup>6</sup> ↑ "[The Use-of-Force Continuum](#)" . National Institution of Justice Statistics. August 4, 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> ↑   *a b c d e f g*  McGoey, Chris. "[Use of Force, Security Guards, use of force, Chris McGoey, security guards expert](#)" . *crimedocter.com*. Retrieved 2015-04-17.
- <sup>8</sup> ↑ "[Use- of Force](#)"  (PDF). *cops.usdoj.gov*. Retrieved 2015-04-17.
- <sup>9</sup> ↑   *a b c d e f g h i j*  "[Use- of Force](#)"  (PDF). *cops.usdoj.gov*. Retrieved 2015-04-17.
- <sup>10</sup> ↑   *a b*  "[The Use-of-Force Continuum](#)" . National Institute of Justice. August 4, 2009.
- <sup>11</sup> ↑   *a b*  "[The Use of Force Paradigm for Enforcement and Corrections](#)" . *pss.cc*.
- <sup>12</sup> ↑ "[The Use-of-Force Continuum](#)" . National Institute of Justice Statistics. August 4, 2009.
- <sup>13</sup> ↑ "[Use of Force](#)" . *crimedocter.com*.

14. <sup>^</sup> ["Escalation of Force - Non-Lethal Effects"](#)<sup>↗</sup>. *marinecorpsconceptsandprograms.com*.
15. <sup>^</sup> [a b c d "Use of Force"](#) <sup>↗</sup> (PDF). *cops.usdoj.gov*.
16. <sup>^</sup> [a b c d "The \(Original\) Use of Force Model"](#)<sup>↗</sup>. *pss.cc*. Retrieved 2015-04-17.
17. <sup>^</sup> ["Use of Force"](#) <sup>↗</sup> (PDF). *cops.usdoj.gov*.
18. <sup>^</sup> Faulkner, S. (2007). "Response to resistance - Defining what is objectively reasonable"<sup>↗</sup>. *responsetoresistance.com*.
19. <sup>^</sup> Faulkner, S. (2007). "Response to resistance - Defining what is objectively reasonable"<sup>↗</sup>. *responsetoresistance.com*.

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- Law of War, Rules of Engagement, and Escalation of Force Guide, Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned. 31 August 2007.

### Marine Corps

- [marinecorpsconceptsandprograms.com](#)<sup>↗</sup>

## External links [ edit ]

- [Law Enforcement Police Integrity - United States Department of Justice](#)<sup>↗</sup>
- [integratedbyardvark.com](#)<sup>↗</sup>
- [marinecorpsconceptsandprograms.com](#)<sup>↗</sup>

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