



GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA OFFICE OF POLICE COMPLAINTS

Office of Police Complaints
Michael G. Tobin, Executive Director

POLICE COMPLAINTS BOARD
Paul Ashton, Chair
Bobbi Strang
Jeffrey Tignor
Earl Fowlkes, Jr.

PCB POLICY REPORT #23-2: Policies and Procedures for Edged Tools

Summary:

Knives and edged tools¹ have proven to be convenient and versatile devices for law enforcement officers. In fact, most police officers consider them essential pieces of equipment. Edged tools can be used by police officers to open boxes, remove license plates when screwdrivers are not available, scrape away stickers or paint coverings while searching for evidence, cut away restraints in rescue situations, and the handles can be used to break glass, if necessary. However, edged tools can also be used as dangerous or deadly weapons that can result in potential use of force incidents. As such, it is imperative that law enforcement agencies like the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) promulgate policies, procedures, and trainings to avoid preventable injuries to members of the public and the officers themselves while also protecting against civil litigation. Currently MPD has no written directives governing the proper use of edged tools by its officers. The lack of a written policy is problematic for the agency, its officers, and members of the public. This report examines the issues surrounding the lack of policies and procedures for MPD officers with respect to the proper use of edged tools and looks at one example from an Office of Police Complaints (OPC) case and an example from an incident reported by the media.²

Case Examples:

Example 1: In August 2019, MPD officers arrested an OPC complainant and transported him to the Fifth District station for processing. During the arrest, the subject officer began behaving aggressively toward the complainant when he called the complainant an “idiot,” stood on one of the complainant’s shackled ankles, and clenched his hand while palming his fist in an obvious attempt to intimidate the complainant. While at the station, the subject officer repeatedly called the complainant a “fool,” dragged the complainant across the floor as he attempted to remove a shoe, and eventually used his personal pocketknife to cut off the shoe. However, when the subject officer used the pocketknife to cut off the shoe, he positioned the blade such that it was facing downward toward the complainant’s Achilles tendon while he yelled “I don’t give a fuck.

¹ An “edged tool” is defined as a tool with a sharp cutting edge. This is a broader term that encompasses knives, pocketknives, and switchblades, as well as other similar tools such as multi-tools with at least one edged blade attachment.

² The Police Complaints Board (PCB) is issuing this report pursuant to D.C. Code § 5-1104(d), which authorizes the Board to recommend to the District of Columbia Mayor, Council, MPD Police Chief, and the Director of District of Columbia Housing Authority reforms that have the potential to improve the complaint process or reduce the incidence of police misconduct.

Don't move," in response to the complainant's fearful screams. In October 2020 a complaint examiner sustained the unnecessary and excessive force allegation against the subject officer for his use of the knife blade to intimidate the complainant while cutting off the shoe.³

Example 2: In February 2023, former MPD Officer Robert Anderson was found guilty by a jury on four counts of assault stemming from incidents with his coworkers. During one incident, he approached two female coworkers "and began to touch them on their heads without their consent." When another MPD employee attempted to intervene, "Anderson brandished a knife on the intervening employee."⁴

Policy Concerns:

The preceding examples demonstrate that MPD should develop policies, procedures, and training for its officers to avoid similarly dangerous situations for community members, its own employees, and to help shield itself from potential civil liability. In the first example, placing the obvious endangerment of the complainant aside, the subject officer resorted to using a knife for the removal of the complainant's shoe despite being in a police station that contained safer alternatives, such as scissors. In both examples, the officers used knives to threaten and intimidate others in a way that resulted in criminal liability for one officer and potential civil liability for the Department in both cases. With proper guidance and training, perhaps these officers would have been more conscious of the fact that any misuse of their edged tools could carry serious consequences for themselves, others, and MPD. Adequate training on the use of edged tools could have also acted as a deterrent if these officers learned to handle their edged tools with the same level of responsibility as their other department-issued weapons.

Guidance from Other Jurisdictions:

An examination of written directives from other police departments shows that it is possible for MPD to create an effective policy governing edged tools that is clear yet concise.

For example, the Eugene, Oregon Police Department issued a two-page written policy on edged tools that authorizes officers to use them for "both general work and for limited defensive purposes."⁵ The directive limits each edged tool to a length of six inches, which is measured from the tip of the blade to the handle. The policy requires officers to "use reasonable care [...] to prevent injury to the officer and others" and prohibits officers from using edged tools in a way that would "alarm any bystander."⁶ The edged tool must be stored in a case and securely fastened to the officer's uniform such that the blade is concealed to any outside observers.

In another example, the Greenville County Sheriff's Office in South Carolina incorporated its edge tool policy into its general order on weapons. The policy allows the use of edged tools "during rescue operations or in other non-confrontational situations," while explicitly stating that

³ See OPC Case 19-0682.

⁴ See <https://www.fox5dc.com/news/former-dc-police-officer-sentenced-for-assaults-on-other-mpd-officers-employees>

⁵ See <https://www.eugene-or.gov/ArchiveCenter/ViewFile/Item/4370>

⁶ *Id.*

the use of an edged tool as a weapon constitutes a use of deadly force.⁷ The directive also specifies that officers may not wear the edged tools on their torso for their own protection and states that all edged tools will be subject to inspection by supervisors.

The Austin Police Department in Texas chose to incorporate its edged tool directives into its general order on equipment. Austin police officers are allowed to carry folding knives (fixed blade knives are prohibited) and they may only use them as tools, not weapons. Unlike the preceding examples, Austin Police Department officers must also secure their edged tools as they would any other weapon upon entering a booking facility.⁸

Recommendations:

1. MPD should update General Order 110.11, Uniform, Equipment, and Appearance Standards, to include edged tools and regulate the size of the blade, their storage, the manner in which officers carry them on their uniforms and specify that they are to be used as tools, but not weapons. MPD should also train its members on the new directive for edged tools once it is published.
2. MPD should require members to complete a Force Incident Report (FIR) whenever they use edged tools as weapons or in a threatening or intimidating manner. This requirement should be reflected in relevant general orders or other guidance. MPD should also train its members on the FIR requirement.

⁷ See <https://gcsso.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GO-204.pdf>

⁸ See https://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Police/General_Orders.pdf