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Striking or grappling? Comparing public and officers' perceptions of police use of force

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ABSTRACT

Police officers use physical arrest and control techniques far more often than firearms, yet public understanding of how people judge these actions is limited, specifically regarding different styles of unarmed arrest. This study examined how civilians and law enforcement officers evaluate different types of police use of force, focusing on whether opinions change depending on the kind of technique used. Using short video clips of the same police encounter, the study employed a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ experimental design that varied by officer race (Black or White), suspect race (Black or White), type of force used (striking, operationalized as a punch, or grappling, operationalized as a double-leg takedown), and video format (complete or segmented vignette). Civilians ($n = 996$) and officers ($n = 744$) randomly watched one of these videos and rated the officer's performance and response. Both groups viewed grappling as more appropriate and professional than striking. Grappling officers were more likely to have their performance rated as "excellent" than striking officers in both the civilian (48.2% vs. 34.1% of responses) and law enforcement samples (66.5% vs. 42.9%). Officer and suspect race did not significantly affect judgments, though officers' ratings were influenced by whether they saw the full or edited version of the video. Few participants supported disciplinary action against the officer, though civilians were more likely to recommend additional training. Overall, the findings show that people's reactions to police use of force depend heavily on how the force looks—not just whether it is legally justified—highlighting the importance of context and perception in public and professional evaluations.

1. Introduction

The fundamental nature of police in society is rooted in their exclusive institutional capacity to employ coercive force as a normalized instrument of state authority, with its role defined as "a mechanism for the distribution of non-negotiably coercive force employed in accordance with the dictates of an intuitive grasp of situational exigencies." (Bittner, 1970, p. 46) This definition differs from the conventional crime control law-enforcement perspective by identifying the capacity to employ force unilaterally as the defining characteristic that unifies all police functions, from traffic regulation to emergency medical aid to criminal investigation.

Law enforcement officers (LEOs) are often required to physically subdue non-compliant individuals to protect the immediate community, themselves, and the individuals involved (Alpert & Dunham, 2004; Skogan & Meares, 2004). In this sense, the use of arrest and control techniques is a routine aspect of law enforcement, occurring far more frequently than the use of firearms. For instance, Lersch, Bazley, Mieczkowski, and Childs (2008) analyzed police use of force (PUF) incidents in a large municipal police department located in the Southeastern USA and found that firearm discharges accounted for only 0.8% of the incidents, compared to 66% involving arrest and control techniques. Although exact numbers may vary by locality and period (e.g., Eleuterio-da-Rocha, Da Silva, & Zingraff, 2025; Jetelina, Jennings, Bishopp, Piquero, & Reingle Gonzalez, 2017), this difference illustrates the magnitude of the difference in frequency.

When a police action conforms to the Constitution, state laws, case law, policies, and professional standards—whether involving the use of force or not—it is considered lawful. Lawfulness, or compliance with the law, represents a foundational element of policing and one of the cornerstones of democratic governance (Skogan & Meares, 2004). Yet, lawfulness alone does not capture the full scope of police practice. Public

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perceptions of the fairness and propriety of police conduct are equally critical. These perceptions are closely tied to the broader concept of legitimacy, understood as the extent to which members of society believe authorities are entitled to be obeyed (Meares, Tyler, & Gardener, 2016).

Diminished legitimacy hinders the daily functions of the police, for public opinion about police in general—and PUF, in specific—reflect police legitimacy, which, in turn, shapes people's willingness to defer to police authority and accept police intrusions as appropriate (Meares et al., 2016). In other words, unfavorable public opinion can make policing even harder. In fact, the loss of legitimacy can threaten the very existence of the police as a democratic institution, because police organizations modeled on the English system, such as those in the United States, were founded on a strong connection to public approval (Andrews, 2025; Williams, 2003).

Importantly, however, public assessments of the appropriateness of police use of force (PUF), which impact legitimacy, are not necessarily linked to lawfulness. These assessments are often shaped more by how force is exercised in a particular situation than by whether it satisfies formal legal criteria. A substantial body of research has examined potential predictors of public perceptions of the appropriateness of police use of force (PUF) incidents. Prior studies have explored the influence of factors such as demographics (Miethe, Venger, & Lieberman, 2019; Roche, Fenimore, & Taylor, 2022), political orientation (Gerber & Jackson, 2017; Miethe et al., 2019; Navarro & Hansen, 2023), profanity (Adams, Olson, James, Tregle, & Boehme, 2025; Doyle, Sandel, & Martaindale, 2025; Martaindale, Sandel, Duron, & Blair, 2023; Patton, Asken, Fremouw, & Bemis, 2017; Sharps, Torkelson, Hulett, Kuhn, & Sevillano, 2019), visual framing (Bailey et al., 2021; Boivin, Bernier, Ostiguy, Gagnon, & Gendron, 2023; Pyo, Marteache, & Maxfield, 2023), and the presence of audio (Boivin & Gendron, 2021; Reyes & Houston, 2019). The literature has also investigated how different weapons affect public views of PUF (Kyprianides et al., 2021). However, no study to date has addressed whether distinct styles of unarmed arrest and control techniques shape public perceptions of PUF.

The present study investigates evaluations of PUF in response to two specific unarmed arrest and control techniques: one grappling technique[1] (operationalized as a takedown) and one striking technique (operationalized as a swing or hook punch). The study contrasts the perceptions of appropriateness between civilian and law enforcement samples, while also examining the impact of three potential moderators: two demographic (i.e., officer race, suspect race) and one compositional (i.e., viewing PUF videos in a segments or in an uninterrupted manner).

1.1. Research hypotheses

Drawing on the prior literature, which will be discussed in later sections, we formulated five hypotheses:

H1. LEOs will perceive a grappling response as more reasonable than a striking response.

H2. Civilians will perceive grappling response as more reasonable than a striking response.

H3. The race of the officer will not significantly influence assessments of the PUF scenario.

H4. The race of the suspect will not significantly influence assessments of the PUF scenario.

H5. Evaluations when an incident is viewed in its entirety will differ from the segmented form.

1.2. Literature review

Research on public assessments of police use of force (PUF) shows that perceptions are shaped by various contextual and social factors and often differ from the legal and policy standards guiding officers. Evidence indicates that public judgments of police force are influenced not solely by legality or proportionality but also by broader notions of fairness, situational context, and identity cues (Richardson & Fridell, 2024). In fact, in almost half of the cases, the public's perception does not align with the legal standard, with that gap being called reasonableness divide (Richardson & Fridell, 2024).

1.2.1. Context and perception of use of force

The misalignment between law and perception appears consistently across literature. Public judgments of the legality of force often map onto perceptions of fairness rather than on formal rules: actions considered unfair are more likely to be judged illegal, and those felt to be legitimate are more readily judged legal (Meares et al., 2016). For this reason, the suspect's behavior and the seriousness of the suspected offense can influence opinion: more serious crimes (Marier & Goodwin, 2026; Miethe et al., 2019), suspect resistance (Marier & Goodwin, 2026), and confrontational demeanor (Seron, Pereira, & Kovath, 2004) elicit greater support for the use of force. Additionally, if the environment is perceived as dangerous, increased support is likely (Marier & Goodwin, 2026).

Conversely, perceptions of appropriateness may diminish when force is deployed against an unarmed individual, independent of legal justifications (Roche et al., 2022). Respondents also evaluate the proportionality of force differently depending on the type of intervention. While talking down and handcuffing are seen as more acceptable, weapons such as batons, tasers, or OC spray decrease public approval; however, there does not seem to be any differences between specific weapons (Kyprianides et al., 2021). Similarly, if the public perceives that use of force could have been avoided somehow, a decrease in support is expected (Marier & Goodwin, 2026).

Accordingly, we assessed the difference in perception of two different styles of empty-hands techniques: grappling or striking. At first glance, the former may communicate the idea of control or restraint, while the latter communicates an offensive action meant to injure. Accordingly, we hypothesized that, for an unarmed suspect and ceteris paribus, the use of a grappling technique would be viewed as more appropriate than a striking technique, which involves a higher level of force (**H1** and **H2**).

1.2.2. Officer and suspect race

The identity of actors in these scenarios also shapes evaluations and perceptions, though not always predictably. While the suspect's race has sometimes been found to alter the public's judgment of force (Bailey et al., 2021; Kahn, Thompson, & McMahon, 2017; Provenza, 2021), other studies report no consistent relationship (Pica, Sheahan, Pozzulo, & Bennell, 2020; Rome, Son, & Davis, 1995; Sturges, Flick, Provenza, & Nunez, 2022; Vardsveen & Wiener, 2022), indicating a more complex process.

Likewise, the officer's race does not necessarily affect public perception of PUF cases. Officer race may be directly associated with perception, with black officers being judged more favorably (Pica et al., 2020). Another possibility is that officer race interacts with conduct history, with black officers possessing commendations judged more favorably, while white officers with misconduct histories were evaluated more negatively (Dunbar, Hanink, & Kyle, 2024). These findings further highlight the layered interplay of factors shaping public evaluations of PUF.

We examined racial differences involving both officers and suspects. Based on previous research, we hypothesized that, ceteris paribus,

[1] Grappling techniques involve taking a suspect down to the ground, restricting their movements and using methods such as joint locks and pins. On the other hand, striking techniques entail the use of traumatic blows, including punches, kicks, or headbutts.

neither the officer's race (**H3**) nor the suspect's race (**H4**) would significantly affect evaluations of the PUF scenario.

1.2.3. Presentation of the incident

The presentation of force also matters. The use of offensive language or profanity seems to reduce public perceptions of reasonableness (Doyle et al., 2025; Martaindale et al., 2023; Seron et al., 2004), notably when it is directed at the public or the suspect (Adams et al., 2025; Patton et al., 2017; Sharps et al., 2019). Interestingly, administrators tend to penalize profanity even more harshly than does the public (Adams et al., 2025). In the same sense, the mere presence of recorded audio can alter public judgments in inconsistent ways depending on situational context (Boivin & Gendron, 2021; Reyes & Houston, 2019).

Visual framing introduces further complexity: point-of-view in body-worn camera footage has been found both to affect (Bailey et al., 2021; Boivin et al., 2023) and, in other studies, not to affect perception (Pyo et al., 2023), suggesting nuanced effects dependent upon circumstances. Repeated viewing may improve evaluations, producing more favorable judgments over time (Boivin & Gendron, 2021). Similarly, video formats can elicit stronger support than written descriptions of shootings (Culhane, Boman, & Schweitzer, 2016), though following highly salient events with negative outcomes—such as the 2014 Ferguson shooting—footage exacerbated public concerns about legitimacy (Culhane et al., 2016).

Building on prior research indicating that point of view, repeated exposure, and video format influence perceptions of police use of force (PUF), this study introduces a new focus on pacing. The pacing of footage—the rate and sequence in which events unfold—may shape viewers' judgments by affecting how quickly they form impressions of an officer's actions. Segmenting video material represents an effort to examine whether perceptions of appropriateness are influenced by the speed of viewing and by the opportunity to make more deliberate assessments rather than immediate "snap" judgments. By dividing the footage into segments, respondents were prompted to evaluate each instance of force separately rather than judging the entire event as a whole. Given that framing and pacing can alter how PUF incidents are interpreted, we hypothesized that segmented footage would elicit different evaluations compared with continuous footage (**H5**).

1.2.4. Civilians' and officers' perceptions

The public judges police misconduct as seriously as similar forms of misconduct in other professions, suggesting that law enforcement does not occupy an exceptional position in evaluative terms (Goldrosen, 2025). However, perceptions of PUF among officers and laypersons differ substantially, and officers' opinions may shift during the course of police training (Charbonneau, Mousseau, Poirier, Faubert, & Boivin, 2024). Given this expected difference, we decided to test the perception of civilians and officers separately (**H1** and **H2**).

1.2.5. Other factors

Finally, viewers' demographic and political orientations are associated with differences in perceptions. Variables such as age, biological sex, and household income are associated with evaluations of PUF (Marier & Goodwin, 2026; Miethe et al., 2019; Roche et al., 2022),[2] as well as media consumption patterns (Miethe et al., 2019; Roche et al., 2022). Respondents' race and level of education also seem to affect their perceptions of PUF (Marier & Goodwin, 2026; Mourtgos & Adams, 2020).

Political identity is particularly influential—potentially, more influential than race (Marier & Goodwin, 2026). Republicans and conservatives tend to view PUF more favorably (Gerber & Jackson, 2017; Marier & Goodwin, 2026; Miethe et al., 2019; Mourtgos & Adams, 2020; Navarro & Hansen, 2023; Seron et al., 2004), though partisan gaps diminish when force is deployed in response to overtly violent threats (Navarro & Hansen, 2023). Since political and demographic factors were marginal to the study's objectives, we did not examine them directly but controlled for them through random assignment.

Prior knowledge also matters. Contextual information about suspects or incidents (Baker & Reysen, 2020) or officers' typical attitude toward suspects (Marier & Goodwin, 2026) may influence evaluations.

2. Method and procedures

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a cross-sectional, web-based survey administered through Qualtrics. Two distinct samples were recruited: one consisting of civilians and the other of law enforcement officers (LEOs). After viewing a video vignette depicting a police use-of-force (PUF) incident, participants were asked to respond to a series of survey questions. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Texas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

2.1. Sampling and recruiting

Two independent samples of respondents were recruited. The first was a civilian sample recruited from the Qualtrics online research panel ($n = 996$). The Qualtrics sample quota was set to approximate the U.S. adult population on sex, age, race, household income, and education level based on U.S. Census benchmarks. To be eligible to participate, respondents had to be at least 18 years old and could not be current or former law enforcement. The resulting sample was 47% male and mostly consisted of Non-Hispanic (NH) White respondents (58%; NH Black = 18%; Hispanic = 10%; Asian/Pacific Islander = 6.3%; "Other" = 5.3%; American Indian/Alaskan Native = 1.3%).[3] The civilian sample had a balanced distribution of political orientation (31% for neutral, 36% for conservative/slightly conservative, and 33% progressive/slightly progressive), most of the sample completed a 4-year college degree or greater (67.6%), most of the sample had an income of $50K or greater (61%), and most of the sample reported having a positive/very positive attitude toward police (60%).

The second was a law enforcement (LE) sample drawn from the ALERRT Center trainee database, which contains approximately 400,000 active and retired officers from all 50 U.S. states who have completed ALERRT training. A random subset of 20,000 officers from the ALERRT database was invited via email to participate in the study. The e-mails were successfully delivered to 19,841 of them. We collected responses from 882 officers, resulting in a final sample size of 744 officers without missing data. Compared to cases with complete data, LE respondents with missing data were older, more centrist in their political affiliation, and had a lower proportion of patrol officers (i.e., compared to officers in administrative, investigative, and special unit roles). No differences were observed between groups in terms of sex, race/ethnicity, years in law enforcement, department level, size of population served, or department call volume (for details, see **Table S1**; **Fig. S1**). The final analytic law enforcement sample was mostly male (90%) and NH White (77%; NH Black = 6.6%; Hispanic = 9.3%; Asian/Pacific Islander = 2%; "Other" = 5%; American Indian/Alaskan Native = 0.4%). The political orientation was predominately conservative, with 28% reported being neutral, 65% conservative/slightly conservative, and only 6.9% as progressive/slightly progressive. The law enforcement sample was not asked questions regarding their education, income, or attitude toward the police. Instead, officers were asked additional questions regarding their experience in law enforcement and characteristics of their current agency. The median years of experience in the sample was 15 (IQR = 8–23), with slightly less than half of the sample

[2] Conversely, Mourtgos and Adams (2020) found no significant association between age and support for PUF.

[3] Information regarding the profile of the American population for comparison can be found at <https://data.census.gov/table>.

working in patrol (43%; administration = 17%; investigations = 15%; SWAT/tactical = 6.5%; other specialty units = 17%). Most respondents worked at agencies at the city level (38%; county = 26%; state = 20%; federal = 6.2%; other = 9.7%) with just over half of the sample (53.4%) serving a population of <100,000 residents and a median call volume of 5 calls per shift (IQR = 2–10). Descriptive statistics for both civilian and law enforcement samples are provided in Table 1.

2.2. Video vignettes

We produced video vignettes depicting a call in which an officer used force. Filming took place at the police academy of a large police department. All role players were experienced sworn officers and academy instructors. Each vignette began identically: a male officer entered a classroom where a male suspect was actively assaulting a smaller female victim. The assault was ongoing and the victim was screaming, making an immediate intervention by the officer mandatory. As the officer initiated verbal commands, the suspect advanced and attempted a swinging punch. Two outcomes were scripted: (1) the officer evaded the punch and delivered a single counterpunch to the suspect's face, immediately knocking him down and rendering him compliant; or (2) the officer evaded the punch and executed a double-leg takedown. In both versions, the suspect complied immediately after the initial use of force and was controlled and handcuffed. Officer and suspect race were experimentally varied (Black vs. White). All videos had two versions: a full version and a segmented version, consisting of three sequential clips—from entry to the assault on the officer, the officer's response (punch or takedown), and ground control. The final result was a 2 × 2 × 2 × 2 design (officer race × suspect race × force modality (striking or grappling) × type of video presentation [full vs. segmented]).

To minimize variation between the videos, all vignettes were similar in duration, camera angles, lighting, background, and ambient conditions, and role players maintained comparable tone, attitude, and volume across recordings. The scenarios were intentionally constructed to minimize ambiguity and leave no room for reasonable alternative actions by the officer. The suspect's active assault on a smaller female victim ensured the legitimacy of the officer's presence and action; the ongoing aggression at the officer's arrival required immediate action; and the suspect's unprovoked attempt to strike the officer at the outset eliminated opportunities for de-escalation. In the striking condition, the officer's response was proportional both technically and visually (one swing punch in response to one swing punch). A single countermeasure in either condition immediately neutralized the threat, limiting concerns that the PUF exceeded the necessary level of force to control the threat.[4]

2.3. Procedures

Each participant of both LE and civilian samples was randomly assigned to one of sixteen video conditions corresponding to the 2 × 2 × 2 × 2 factorial design (officer race × suspect race × force modality × type of video presentation). They were presented with the following prompt: "You will be provided with a short video in which a law enforcement officer subdues a noncompliant individual. After you watch the video, you may then answer the questions provided." Participants were blind to their assigned condition and to the study hypotheses.

After viewing the video, participants indicated who, in their view, exerted more force in the video—the officer, the suspect, or neither of them. Participants assigned to view segmented videos were asked the same question immediately after each segment.

After that, all participants completed post-video measures assessing their perceptions of the officer's conduct and provided background information. First, they rated the officer's intervention on a 4-point scale from "Blameworthy" to "Excellent." They then indicated appropriate punishment by responding on 4-point scales from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." The items included statements about whether the officer should not be punished because the use of force was reasonable, be required to take additional use-of-force training, be fired, be prosecuted, or serve jail time. Participants also reported their general attitude toward the police on a 5-point scale from "Very negative" to "Very positive," their political orientation on a 5-point scale from "Progressive" to "Conservative," and standard demographic information.

2.4. Analytic strategy

Our analysis consisted of four parts. First, we confirmed covariate balance for the civilian and law enforcement (LE) samples across the focal condition, *force type* (i.e., viewing videos with officers using striking or grappling techniques). Second, we regressed ratings of officer performance on *force type* using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. This allowed us to test if perceptions of officer performance varied across force type (H1−2). Third, we probed for sources of effect size heterogeneity by re-estimating the OLS models and including multiplicative interaction terms between *force type* and three candidate moderators (H3–5): *officer race*, *suspect race*, and *video type* (i.e., full or segmented). Fourth, we conducted exploratory, descriptive analyses of (1) the locus of force rating following each video and (2) assessments of the need for punishment following the officers' actions.

The primary outcome variable, *officer performance rating*, was measured on a 4-point ordinal scale (i.e., 1 = blameworthy to 4 = excellent). We chose to model *officer performance ratings* using an OLS approach (with robust standard errors) because it has been shown to be an efficient estimator in the case of ordinal variables and benefits from intuitive interpretation of its results (i.e., unstandardized betas correspond to the average difference between groups on the outcome scale) (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). Though efficiency gains are achievable by modeling ordinal variables using more targeted methods (e.g., ordered logistic regression), these gains are contingent on strong assumptions (e.g., the proportional odds assumption) and the results (i.e., odds ratios) are less intuitive to interpret. Thus, we present results from OLS models in the main text. As a robustness check, we also re-estimated all analyses using ordered logistic regression and present them in the **Supplemental Material**. Figures present predicted probabilities for specific response levels derived from the ordered logistic models.

While a formal a priori power analysis was not undertaken for this study, we evaluated the design sensitivity of the study using simulation. Using the observed sample sizes, treatment allocation, and residual variances, we simulated a range of plausible treatment effects (0.0–0.5) and estimated statistical power based on the proportion of statistically significant effects across 2000 replications (per effect size) of our specified linear model. Simulation results suggest that the minimum detectable effect of our main models (i.e., at 80% power) was approximately $b = 0.135$ (results were identical across samples to the third decimal place) (see **Fig. S2**). Using the same method, we also estimated a model that included all three interaction terms with the effect modifiers and found that this model had a minimum detectable effect (at 80% power) of 0.27 and 0.255 for the civilian and LE models, respectively. (Note: due to the balanced nature of the effect modifiers across experimental conditions, as well as their joint modeling, the minimum detectable effect for each modifier is identical under this approach).

3. Results

We assessed demographic balance within the civilian and law enforcement (LE) samples across force type condition (i.e., viewing videos with officers using striking or grappling techniques). No imbalances were detected for either sample, suggesting that randomization

[4] For more details on the vignettes, refer to these two sample videos:
< https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qUWToiGzUU>
< https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oV2D2vxj9v0>

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of civilian and law enforcement samples and *p*-values for group difference tests (groups = use of force group assignment)

Variable	Civilian Sample				LE Sample			
	Overall $N = 996$[1]	Striking $N = 499$[1]	Grappling $N = 497$[1]	P[2]	Overall $N = 744$[1]	Striking $N = 371$[1]	Grappling $N = 373$[1]	P[3]
Age	48 (34, 65)	47 (34, 64)	48 (34, 65)	0.8	43 (36, 51)	43 (35, 51)	44 (37, 51)	0.5
Sex				0.3				0.6
Female	523 (53%)	253 (51%)	270 (54%)		72 (9.7%)	34 (9.2%)	38 (10%)	
Male	473 (47%)	246 (49%)	227 (46%)		672 (90%)	337 (91%)	335 (90%)	
Race/Ethnicity				>0.9				0.2
Non-Hispanic White	580 (58%)	282 (57%)	298 (60%)		571 (77%)	291 (78%)	280 (75%)	
Non-Hispanic Black	184 (18%)	96 (19%)	88 (18%)		49 (6.6%)	17 (4.6%)	32 (8.6%)	
Hispanic	103 (10%)	53 (11%)	50 (10%)		69 (9.3%)	34 (9.2%)	35 (9.4%)	
Asian/Pacific Islander	63 (6.3%)	33 (6.6%)	30 (6.0%)		15 (2.0%)	6 (1.6%)	9 (2.4%)	
Other	53 (5.3%)	29 (5.8%)	24 (4.8%)		37 (5.0%)	21 (5.7%)	16 (4.3%)	
American Indian/Alaska Native	13 (1.3%)	6 (1.2%)	7 (1.4%)		3 (0.4%)	2 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)	
Political orientation				0.7				0.7
Conservative	176 (18%)	88 (18%)	88 (18%)		305 (41%)	150 (40%)	155 (42%)	
Slightly conservative	177 (18%)	97 (19%)	80 (16%)		182 (24%)	93 (25%)	89 (24%)	
I have no strong feelings either way	313 (31%)	149 (30%)	164 (33%)		206 (28%)	98 (26%)	108 (29%)	
Slightly progressive	166 (17%)	82 (16%)	84 (17%)		35 (4.7%)	21 (5.7%)	14 (3.8%)	
Progressive	164 (16%)	83 (17%)	81 (16%)		16 (2.2%)	9 (2.4%)	7 (1.9%)	
Highest earned degree				0.8				
Less than HS/GED	24 (2.4%)	12 (2.4%)	12 (2.4%)					
HS/GED	296 (30%)	144 (29%)	152 (31%)					
College	396 (40%)	194 (39%)	202 (41%)					
Masters	204 (20%)	108 (22%)	96 (19%)					
Doctorate/professional degree	76 (7.6%)	41 (8.2%)	35 (7.0%)					
Income				0.10				
< $50 K	385 (39%)	177 (35%)	208 (42%)					
$50 K - 100 K	320 (32%)	172 (34%)	148 (30%)					
> $100 K	291 (29%)	150 (30%)	141 (28%)					
Attitude toward police				0.064				
Very negative	34 (3.4%)	12 (2.4%)	22 (4.4%)					
Negative	104 (10%)	61 (12%)	43 (8.7%)					
I have no strong feelings either way	260 (26%)	138 (28%)	122 (25%)					
Positive	338 (34%)	169 (34%)	169 (34%)					
Very positive	260 (26%)	119 (24%)	141 (28%)					
Years in law enforcement					15 (8, 23)	15 (8, 23)	15 (8, 23)	0.7
Current job duties								0.2
Patrol					322 (43%)	157 (42%)	165 (44%)	
Administrative					130 (17%)	70 (19%)	60 (16%)	
Other Specialty Unit (E.g., Dui, Gang)					130 (17%)	55 (15%)	75 (20%)	
Investigations					114 (15%)	63 (17%)	51 (14%)	
Swat Or Other Tactical Unit					48 (6.5%)	26 (7.0%)	22 (5.9%)	
Department level								>0.9
City					285 (38%)	148 (40%)	137 (37%)	
County					193 (26%)	95 (26%)	98 (26%)	
State					148 (20%)	70 (19%)	78 (21%)	
Other (E.g. University)					72 (9.7%)	36 (9.7%)	36 (9.7%)	
Federal					46 (6.2%)	22 (5.9%)	24 (6.4%)	
Size of population served								0.2
Under 10,000					112 (15%)	57 (15%)	55 (15%)	
10,000 To 24,999					101 (14%)	48 (13%)	53 (14%)	
25,000 To 49,999					90 (12%)	55 (15%)	35 (9.4%)	
50,000 To 99,999					104 (14%)	51 (14%)	53 (14%)	
100,000 To 249,999					90 (12%)	44 (12%)	46 (12%)	
250,000 To 499,999					50 (6.7%)	29 (7.8%)	21 (5.6%)	
500,000 To 1,000,000					51 (6.9%)	25 (6.7%)	26 (7.0%)	
Over 1,000,000					146 (20%)	62 (17%)	84 (23%)	
Number of calls					5 (2,10)	5 (2, 10)	5 (2, 10)	0.2

[1] Median (Q1, Q3); n (%)
[2] Wilcoxon rank sum test; Pearson's Chi-squared test
[3] Wilcoxon rank sum test; Pearson's Chi-squared test; Fisher's exact test

across force type conditions was successful (Table 1).

3.1. *Does type of force used by police impact ratings of their performance?*

For both the civilian and LE samples, officers who employed grappling received higher performance ratings compared to officers who used strikes. Specifically, among the civilian sample, average performance ratings were $b = 0.2$ (95% CI = [0.11, 0.3], $P < 0.001$) points higher for grappling officers compared to striking officers–roughly one-fifth of a category change between groups of officers on the 4-point rating scale (Table 2). For the law enforcement sample, the difference in officer performance ratings was even larger, with grappling officers receiving $b = 0.28$ (95% CI = [0.18, 0.37], $P < 0.001$) more points, on average, compared to striking officers. Our results were robust to choice of estimation method, as similar results were produced by ordered logistic models (see **Table S2**). The predicted probabilities from these models (**Table S3**) add some nuance to our results. While both civilian and LE samples tended to score grappling officers' performance higher than striking officers, there appear to be sample-specific mechanisms at work (Fig. 1, **Panel A**). For instance, civilians tended to rate grappling

Table 2
Linear regression results of officer performance ratings regressed on vignette factors of force type, officer/suspect race, and video type and their interactions

	Civilian Sample									Law Enforcement Sample								
	Mod 1.1			Mod 1.2			Mod 1.3			Mod 1.4			Mod 1.5			Mod 1.6		
Vignette Factor	*b*	95% CI	P	*b*	95% CI	P	*b*	95% CI	P	*b*	95% CI	P	*b*	95% CI	P	*b*	95% CI	P
Force type: Grappling	0.20	0.11, 0.30	<0.001	0.20	0.11, 0.30	<0.001	0.21	0.02, 0.40	0.028	0.28	0.18, 0.37	<0.001	0.27	0.18, 0.36	<0.001	0.32	0.13, 0.50	<0.001
Officer race: White				−0.06	−0.16, 0.03	0.2	−0.04	−0.18, 0.10	0.5				0.08	−0.01, 0.17	0.10	0.07	−0.07, 0.22	0.3
Suspect race: White				0.06	−0.03, 0.16	0.2	0.05	−0.09, 0.19	0.5				0.07	−0.03, 0.16	0.2	0.16	0.02, 0.31	0.026
Video type: Segmented				0.09	0.00, 0.19	0.054	0.10	−0.04, 0.24	0.2				0.22	0.13, 0.31	<0.001	0.17	0.03, 0.31	0.021
Force type: Grappling × Officer race: White							−0.04	−0.23, 0.15	0.7							0.00	−0.18, 0.19	>0.9
Suspect race: White							0.03	−0.15, 0.22	0.7							−0.20	−0.38, −0.01	0.034
Video type: Segmented							−0.01	−0.20, 0.18	>0.9							0.10	−0.08, 0.29	0.3
(Intercept)	3.1	3.0, 3.2	<0.001	3.1	2.9, 3.2	<0.001	3.0	2.9, 3.2	<0.001	3.3	3.3, 3.4	<0.001	3.2	3.1, 3.3	<0.001	3.1	3.0, 3.3	<0.001

Abbreviation: CI = Confidence Interval

officers as "satisfactory" and "excellent" at roughly equivalent rates; striking officers, by contrast, were more often rated as only "satisfactory", with lower rates of "excellent". The opposite case was observed for the LE sample, with roughly equal rates of "satisfactory"/"excellent" ratings for striking officers and a marked increase in the rate of "excellent" ratings for grappling officers. Fig. 1, **Panel B**, depicts these trends in terms of cumulative/exceedance probabilities. Together, these findings suggest that similar conclusions regarding the greater appropriateness of officers' use of grappling versus striking techniques may be reached for different reasons.

3.2. Does race of the officer/suspect impact ratings of officer performance?

We did not observe differences in officer performance ratings related to officer race across force types in either sample (Table 2). Similarly, in the civilian sample, performance ratings within force types did not depend on suspect race. In the LE sample, however, there was some indication that average ratings of force type did vary as a function of suspect race ($b_{Grappling\text{-}White} = -0.2$, 95% CI = [−0.38, −0.01], $P = 0.034$). This result indicates that the effect of grappling (i.e., compared to striking) was 0.2 points lower on average on the 4-point response scale when the suspect was White (i.e., compared to Black). Notably, this effect was below the minimum detectable effect we estimated for our interaction model (i.e., $b = 0.255$). This, in conjunction with the near non-significance of the effect indicated by a moderate *p*-value and confidence interval that approached zero, suggests that this result is likely due to chance. Two additional pieces of information support this conclusion. First, adjustment for multiple-testing (i.e., the three effect modifier hypotheses) using the Benjamini and Hochberg (1995) False-Discovery Rate (FDR) method reduced this effect to non-significance ($P_{FDR} = 0.102$). Second, the interaction effect between force type and suspect race was not replicated using an ordered logistic model (**Table S4**). Overall, we conclude that there is little evidence of an impact of officer/suspect race of ratings of officer performance across force types.

3.3. Do full or segmented videos impact ratings of officer performance?

Presentation method did not appear to impact officer performance ratings in either sample (Table 2). Despite the non-significant interaction effect observed in the LE sample ($b = 0.1$, 95% CI = [−0.08, 0.29], $P = 0.269$), inspection of the predicted probabilities produced by the ordered logistic model revealed a degree of variation in how LE officers rated the full/segmented videos (Fig. 2). Specifically, grappling officers had a lower probability of receiving an "excellent" rating when viewed as a single, uninterrupted video compared to when they were viewed in segments (55.9% vs. 78.2%; RR = 0.72, 95% CI = [0.57, 0.9], $P < 0.001$) (**Table S5**).

3.4. How does the locus of force change during the incident?

In an exploratory analysis, we leveraged the experimental factor of video type (i.e., full vs segmented) to explore how perceptions of force change over time. Presenting videos in a segmented manner allowed us to ask respondents who they believed to have exerted the most force (i.e., officer, suspect, neither) in each of the three segments and observe the changes in perception and how they evolve over the course of the videos. Fig. 3 presents Sankey diagrams that depict the proportion of respondents in each sample/condition group. Across samples and force conditions, respondents who viewed the segmented videos followed the same general pattern: the suspect exerted more force in segment 1, the officer in segment 2, and either the officer or neither in segment 3. Fig. 3 also presents the proportion of responses across officer/suspect/neither for respondents who viewed uninterrupted videos. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the LE sample who viewed videos involving grappling had the

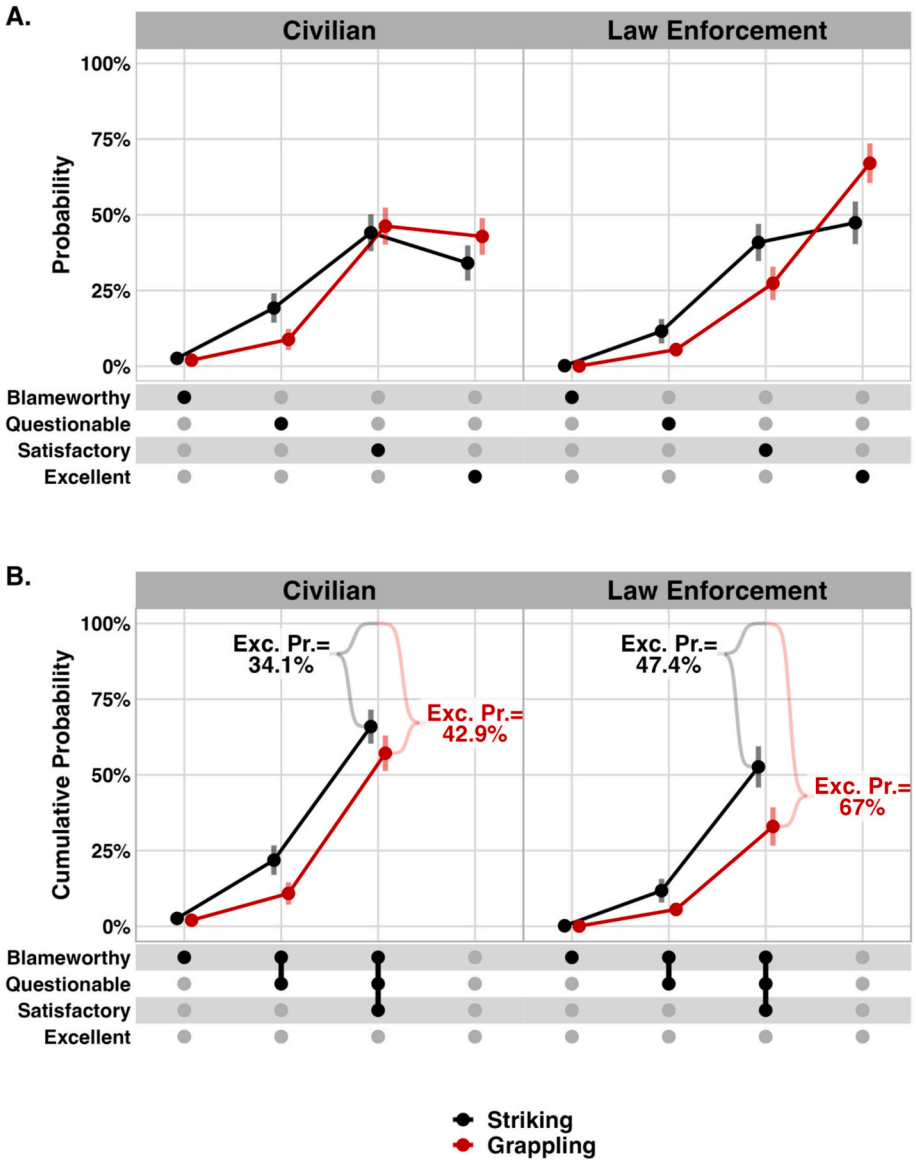

Fig. 1. Basic (Panel A) and cumulative (Panel B) probabilities of officer performance ratings grouped by force type—either punch (black) or takedown (red)—used by officers in video vignettes in the civilian and law enforcement samples. Dot-matrix below each plot represents which rating each point along the x-axis corresponds to (indicated by a black dot). For cumulative probabilities, multiple ratings are grouped below specific thresholds, indicated by dots connected by lines. In Panel B, exceedance probabilities (i.e., 1-cumulative probability; abbreviated "Exc. Pr.") that represent the probabilities associated with ratings falling above the highest threshold (i.e., between "Satisfactory" and "Excellent") are presented. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

largest proportion of responses attributing the greatest force to the suspect.

3.5. *What punitive actions (if any) did respondents advocate for officers using striking/grappling?*

Respondents were asked five follow-up questions after viewing the use-of-force scenarios that asked about possible punishments for the officer involved. As a supplemental analysis, we conducted a descriptive analysis of their responses (Fig. 4). Across both samples, most respondents felt that the officers in both conditions did not need any punishment because of their use of force. This trend was consistent across force type and continued across the different punishment options (i.e., additional training, firing, prosecution, jail time). Only the option for requiring the officer to receive additional training was endorsed (i.e., agree/strongly agree) by at least 15% of the LE and civilian samples. The one exception was for grappling videos in the LE sample which resulted in only 6% of respondents recommending more training. Indeed, both samples expressed little support for any punitive action beyond additional training. The highest levels of endorsement from the civilian sample were for prosecution of the officer (10% and 8% for striking and grappling videos, respectively). Among the LE sample, all punitive options received <1% endorsement.

4. Discussion

This study examined whether views on police use of force (PUF) differ based on the techniques applied, comparing one grappling technique (viz., a takedown) with one striking technique (viz., a punch). Grappling might convey a sense of control, whereas striking suggests an aggressive move intended to cause harm. Because of that, we hypothesized that striking would be perceived as less reasonable.

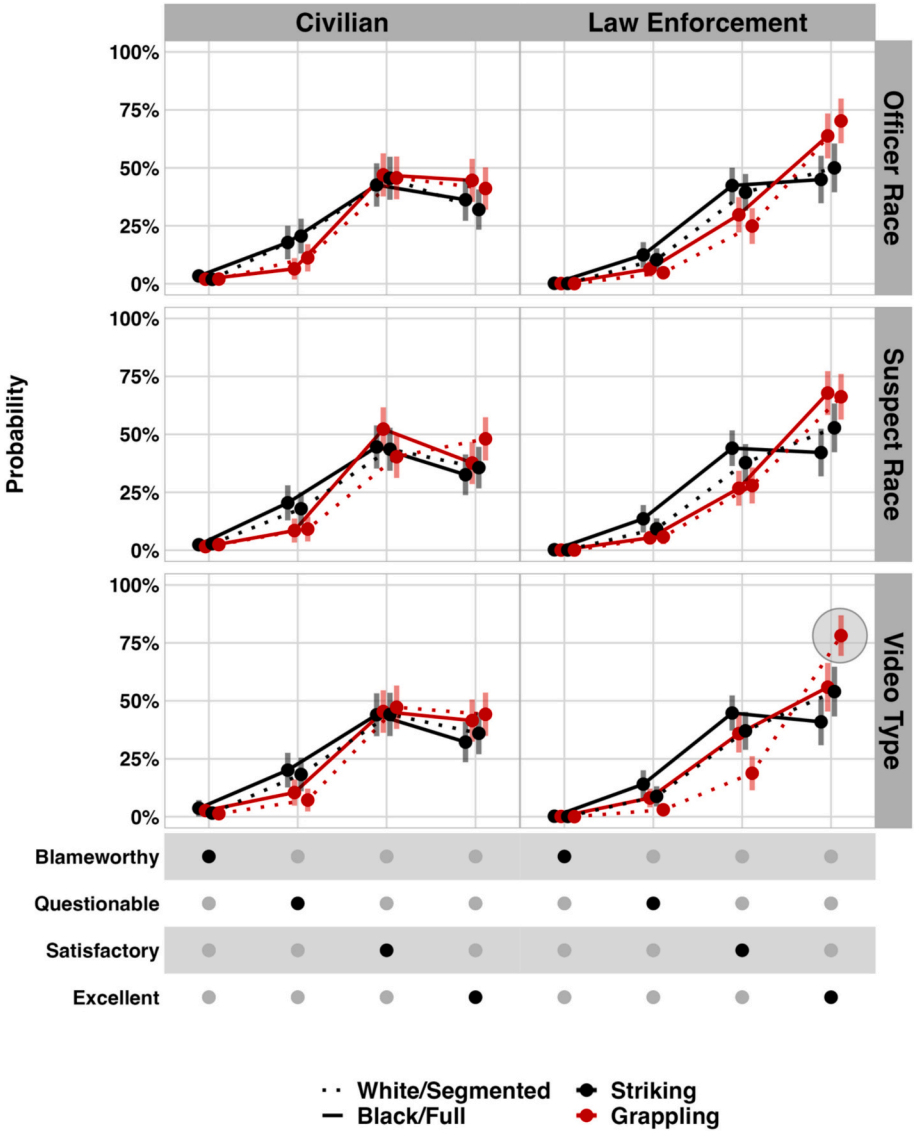

Fig. 2. Basic probabilities of officer performance ratings grouped by secondary moderator variables of officer rate, suspect race, and video type in civilian and law enforcement samples. Dot-matrix below each plot represents which rating each point along the x-axis corresponds to (indicated by a black dot).

Prior research suggested that public assessments of appropriateness of PUF are not necessarily linked to lawfulness; how force is exercised also seems to matter (Meares et al., 2016). Our results align with such idea: even though the striking response was perfectly proportional—and, thus, lawful—it still yielded lower ratings compared to the grappling response, which represents a level of force lower than the assault on the officer. Notably, this effect was observed among both civilians and police respondents, though our results raised some nuanced point beyond the general conclusion.

First, police and civilian respondents both rated grappling officers more highly than striking officers. And while police respondents gave higher ratings overall for both force types compared to civilians, we also observed larger differences in rating among officers. Translating these results back to our original 4-point response scale, videos with grappling officers received an average rating that was one-fifth of a category higher than videos with striking officers ($b = 0.2$; Cohen's $d = 0.26$); among police respondents, the difference was between one-quarter and one-third of a category increase ($b = 0.27$; Cohen's $d = 0.43$). Though we believe these effects to be small (perhaps moderate among police), the type of force employed by officers in the vignettes produced a greater impact on performance ratings than any other variable tested in our study. Second, while both civilian and police respondents rated grappling officers higher than those using strikes, the predicted probabilities from the ordered logistic models suggested that different mechanisms may be at work. For instance, among civilian respondents the probability of moving from "satisfactory" to "excellent" declined for the striking officers but was stable for those who used grappling. The opposite case was observed for police respondents.

This finding supports the existence of two metrics for judgment, as suggested in previous research (Richardson & Fridell, 2024). The first one is intuitive or descriptive, reflecting the viewer's feelings about what they see. The second is formal or normative, strictly based on legal standards and policy. These two criteria account for differences between public opinion and legal assessment in PUF cases—the reasonableness divide (Marier & Goodwin, 2026; Richardson & Fridell, 2024).

While we initially hypothesized that striking would be perceived as less reasonable, we still expected it to be seen as somewhat reasonable given the circumstances presented to participants. However, the results indicated that striking nearly doubled the probability of responses categorizing the officers' actions as blameworthy or questionable among civilians. In the law enforcement sample, there was a borderline difference with smaller magnitude.

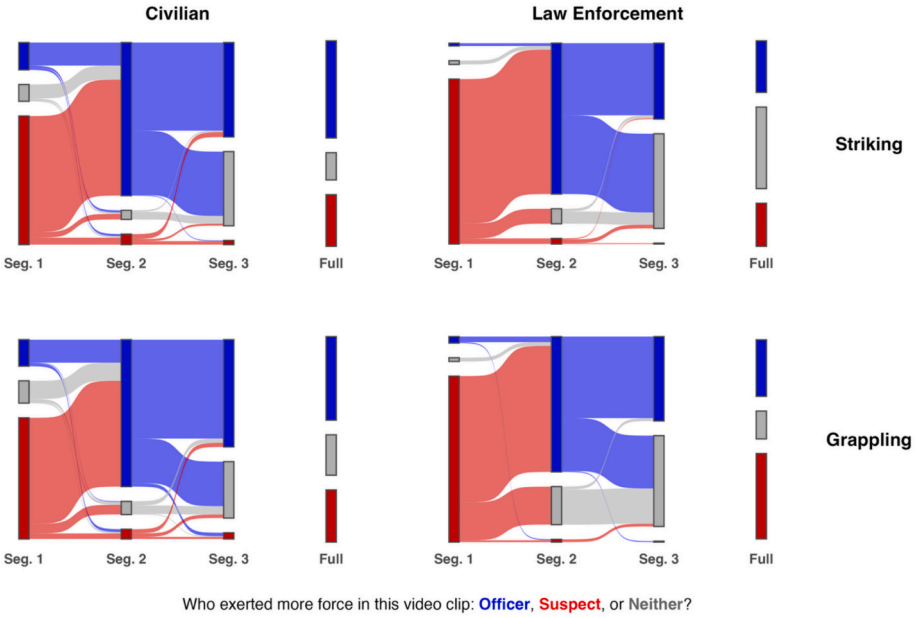

Fig. 3. Exploratory data visualization (Sankey diagram) of the source of force (officer, suspect, or neither) as rated by respondents viewing segmented video clips and full videos (the x-axis) across civilian and law enforcement samples, grouped by force type. The height of individual nodes in the Sankey diagrams represents the relative proportion of each response category for that video group.

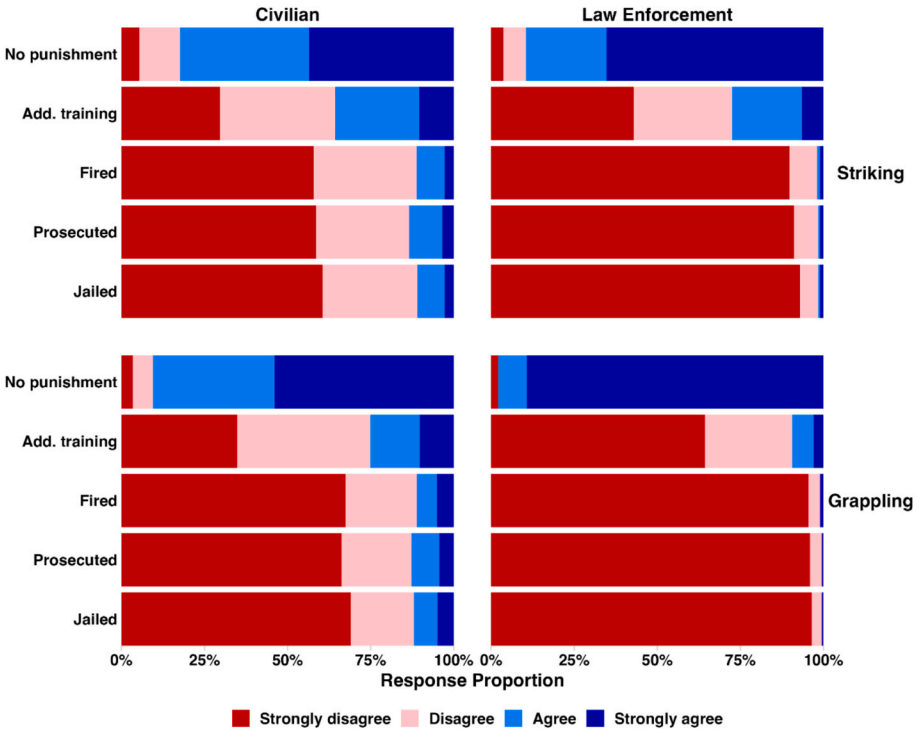

Fig. 4. Exploratory data visualization (horizontal stacked bar chart) showing the relative proportion of responses to five questions regarding how officers in video vignettes should be punished because of their use of force.

On the other hand, there was little support for punishing the officer in both conditions, even though a consistent proportion of civilians agreed with harsher punishment regardless of the condition. More respondents agreed that the officers in striking condition should take additional PUF training. This difference was more prominent among officers. This indicates that respondents did not believe that the officer's response was wrong, but that the officer could do better.

Not only do grappling techniques seem less violent than striking, but they are also commonly classified as a lower level of force than striking—which is one plausible reason for divergent assessments. At first glance, these findings may appear unsurprising. It's known that judgments of proportionality can shift across levels of force (Kyprianides et al., 2021). Also, perceived appropriateness tends to decline when force is used against an unarmed person, even when legally justifiable (Roche et al., 2022). However, if only the resistance–response is considered, the striking technique depicted in this study was lawful and

proportional to the suspect's assaultive behavior—one punch in response to one punch in a timing consistent with self-defense. If judgments on police use of force were primarily guided by proportionality, little differences in public perceptions would be expected between these conditions. The fact that striking received fewer "excellent" ratings and more "questionable" ones suggests that observers treat higher-force techniques as inherently less appropriate even when they are justified. This indicates that perceived force level may override contextual assessments of proportionality in evaluations of police conduct, both among civilians and law enforcement.

Another possible explanation is that viewers may judge the incident considering its outcome, rather than the resistance-response coupling. The suspect's punch never landed, while the officer's strike instantly knocked the suspect out. If only the outcomes are considered, one can have the perception that the officer's response was somewhat disproportionate or, at least, that the officer could have used less force. Supporting this hypothesis, the largest share of civilians and a considerable part of law enforcement thought that the officer exerted more force in the takedown condition, even though the officer objectively applied a lower level of force than the suspect (see Fig. 3). If this hypothesis is true, future studies should find differences when comparing good and bad outcomes for the same technique. A dose-response relationship is also expected: the harsher the outcome, the worse the public perception. Likewise, different techniques resulting in equally bad outcomes should evoke similar public perceptions.

In line with previous research (Dunbar et al., 2024), officer's race did not influence performance ratings. Suspect's race also did not impact ratings, which aligns with some of previous results (Rome et al., 1995; Vardsveen & Wiener, 2022). Divergence from Bailey et al. (2021) may be due to interaction effects of skin color and camera point of view. Divergence from other literature (Kahn et al., 2017; Provenza, 2021) likely arises from differences in measurement procedures. Those studies relied on written vignettes and case files. In contrast, the present study directly asked people their perceptions of a concrete, visually presented incident, offering a more direct and contextually grounded measure of judgment.

Previous research suggested differences between perceptions of PUF among officers and laypersons (Charbonneau et al., 2024). Our results point in the same direction, with the LE sample tending to rate PUF more favorably than civilians. Conversely, LE participants were more critical in their evaluations, showing a much larger gap in "excellent" ratings between conditions compared to civilians. Additionally visual framing may (Bailey et al., 2021; Boivin et al., 2023) or may not (Pyo et al., 2023) affect perception. Regarding segmenting the video, our results suggest a mixed effect. While segmenting seems to impact the perception of officers, it does not seem to have an effect on civilians' perception.

There are several practical and policy implications of our findings. First, public communication should highlight the technical dimensions of police use of force (PUF), particularly the principle of proportionality. When legitimate PUF incidents result in undesirable outcomes, it is important to emphasize that the officer's response was technically appropriate and that adverse outcomes can occur despite careful conduct. Similarly, reviews of PUF incidents should focus strictly on contextual factors and the alignment between resistance and response, without being influenced by the outcome. In terms of training, tactics involving grappling (such as takedowns and restraints) should be prioritized over striking techniques.

It is noteworthy that this study had a deliberately narrow scope: it compared perceptions of one striking technique and one grappling technique while holding all other factors constant. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as evidence about perception rather than as direct guidance for policy or training decisions. Our results provide no information about the effectiveness, safety, or operational feasibility of any technique, all of which are critical considerations when designing policies and training programs.

That said, the consistent perceptual advantage observed for grappling techniques across both civilian and LE samples suggests potential implications for how PUF encounters are framed and explained. In light of these findings, it may be reasonable for trainers and agencies, where context allows, to emphasize grappling techniques as a preferred option among available responses, while recognizing that striking remains an appropriate and lawful option under certain conditions. However, grappling should not be treated as the only correct response; rather, training should continue to emphasize decision-making that is responsive to situational demands and officer capability, particularly in simulated environments.

Although perceptions differ between striking and grappling, there was limited public support for punishing officers in either condition. This pattern suggests that perceptual differences do not necessarily translate into demands for formal sanctions. Consequently, our findings do not support calls for categorical policy restrictions on striking techniques.

5. Limitations

Video framing may impact viewers' perception (Bailey et al., 2021; Boivin et al., 2023). Our vignettes were recorded at bystander eye level, using varied angles to enhance visibility. Consequently, the results may not extend to incidents recorded by body-worn, dashboard, or surveillance cameras. The civilian sample was recruited via Qualtrics™. Prior work has noted limitations of panel-based recruitment, even with matched samples (Graham, Pickett, & Cullen, 2021). Therefore, although random assignment produced balance across all demographics, the views expressed may not be fully generalizable to the broader population, especially due to self-selection effects. To this point, we note that our civilian sample did diverge from population estimates (take from 2023) in terms of both education and income (i.e., our sample was more educated and had higher income; **Table S6**), other the distributions of other demographic variables were similar. The same caveat applies to the LE sample: despite random selection, the sampling pool was limited and no poststratification was applied, so results may not generalize to the U.S. LE population. Although the vignettes aimed to simulate real use-of-force encounters, they lacked the emotional intensity of actual events. Real incidents often receive media coverage and public attention, which can shape and amplify public perceptions. Similarly, the vignettes were intentionally scripted to be unambiguous and high threat, a design choice that enhances internal validity but may limit external validity. Thus, generalizing the findings to more complex real-life scenarios may be done cautiously. Finally, the 4-point performance scale used in this study ("Blameworthy" to "Excellent") may be perceived as normatively asymmetric, with fewer intermediate categories capturing neutral or ambivalent responses. Although "satisfactory" was intended to function as a largely neutral assessment and was commonly selected by respondents. Future research would benefit from refining the scale to better differentiate intermediate judgments and improve interpretability.

6. Conclusions

This study found that the type of physical restraint technique used by LEOs can shape how both civilians and law enforcement evaluate force. The grappling technique utilized was viewed more favorably than the striking technique, even though both were proportional responses to the same simulated threat. These results suggest that public and professional judgments may depend on both how the force appears and its legality. The grappling technique used may convey control and professionalism, while striking may be viewed as more aggressive.

Neither officer nor suspect race influenced the evaluations, indicating that the utilized technique played a stronger role than demographic factors in a clear-cut encounter. Additionally, officers who viewed the segmented videos rated the actions more positively, suggesting that structured review may help temper initial reactions for law

enforcement audiences. Overall, the findings highlight that perception is shaped by both outcome and presentation. Emphasizing lower-impact control tactics and promoting public understanding of PUF techniques may improve confidence in the PUF. Future work may examine if repeated or guided exposure to realistic scenarios can narrow differences between citizen and LEO perspectives of PUF.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joe Eleuterio-da-Rocha: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Peter T. Tanksley:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **M. Hunter Martaindale:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jack Johncox:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **J. Pete Blair:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Perplexity, Grammarly, and ChatGPT as editorial tools. After using these tools/services, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2026.102601.

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