

CNA Spotlight

Improving Officer Resilience *The San Antonio, Texas Police Department's Performance and Recovery Optimization Training*

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Photos: San Antonio, Texas Police Department

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Introduction

The San Antonio, Texas Police Department



This report is part of a series highlighting innovative programs that have been implemented in some of the most progressive police agencies across the country. These reports will highlight some of the nation's most innovative best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterrence; approaches to gun violence; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime. Each of these reports provides background on the program, details the important components of the program and the agency's approach, highlights the successes the agency has experienced as a result, and identifies ways other agencies can employ similar programs.

This report highlights the San Antonio (Texas) Police Department (SAPD)'s Performance and Recovery Optimization training program, or PRO. CNA worked closely with the San Antonio Police Department to develop this publication, including a site visit in May 2018 to observe a PRO training session and speak with department personnel about the initiative.

San Antonio, the second-largest city in Texas and seventh-largest city in the United States, has an estimated population of nearly 1.4 million people. The SAPD, led by Chief William McManus, is the second-largest municipal police force in the state of Texas, comprising about 2,000 sworn personnel and 1,000 civilian employees.

The SAPD enjoys a reputation as one of the nation's leading law enforcement agencies. Its innovative programs, strong connections with the communities it polices, and effective crime-fighting strategies provide invaluable examples and lessons for other law enforcement agencies. The SAPD's goals are focused on the areas of community policing, decreasing violent crime, and officer wellness; the department has been at the forefront of addressing the safety and wellness challenges associated with the stresses of 21st-century policing by employing biometric techniques in officer training and embedding clinical psychologists in police early-intervention services and other aspects of police operations.¹

1. Steve Rickman and Denise Rodriguez, *Safer Neighborhoods through Precision Policing Initiative: San Antonio Police Department Fast Track Report*, IIM-2018-U-017364 (Arlington, VA: CNA, 2019).

Performance and Recovery Optimization Training

The SAPD, a national leader in officer wellness, has employed staff psychologists through its Psychological Services Office since 2004. The integration of staff psychologists into training was a natural progression for the department. SAPD staff psychologist Dr. Brandi Burque observed and participated in officer training to increase her understanding of the needs and realities of an officer's job. Her participation also aided in integrating her into the department training division and in fostering the trust of the officers. After taking part in numerous training sessions, Dr. Burque and fellow trainers saw an opportunity to expand the department's officer safety and wellness efforts. In 2013, they launched the Performance and Recovery Optimization training program, or PRO.

PRO is an integrated stress management program based on research, theory, and law enforcement skills, with the goal of improving officer resilience. The PRO training program aims to enhance officer performance on the job and at home, prevent officer burnout, and aid in creating a culture that encourages mental health and wellness. The PRO training program includes multiple modules designed to treat officers as "tactical athletes."²

The Origins of PRO

PRO is based on a military training program called Defender's Edge. The United States Army and Air Force first conceptualized Defender's Edge Training to address service member resiliency, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide.³ The training covers physical and mental stress response, provides tools for optimal performance under stress, and emphasizes the importance of self-care to combat negative impacts of short- and long-term stress. It is designed to inform officers about the body's response to

stress, going into detail on the release of cortisol and adrenalin, and the short- and long-term effects of those chemicals on the body and mind. Although Defender's Edge was scientifically based—rooted in performance and sports psychology literature on stress and performance optimization—it did not take into account organizational military—or police—culture that affected service member participation in the program.

Although the SAPD staff psychologists recognized the benefits of Defender's Edge, they saw that it needed to be reconceptualized to meet the needs, and fit the organizational culture, of police officers. This led to the development of the PRO training program. PRO draws on law enforcement, military, and sports psychology; it seeks to address officer wellness by understanding what techniques are useful for law enforcement and how they can be easily engaged both at work and home. PRO seeks to optimize a person's performance both on the job and at home.

2. Brandi Burque, *Performance & Recovery Optimization (PRO) Implementation Plan* (San Antonio: San Antonio Police Department, 2018).

3. Rickman and Rodriguez, *Safer Neighborhoods: San Antonio* (see note 1).

Figure 1. Performance and Recovery Optimization’s eight training modules

<p>1. Optimal response in performance and stress management</p>	<p>The human body’s response to stress; honing in on optimal performance during stressful situations</p>
<p>2. Modulating physical response</p>	<p>Controlling the body’s response to stress (e.g., combat breathing)</p>
<p>3. Mindset</p>	<p>The effects of mindset on performance on and off the job</p>
<p>4. Performance self-talk</p>	<p>Mentally practicing scenarios and talking through steps</p>
<p>5. Nutrition</p>	<p>The importance of nutrition to combat common health conditions exacerbated by stress (e.g. diabetes, heart disease)</p>
<p>6. Fitness</p>	<p>The importance of fitness for health outcomes and safety</p>
<p>7. Recharging</p>	<p>The need to recharge through sleep, hobbies, and outside interests</p>
<p>8. Critical incident response</p>	<p>How to respond and recover following a critical incident</p>

Source: Elizabeth Simpson, “Performance and Recovery Optimization (PRO) in San Antonio Police Department,” *Community Policing Dispatch* 10, no. 12 (2017), https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/12-2017/Performance_and_Recovery_Optimization.html.

The cadet and in-service training includes both classroom discussion and hands-on activities designed to improve survival stress response systems and stress modulation tactics. Both aspects of PRO training aim to educate officers about how the body reacts to stress and provide strategies to regulate stress response in order to optimize performance. During classroom training, officers learn about the

long-term effects of stress on the nervous system, brain, and cardiovascular system. Officers also learn about short-term stress responses, such as tunnel vision and tensed muscles, and how to gain control and optimize performance under stressful conditions. Dr. Burque and the SAPD continuously update the training to ensure that it meets the needs of the department.



San Antonio Police Department recruit officers at the police academy.

The hands-on activities are designed to show officers how they specifically respond to stress and allow them to practice the stress-regulation skills they learned in the classroom. For example, during the Zombie Exercise, an officer is given a designated amount of time—seconds—to observe a montage of images including zombies, perpetrators, and victims. The officer is later asked about components of the image, such as how many guns were pictured. They are also asked to report on what was happening in the room while they observed the image. This exercise is designed to test an officer's attention management and ability to observe the whole picture of a situation. The exercise can also be adapted to introduce stressors, such as lights and sirens, to demonstrate the effects of stress on attention management and memory.

In addition to classroom training for cadets, the PRO program has been embedded in various ways throughout the department, including in six hours of in-service training and return-to-duty evaluations. Additionally, a trained psychologist works closely with instructors to reinforce PRO skills in driving, tactics, and firearms training. During these training sessions, the instructor and psychologist both shadow officers. The psychologist will offer advice on using PRO skills, such as mental practice

before and after scenario training. Instructors not only offer tactical advice but also point out signs of stress, such as shaking hands, and remind officers to slow down, breathe, take time, and use PRO skills to calm down and think through next steps. This partnership between psychologists and instructors is an integral component of PRO that allows psychologists to explain and teach PRO skills while instructors reinforce those skills during exercises.

Challenges

In developing PRO, the SAPD ran into a few challenges with officer buy-in, officer time and availability, and funding. Like many agencies across the country, the SAPD is currently experiencing a staffing shortage because of a hiring freeze that was only lifted recently and an increase in the number of officers nearing retirement. The SAPD ratio

of officers to population has been declining since 2012. As of 2016, the city had only 1.44 officers per 1,000 inhabitants, almost half the national average.⁴ The SAPD has increased its recruiting efforts, but resources are constrained. As a result, implementation of the new PRO training throughout the department was not an initial priority. Once command staff had participated in the training, however, they better understood its benefits, aiding in command-level buy-in.

Getting buy-in from all levels of officers throughout the department was also a challenge. The SAPD addressed it in two ways. First, the PRO training is mandatory for cadets. Second, the training curriculum is presented in a usable and practical manner with information grounded in science. The instructor's participation in training and openness to listening to the needs and realities of officers also helped build officer trust and buy-in. Gaining buy-in from more-established officers has been more of a challenge, but an advantage of PRO is that it uses a two-pronged attack, targeting not only cadets but established officers through in-service training. As material is presented across the department, and over time, the cadets, who appear to be very receptive to PRO, will influence the overall culture of the department.

The SAPD is continually modifying PRO to suit the needs of the department and available training time. Although this poses a challenge to establishing a strong

and permanent program, it also provides an opportunity to continually improve the training to better suit the needs of SAPD officers. Officers' interest in the training program is also evident in their participation in its ongoing development. For example, after in-service training, an officer approached the instructor and asked to be a part of the training. This officer also suggested that the training be updated to incorporate material on the mindset of stoic philosophy.⁵ This added component has since become a strong, well-received piece of the training.⁶

Successes

Although the department is in the early stages of conducting a formal evaluation of the training program, anecdotal evidence suggests that PRO has had a positive effect on officer safety and wellness. The integration of PRO skills into field training has helped officers retain and remember to use these skills in the field during critical incidents. Many officers, after being in a critical incident, report hearing their instructor's voice directing them to use PRO skills, such as combat breathing. Officers have also reported using PRO skills to avoid accidents in emergency driving situations. The successes of PRO can also be seen in the longer term stress effects on officers, and it has shown officers that their safety and wellness are important to the department.

4. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Table 26: Texas Full-time Law Enforcement Employees by City, 2016." *Crime in the United States 2016* (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017), <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2016/crime-in-the-u.s.-2016/tables/table-26/table-26-state-cuts/table-26-texas.xls>.

5. The stoic philosophy mindset is grounded in acceptance of situations and control over one's response to events.

6. Brandi Burque, "Performance and Recovery and Optimization (PRO) Program," interview in June 2018 episode of *The Beat*, podcast, produced by the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, MP3 audio, https://cops.usdoj.gov/html/podcasts/the_beat/06-2018/TheBeat_Burque_062018.mp3.

Members of the district attorney’s office also participated in PRO training. SAPD officers report that since then, they have seen a change in the how the district attorney’s office has understood the impact of stress on officers, appearing more understanding of the stress effects on officers during critical incidents. For example, they report that it has been more open to viewing and taking into account the entirety of a deadly force incident under review, as opposed to just the seconds in which deadly force was used.

Moving forward

The SAPD’s vision for PRO is for the skills taught to be continually used throughout an officer’s career—both on the job, in day-to-day routine and critical incidents, and in officers’ personal lives as well. The SAPD remains committed to PRO training and intends for it to serve as the dominant health and wellness program for the department along with other interventions for promoting resilience, enhancing performance, and improving health. The department’s other wellness support initiatives are designed to work in tandem with PRO; currently, the SAPD offers peer support, chaplains, family assistance, and an in-house psychological services unit. The department is also considering developing a family academy to offer holistic services that reach out to officers’ families.

There are also plans to enhance the PRO training itself as soon as funding becomes available. These plans include incorporating improved biometric technology, such as cortisol wipes, blood pressure monitors, and simulators. These tools will be used to better simulate and measure stress response in officers. Beyond simulating stress response, the goal of these enhancements is to map each officer’s optimal performance zone, in terms of such factors as heart rate, and teach officers how to stay in that zone when responding to a critical incident in hopes that this will improve an officer’s overall performance.

A formal evaluation of whether officers are using the skills taught through the PRO training is being conducted in partnership with the University of Texas at San Antonio. The evaluation will first focus on whether officers receiving the training are actually applying the skills they were taught. The second phase of this evaluation will be to identify other measures of job performance and look for correlations between job performance measures and PRO training and skill use. Preliminary findings on the first phase will be available in the spring of 2019.

San Antonio Police Department recruit officers attending PRO training at the police academy.



Lessons for other agencies

In developing and implementing PRO, the SAPD and Dr. Burque have learned some valuable lessons about how to successfully establish an innovative officer safety and wellness program. To develop a strong officer safety and wellness curriculum and gain officer buy-in, the SAPD recommends that agencies should do the following:

- **Include the psychologists developing the curriculum in department training.** This will ensure that the psychologists and others developing the curriculum understand the unique needs of law enforcement officers and the agency.
- **Make training mandatory to ensure participation and cultural change.** Encourage law enforcement training instructors to conduct the training alongside the psychologists. Present officers with the “what,” “why,” and “how,” and allow officers the opportunity to internalize these lessons through scenario-based training.
- **Take a holistic approach that connects wellness skills to home life.** This allows officers to use and see the benefit of stress-management skills outside the job, which can ultimately affect officer behavior in the field.
- **Invest in the right team to build and deliver the training.** The training team should be composed of passionate and humble individuals who are open to new ideas. It should include officers and psychologists. The SAPD team includes psychologists and officers from the SAPD mental health unit, as well as officers with experience leading tactical training and crisis intervention training. The diversity of this team allows for the merging of

different perspectives and approaches to build a holistic program that presents officers with training that is actionable and relevant to the field.

- **Invest in resources.** Not many agencies have psychologists on staff, and agencies must put value in this resource for successful officer safety and wellness programs. As a part of PRO, the SAPD has three psychologists on staff. These psychologists meet with officers after a critical incident to determine fitness for duty; whether they are handling the mental stress of the incident well; and if they will need time off, treatment, or counseling to help them cope with the traumatic stress they experienced.⁷ The SAPD has also started to recommend, when appropriate, that these officers return to the training academy to ease them back into service.

Law enforcement officers frequently encounter stress in their jobs and that stress can have short-term impacts on performance and safety and long-term impacts on physical and mental health and well-being. Officer wellness training programs, such as PRO, have the potential to improve law enforcement performance through better decision making and stress management.

7. Rickman and Rodriguez, *Safer Neighborhoods: San Antonio* (see note 1).

About CNA

CNA is a not-for-profit organization based in Arlington, Virginia. The organization pioneered the field of operations research and analysis 75 years ago and, today, applies its efforts to a broad range of national security, defense, and public interest issues, including education, homeland security, public health, and criminal justice. CNA applies a multidisciplinary, field-based approach to helping decision makers develop sound policies, make better informed decisions, and lead more effectively.

Performance and Recovery Optimization, or PRO, is an officer resilience training program developed by Dr. Brandi Burque for the San Antonio (Texas) Police Department. Developed from sports medicine and military training, it teaches officers to understand and manage their stress responses. This Spotlight report describes the program's background and implementation and gives advice for other agencies considering similar programs.

This series of Spotlights highlights innovative programs implemented in progressive police agencies across the country. These reports showcase best practices in violent crime reduction; focused deterrence; approaches to gun violence; officer safety and wellness; community and public safety partnerships; and the use of technology, intelligence, and analytics to reduce violent crime.



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