

Training and Decision-Making in Police Firearms Use: Evidence from a Survey of Slovenian Police Officers

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Background/Purpose: The use of firearms represents the most severe coercive measure in policing and requires a high level of legal knowledge, technical competence, and psychological preparedness. Although the use of firearms by the Slovenian police is relatively rare, decisions regarding their deployment involve significant legal, ethical, and organizational consequences. The purpose of this study is to examine police officers' preparedness for the use of firearms and their perceptions of the existing training system.

Methods: The study is based on a quantitative survey conducted among police officers working in operational units across Slovenia. A total of 359 valid questionnaires were collected and analyzed. In addition, official police statistics on the use of firearms between 2014 and 2024 were examined to provide a broader contextual framework.

Results: The results indicate that police officers generally assess their knowledge of the legal framework governing firearm use as high and perceive the legislation as largely clear. However, a substantial proportion of respondents express doubts regarding decision-making in stressful and unpredictable situations. While most officers participate regularly in firearms training, many consider the frequency and practical orientation of such training insufficient, particularly with regard to scenario-based exercises and decision-making under stress.

Conclusions: The findings highlight a gap between formal knowledge and perceived operational readiness, suggesting the need for more frequent, realistic, and simulation-based training approaches. From an organizational perspective, continuous and practice-oriented training represents a key factor in ensuring lawful, safe, and effective use of firearms in police work.

Keywords: Policing, Use of force, Firearms, Police training, Decision-making, Survey research

1 Introduction

Contemporary policing is increasingly shaped by social change, technological development, and rising public expectations regarding safety and accountability (Staller et al., 2017; Donner & Popovich, 2019). Police officers are more frequently confronted with complex and potentially dangerous situations that may require the use of coercive measures, including firearms as the most severe option.

Police officers employ a range of coercive measures in the performance of their duties, from the use of physical force to the deployment of firearms as the most severe and last-resort option. The use of firearms is permitted only in situations where no other means are available to protect human life. Although advances in technology and tactical approaches have influenced policing practices, the fundamental principle remains that firearms should be used only

when absolutely necessary.

Despite the existence of a comprehensive legal framework, modern equipment, and standardized procedures, police officers are not always optimally prepared for the complexity and rapid dynamics of real-life operational situations. The reasons for this may be found in limited opportunities for practical training, insufficient psychological preparation, and a lack of modern, scenario-based approaches to crisis management. These challenges highlight the importance of continuous organizational learning and systematic training development within police institutions.

The Slovenian legal framework governing police powers requires that police actions be conducted in accordance with the constitution, statutory law, and respect for human rights. At the same time, contemporary societal developments, particularly the growing emphasis on individual rights and accountability, impose additional constraints on the use of coercive measures. This dual expectation creates a demanding operational environment in which police officers must make rapid decisions with potentially far-reaching legal and social consequences.

The use of firearms represents one of the most sensitive aspects of police work. Decisions to use firearms carry serious legal, ethical, and organizational implications, affecting public trust in law enforcement, the safety of communities, and the physical and psychological well-being of all individuals involved. For this reason, police officers must possess not only sound legal knowledge and technical skills but also the ability to make appropriate decisions under stress, uncertainty, and time pressure. In the Slovenian context, the use of firearms by the police is extremely rare. Official statistics indicate a low and declining number of firearm-related incidents over the past decade, with no recorded cases of firearm use or warning shots in the most recent years. This low-frequency context is particularly important, as it limits opportunities for experiential learning and places greater emphasis on training as the primary mechanism for maintaining operational readiness.

Organizational capacity for lawful and effective use of coercive measures largely depends on the quality of police training systems. Analyses of the use of force provide valuable insights into existing shortcomings and support the development of improved training programs and operational guidelines. Previous studies emphasize that systematic analysis of use-of-force incidents, combined with empirical data on officers' experiences and perceptions, represents a crucial foundation for evidence-based improvements in police training and organizational practice.

In Slovenia, police firearms training is formally regulated and consists of initial education and regular in-service training. Basic competencies are acquired through formal education, covering legal knowledge, technical firearm handling, and fundamental tactical procedures. Continued training includes periodic shooting exercises and assessments of professional and psychophysical readi-

ness. However, international research suggests that formal knowledge and routine training alone may not be sufficient to ensure confidence and effective decision-making in high-stress situations.

Empirical studies conducted in various countries indicate that a gap often exists between theoretical knowledge and perceived readiness to use firearms in real operational contexts. Research highlights the importance of scenario-based training, stress exposure, and psychological preparation as key factors influencing decision-making under pressure. These findings suggest that challenges related to firearms training are not limited to individual police systems but represent a broader organizational issue within modern policing. Previous research highlights that decision-making in use-of-force situations is influenced by a combination of legal knowledge, training, experience, and situational factors, particularly stress and uncertainty (Andersen et al., 2015; Nieuwenhuys et al., 2015). Studies further suggest that traditional training approaches may not be sufficient to prepare officers for complex real-world scenarios, emphasizing the importance of scenario-based and simulation-based training methods (Andersen et al., 2018).

Against this background, the present study aims to examine police officers' preparedness for the use of firearms in Slovenia, with particular emphasis on training frequency, perceived adequacy of training content, and confidence in decision-making. By combining survey data with official statistics on firearm use, the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between training, perceived preparedness, and decision-making in a low-frequency, high-risk policing environment.

2 Theoretical Background

The use of force represents one of the most critical and scrutinized aspects of modern policing.

The use of force in policing has been widely examined in the context of legal frameworks, decision-making processes, and organizational practices. Firearms represent the most severe form of coercive force and are generally considered a measure of last resort, justified only when necessary to protect human life (Staller et al., 2017; Donner & Popovich, 2019). This principle is embedded in both national legislation and international policing standards.

Existing research on police use of force consistently highlights the complexity of decision-making in high-risk situations. Police officers are often required to make rapid judgments under conditions of uncertainty, time pressure, and stress (Andersen et al., 2015). In such environments, cognitive processing may be affected by stress responses, which can influence perception, attention, and decision accuracy (Nieuwenhuys et al., 2015). As a result, the ability to make appropriate decisions is not solely dependent on

legal knowledge but also on situational awareness, experience, and psychological preparedness. This highlights the importance of aligning training practices with organizational goals and operational demands.

A growing body of literature emphasizes the importance of training in shaping police officers' decision-making capabilities. Traditional firearms training has often focused on technical proficiency and shooting accuracy. However, recent studies suggest that such approaches may be insufficient for preparing officers for real-life operational situations (Staller et al., 2017). Instead, scenario-based and simulation-based training methods have been identified as more effective in developing decision-making skills under realistic conditions (Andersen et al., 2018).

Another important aspect concerns the relationship between formal knowledge and perceived preparedness. Empirical research indicates that police officers may demonstrate high levels of theoretical knowledge while simultaneously experiencing uncertainty in practical decision-making contexts (Donner & Popovich, 2019). This gap is particularly relevant in situations involving the use of firearms, where decisions have potentially irreversible consequences.

The organizational dimension of police training has also received increasing attention. Police organizations are expected to ensure that training systems are aligned with operational realities and evolving societal expectations. This includes not only technical and legal training but also the development of competencies related to stress management, communication, and ethical decision-making (Kalesnykas & Muniz, 2017). From this perspective, training represents a key mechanism of organizational learning and adaptation.

A specific challenge arises in contexts where the use of firearms is relatively rare. In such environments, police officers have limited opportunities to gain direct operational experience, which increases the importance of training as a substitute for experiential learning. Studies suggest that low-frequency but high-risk events require particularly intensive and realistic training approaches in order to maintain operational readiness and decision-making confidence (Andersen et al., 2015).

Overall, the literature indicates that effective police firearms training must go beyond technical skills and incorporate elements of decision-making under stress, scenario-based learning, and continuous organizational adaptation. These insights provide the theoretical foundation for examining police officers' perceptions of preparedness, training adequacy, and decision-making in the present study.

3 Methods

The study combines a theoretical and an empirical component. The theoretical part is based on a review of

relevant legislation and professional literature concerning the use of coercive measures in policing, with particular emphasis on the use of firearms. In addition, training curricula and competency frameworks related to firearms use were examined in order to assess the formal structure of police firearms training in Slovenia.

The empirical part of the study comprises two complementary analyses. First, a quantitative analysis of official police statistics on the use of firearms was conducted in order to examine trends and frequency patterns over time. Second, a survey-based study was carried out to assess police officers' perceptions of their preparedness for the use of firearms, the adequacy of training, and confidence in decision-making.

3.1 Analysis of Official Police Statistics

Official police data on the use of firearms were analyzed for the period from 2014 to 2024. The analysis included cases of warning shots as well as the use of firearms against persons. The purpose of this analysis was to provide a contextual overview of the frequency and distribution of firearm use within the Slovenian police and to support the interpretation of survey findings. Descriptive statistical methods were used to identify trends and differences across time and organizational units. The research design was selected in order to capture both objective indicators (official statistics on firearm use) and subjective perceptions of police officers. This combined approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between training, experience, and perceived preparedness.

3.2 Survey Design and Sample

The second part of the empirical research was based on a quantitative survey conducted among police officers working in operational units across Slovenia. The target population consisted of police officers employed at all 99 police stations who perform field duties.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing 17 questions. The questionnaire was distributed electronically via the internal police intranet by the Police Academy of the General Police Directorate. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

A total of 875 police officers accessed the survey. Of these, 500 respondents did not complete the questionnaire or provided only partial responses. The final sample consisted of 359 fully completed and valid questionnaires, which were included in the analysis. Although the sample provides valuable insights, it should be noted that participation was voluntary, which may introduce self-selection bias. Officers who chose to participate may differ from those who did not, particularly in terms of motivation, experience, or attitudes toward training. The study adhered to

basic ethical principles, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and the protection of personal data. The sample includes officers from different organizational units, which allows for a broader perspective on training and preparedness across the police organization.

3.3 Measures and Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed to capture several key dimensions, including knowledge of legal regulations, perceptions of training adequacy, self-assessed preparedness for firearm use, and decision-making in hypothetical scenarios. Most items were formulated as closed-ended questions, allowing for quantitative analysis, while some questions included scenario-based elements to better reflect real-life operational situations.

The development of the questionnaire was based on a review of relevant literature and existing research on police use of force and training. Particular attention was given to ensuring clarity and relevance of questions for the target population.

Most attitudinal items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement. Additional questions focused on the frequency of training participation and involvement in incidents involving the use of firearms.

3.4 Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Results are presented using tables and graphical representations to facilitate interpretation and

comparison. The combination of survey data and official statistics enabled a more comprehensive assessment of police firearms use and training. The analysis was conducted with the aim of identifying general patterns and relationships within the data, rather than establishing causal conclusions. The results should therefore be interpreted within the limitations of descriptive statistical analysis. All analyses were performed using standard statistical procedures appropriate for descriptive research.

4 Results

This section presents the key findings of the empirical analysis, combining official statistics on firearm use with survey data on police officers' perceptions of training and preparedness.

4.1 Results of the Survey Among Police Officers

4.1.1 Sample Characteristics

The age structure of the surveyed police officers is relatively homogeneous, with a predominance of middle-aged and older respondents. The average age of participants was 43.3 years. The largest proportion of respondents (45%) belonged to the age group between 41 and 50 years, followed by officers aged between 31 and 40 years. The youngest respondent was 21 years old and the oldest was 59 years old. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents by length of service.

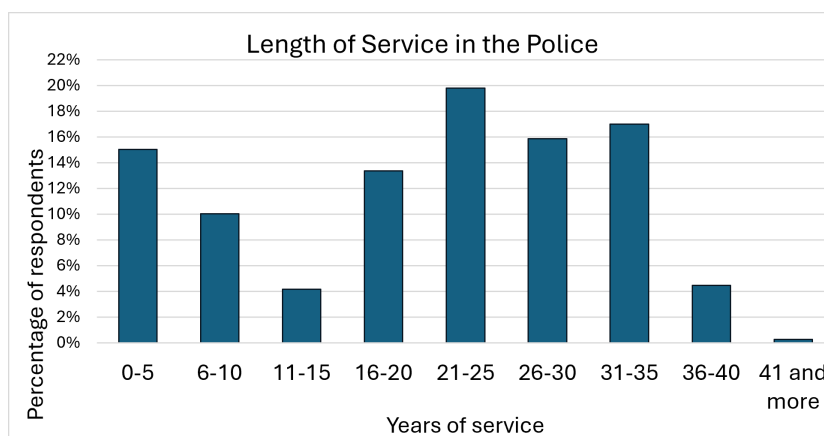


Figure 1: Length of Service in the Police

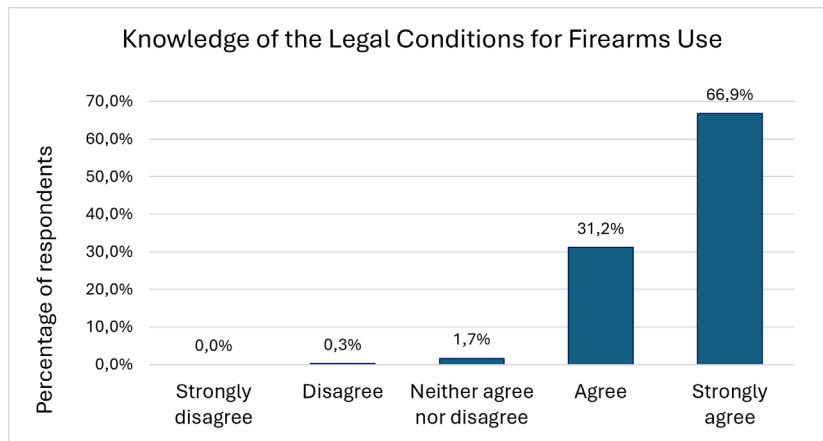


Figure 2: Knowledge of the Legal Conditions for Firearms Use

An analysis of years of service indicates that the majority of respondents have extensive professional experience in policing. The average length of service was 24.5 years. The largest group of respondents (20%) reported between 21 and 25 years of service, while a substantial proportion had more than 30 years of experience. Only a small share of respondents reported fewer than five years of service.

Regarding organizational affiliation, the largest proportion of respondents were employed in the Ljubljana Police Directorate (35.4%), followed by the Maribor Police Directorate (23.8%). Together, these two directorates accounted for more than half of the total sample. The lowest response rates were recorded in the Kranj and Nova Gorica Police Directorates.

4.1.2 Knowledge of Legal Conditions for Firearm Use

Survey results indicate a very high level of self-assessed knowledge regarding the legal conditions for the use of firearms, with almost all respondents evaluating their knowledge positively. As shown in Figure 2, a high level of self-assessed knowledge is observed among respondents.

Similarly, perceptions of the clarity of the legal framework governing firearm use were predominantly positive. A total of 46.2% of respondents agreed that the legal framework is clear and unambiguous, while 35.9% completely agreed. In total, 82.2% of respondents evaluated the legal framework positively. While respondents reported relatively high levels of knowledge of legal regulations, their confidence in decision-making under stress was notably lower, indicating a gap between formal knowledge and practical readiness.

Neutral responses were reported by 12.8% of respondents, suggesting that some officers may perceive certain ambiguities in the application of legal provisions in practice. Negative evaluations were relatively rare, with only 5.0% of respondents expressing disagreement. The standard deviation (0.87) indicates greater variability in responses compared to self-assessed knowledge of legal conditions. Figure 3 shows that while most respondents positively evaluate the clarity of the legal framework, a smaller proportion expresses neutrality or disagreement.

These findings suggest that while police officers generally perceive the legal framework as clear and understandable, a smaller but relevant proportion identifies potential uncertainties in practical application.

4.1.3 Firearms Training

Most respondents reported participating in firearms training at least twice per year, which corresponds to formal training requirements. However, despite relatively frequent participation, a majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the frequency of training.

Perceptions of training quality were more divided, indicating variability in how training adequacy is experienced across respondents.

The results reveal noticeable variation in annual training frequency. The largest proportion of respondents (37.9%) reported participating in firearms training twice per year. A further 27.3% indicated participation four times or more per year, while 22.8% reported three training sessions annually. As shown in Figure 4, most respondents participate in firearms training at least twice per year, although a smaller proportion attend training only once per year or not at all.

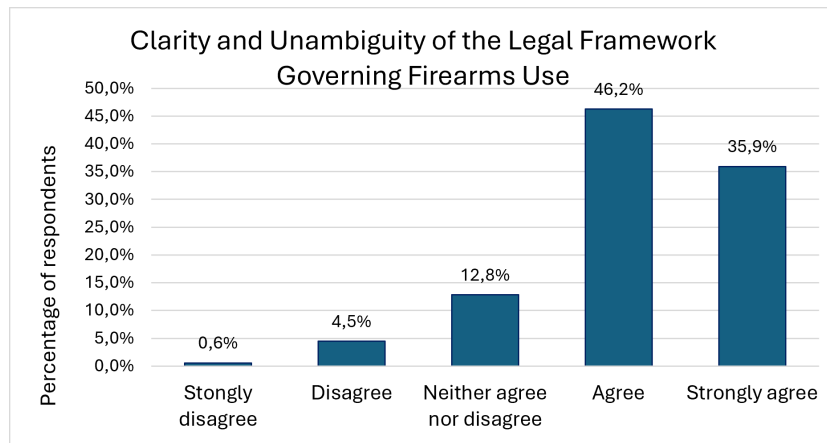


Figure 3: Clarity and Unambiguity of the Legal Framework Governing Firearms Use

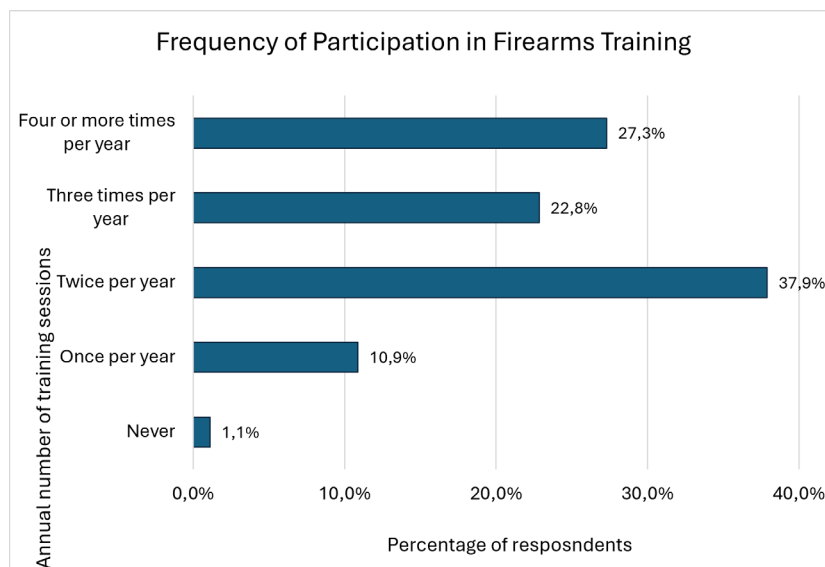


Figure 4: Frequency of Participation in Firearms Training

A smaller proportion of respondents (10.9 %) reported attending training only once per year, and 1.1% indicated that they do not participate in firearms training at all. Overall, 88.0 % of respondents reported participating in training at least twice per year, which corresponds to the formally prescribed training structure. The findings indicate that firearms training is perceived as insufficiently frequent, with a considerable proportion of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the current training system.

However, despite relatively frequent participation, perceptions of training adequacy were more critical. When asked whether police officers receive firearms training often enough, 71.0% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Neutral responses were reported by 16.7% of respondents, while only 12.3% ex-

pressed agreement or strong agreement. As shown in Figure 5, the majority of respondents are dissatisfied with the frequency of firearms training.

These results indicate a perceived discrepancy between formal training requirements and officers' expectations regarding training frequency and relevance.

Regarding the quality and adequacy of firearms training, responses were more divided. A total of 42.0% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that firearms training is of adequate quality. At the same time, 27.3 % selected a neutral response, and 30.7% expressed dissatisfaction with training quality and adequacy. Figure 6 indicates that while a considerable proportion of respondents evaluate training positively, a substantial share expresses neutrality or dissatisfaction.

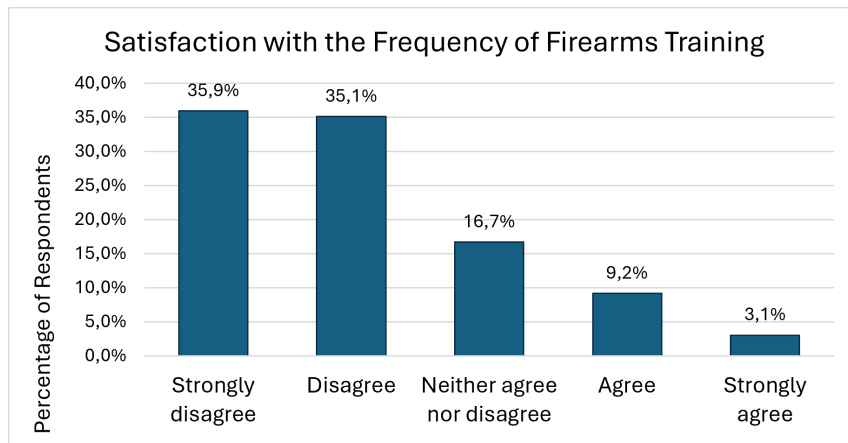


Figure 5: Satisfaction with the Frequency of Firearms Training

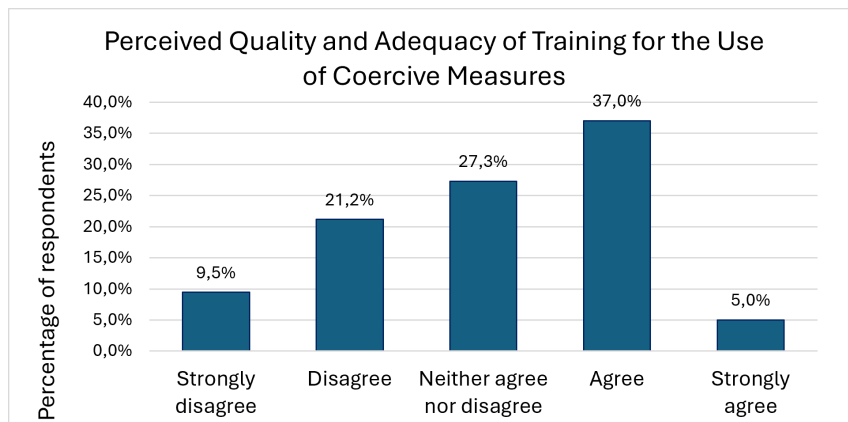


Figure 6: Perceived Quality and Adequacy of Training for the Use of Coercive Measures

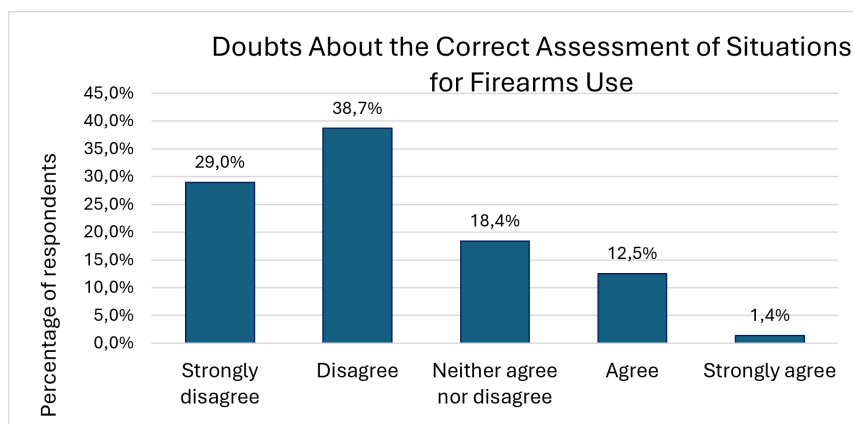


Figure 7: Doubts About the Correct Assessment of Situations for Firearms Use

The dispersion of responses suggests that while a substantial proportion of officers evaluate training positively, a significant share perceives room for improvement, particularly in relation to practical relevance.

4.1.4 Self-Perceived Preparedness and Confidence in Decision-Making

Figure 7 indicates that while most respondents report no doubts, a smaller but important share has experienced uncertainty in decision-making.

Most respondents reported confidence in their ability to assess situations involving potential firearm use, although a smaller but important proportion expressed uncertainty.

In contrast, 13.9% of respondents reported having experienced doubts when assessing whether firearm use was justified. Although this represents a minority of respondents, the presence of such doubts is notable given the potential consequences of firearm-related decisions.

Overall, the results suggest that while the majority of police officers express confidence in their judgment, a non-negligible proportion experience uncertainty in complex or stressful situations.

4.1.5 Operational Experience with Firearm Use

The majority of respondents (71%) reported that they had never been involved in an incident involving the use of firearms in the performance of their duties. This finding indicates that direct experience with firearm use is relatively rare among Slovenian police officers.

At the same time, 29% of respondents reported having been involved in incidents involving warning shots or the use of firearms against a person. A very small proportion of respondents (1.5%) indicated that such experiences occur frequently or very frequently, which may be related to specific assignments or organizational units.

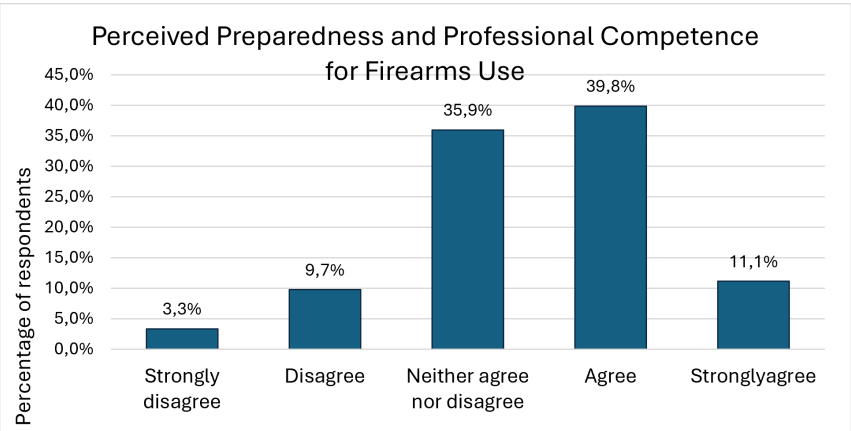


Figure 8: Perceived Preparedness and Professional Competence for Firearms Use

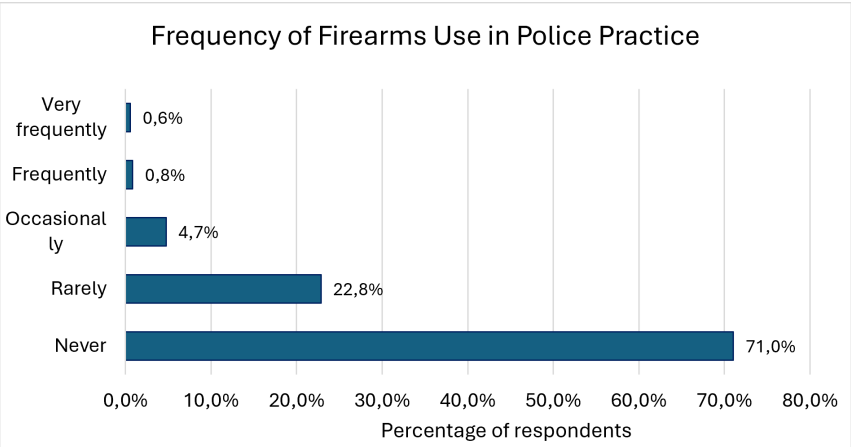


Figure 9: Frequency of Firearms Use in Police Practice

Figure 9 demonstrates that direct experience with firearms use is rare among respondents, with only a very small proportion reporting frequent involvement.

These results confirm that while firearm use is rare in general, a smaller group of officers is exposed to such situations more regularly.

4.2 Use of Firearms in Police Practice:
Official Statistics

The analysis of official police statistics shows that the use of firearms in Slovenia is extremely rare and has gen-

erally declined over the observed period. In recent years, no cases of firearm use or warning shots were recorded, confirming a low-frequency operational context.

Geographically, firearm use occurred most frequently in the Maribor Police Directorate, followed by the Celje Police Directorate, with fewer incidents recorded in other regions. Over the ten-year period analyzed, a total of 18 warning shots and 18 cases of firearm use against persons were recorded.

Comparative data from selected European countries indicate that Slovenia has one of the lowest population-adjusted rates of firearm use among the countries examined.

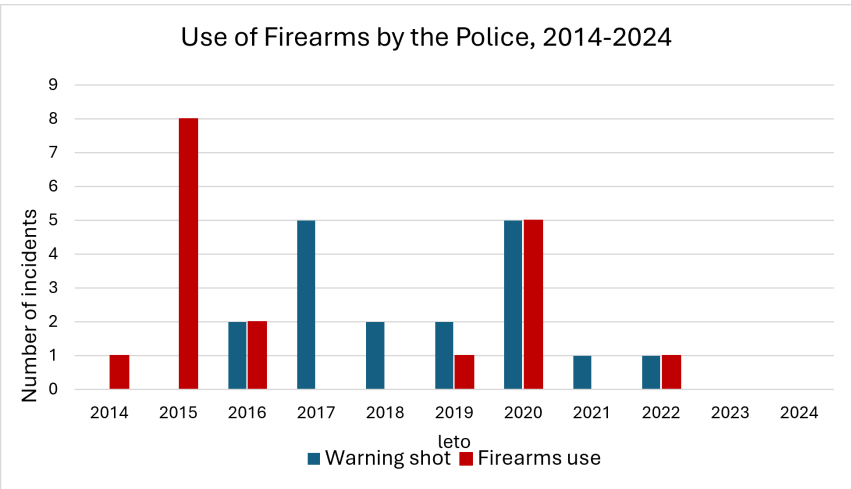


Figure 10: Use of Firearms by the Police, 2014–2024
Source: Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia, 2015–2025.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Firearms Use Against Persons in Selected European Countries (Source: Statistics on firearms use by country)

Country	Year	Cases of firearms use against persons	Population (million)	Rate per million inhabitants
Slovenia	2024	0	2.1	0.00
Switzerland	2024	3	8.9	0.34
Germany	2022	60	84.4	0.71
France	2022	50	67.5	0.74
Croatia	2024	3	3.9	0.77
Austria	2019	13	9.1	1.43
Norway	2024	9	5.5	1.64

Source: KKPKS, 2025; Lindin, 2025; Monroy, 2023; MUP, n.d.; Police nationale, 2022; Winkler, 2020.

When adjusted for population size, Slovenia recorded zero cases per million inhabitants in 2024, which is among the lowest reported rates. These data confirm that firearm use in Slovenia is exceptionally rare in comparative perspective. Overall, the results highlight a discrepancy between formal training structures and perceived operational preparedness, particularly in situations involving decision-making under stress.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into police officers' perceptions of firearms training, preparedness, and decision-making in the Slovenian context. The results highlight several key patterns that are consistent with, but also extend, existing research on police use of force and training.

First, the findings indicate a high level of self-assessed knowledge of legal regulations governing firearm use. This is in line with previous research suggesting that formal knowledge is generally well developed among police officers (Donner & Popovich, 2019). However, the results also reveal a discrepancy between legal knowledge and confidence in decision-making under stress. This finding supports the argument that theoretical knowledge alone is not sufficient for effective performance in high-risk situations, where cognitive processing may be influenced by stress and uncertainty (Nieuwenhuys et al., 2015).

Second, the results indicate that firearms training is perceived as insufficient, particularly in terms of frequency and practical relevance. Although most respondents reported participating in training in accordance with formal requirements, a majority expressed dissatisfaction with the current training system. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing that traditional training approaches may not adequately prepare officers for real-life operational situations (Staller et al., 2017). The importance of scenario-based and simulation-based training has been highlighted in the literature as a key factor in improving decision-making under realistic conditions (Andersen et al., 2018).

Third, the findings confirm that direct operational experience with firearm use is rare among Slovenian police officers. This is further supported by the analysis of official statistics, which show a low and declining frequency of firearm use. This low-frequency context presents a specific challenge, as it limits opportunities for experiential learning. As noted in previous research, in such environments training plays a crucial role as a substitute for direct experience (Andersen et al., 2015).

The combination of these findings suggests a structural gap between formal training systems and perceived operational preparedness. While legal frameworks and formal training requirements are in place, their practical effec-

tiveness in preparing officers for complex and high-risk situations appears to be limited. This gap is particularly relevant in situations involving firearms, where decisions must be made rapidly and have potentially irreversible consequences.

From an organizational perspective, the findings highlight the importance of aligning training practices with operational realities. Police organizations must ensure that training systems are not only compliant with formal requirements but also effective in developing decision-making skills under realistic conditions. This includes greater emphasis on scenario-based training, stress exposure, and continuous skill development.

At the same time, the results should be interpreted with caution. The study is based on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or subjective perception. In addition, the analysis is primarily descriptive and does not allow for causal conclusions. The voluntary nature of participation may also introduce self-selection bias, as respondents who chose to participate may differ from those who did not.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the relationship between training, experience, and perceived preparedness in a low-frequency, high-risk policing environment. The findings contribute to a better understanding of the challenges associated with police firearms training and offer a basis for further research and organizational improvement.

6 Conclusion

This study examined police officers' perceptions of firearms training, preparedness, and decision-making in the Slovenian context, combining survey data with an analysis of official statistics on firearm use. The findings confirm that the use of firearms in Slovenia is extremely rare, creating a low-frequency operational environment in which direct experience is limited.

Despite a high level of self-assessed knowledge of legal regulations, the results reveal a gap between formal knowledge and confidence in decision-making under stress. In addition, although training is conducted regularly, a substantial proportion of respondents perceive it as insufficient, particularly in terms of frequency and practical relevance.

These findings highlight the importance of aligning training practices with operational demands. In low-frequency, high-risk contexts, training plays a critical role in maintaining preparedness and supporting effective decision-making. Greater emphasis on scenario-based training and realistic simulations may contribute to improving officers' confidence and performance in complex situations.

Beyond the policing context, the findings of this study highlight a broader organizational challenge related to pre-

paring employees for rare but high-risk decision-making situations. Similar challenges can be observed in other professional environments, such as healthcare, aviation, emergency management, and critical infrastructure systems, where employees must make rapid decisions under stress despite limited direct experience. From an organizational perspective, the results emphasize the importance of continuous training, scenario-based learning, and organizational preparedness in maintaining professional competence and decision-making confidence in low-frequency, high-consequence environments.

Although the study is limited by the use of self-reported data and a descriptive research design, it provides valuable insights into the relationship between training, experience, and perceived preparedness. The results offer a basis for further research and may support the development of more effective training approaches within police organizations.

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