



Comparative Analysis of the Physical Education Systems in Police Forces around the World: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Special Physical Training (SPT) constitutes a fundamental component of police professional development worldwide. Implementation methods vary across legal frameworks, cultural contexts, and the unique security challenges each nation faces. This review aims to synthesize existing descriptions of SPT to enhance understanding of its operational mechanisms. Accordingly, the paper presents a comparative analysis of SPT models employed by police forces in Europe and other regions, with particular attention to martial arts training, physical and psychological conditioning, program structure, and legal and ethical standards. A discernible trend toward increased professionalization, humanization, and technological integration in police training aligns with evolving international standards on the use of force. The review underscores the necessity for ongoing improvement, systematic institutional evaluation, and international collaboration in the domain of police Special Physical Training. Practical recommendations for advancing training practices are also provided.

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Introduction

The increasing complexity of contemporary policing necessitates a comprehensive approach to officer readiness that integrates theoretical knowledge, psychological resilience, and advanced physical preparedness. In this context, Special Physical Training (SPT) is a core element of police education and professional development. For the purposes of this paper, Special Physical Training is employed as an umbrella term encompassing various national models of police physical training, including the concept of Special Physical Education as developed in Serbia and neighbouring regions. SPT is conceptualized as an integrated system designed to develop motor and

functional abilities, tactical competencies, stress regulation, and the lawful and proportionate application of force in both simulated and real operational environments ([Milošević & Milošević, 2014](#); [Dimitrijević et al., 2014](#)).

While the significance of physical fitness in policing is well established, contemporary approaches to SPT extend beyond physical conditioning to include cognitive, psychological, and ethical dimensions. Empirical evidence demonstrates that physically prepared officers exhibit enhanced decision-making under stress, increased resilience, and a lower risk of injury ([Boyce et al., 2009](#); [Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#)).

Despite its global significance, the conceptualization and implementation of SPT differ markedly across national contexts. These differences are shaped by legal frameworks, cultural norms, institutional traditions, and security priorities. For instance, certain countries incorporate traditional martial arts into their training curricula, whereas others emphasize psychological resilience and crisis communication. As a result, a diverse array of terms and training models is employed internationally (e.g., defensive tactics, use-of-force training, tactical conditioning), often denoting functionally similar but conceptually distinct approaches ([Terrill et al., 2012](#); [Amanović et al., 2015b](#); [Lockie et al., 2019](#)). Cultural adaptations are particularly evident in the selection of martial arts: East Asian systems frequently utilize traditional forms such as judo or kung fu (e.g., police kung fu), while European systems may prefer judo, police jujutsu, Krav Maga, or defensive tactics. Although extensive literature exists on individual national models of police physical training, integrative international analyses that concurrently address the physical, psychological, legal, and ethical dimensions within a unified analytical framework remain scarce. Such comparative studies are essential for identifying systemic strengths, universal trends, and transferable best practices in modern policing. To address this gap, the present narrative review is structured around three central research questions:

1. How are SPT programs structured internationally, and which defensive tactics or martial arts are most prevalent?
2. In what ways do various police forces incorporate psychological conditioning and scenario-based training into their curricula?
3. How do regional legal and ethical frameworks influence the development of police training programs?

By integrating these diverse areas, this study offers a comprehensive global overview of the literature and delivers actionable insights for the modernization and evaluation of police training frameworks.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative comparative narrative review of Special Physical Training (SPT) systems across different national policing contexts. The narrative review approach was chosen because it enables the integration of diverse types of sources and supports the identification of thematic patterns and conceptual variations across different institutional environments ([Greenhalgh et al., 2018](#)).

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major scientific databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Additionally, the search encompassed institutional publications and official documents from international organizations (e.g., UNODC, CEPOL, EUROPOL) and national police academies. The following keywords and their Boolean combinations were utilized in English: ("police training" OR "law enforcement training systems") AND ("use of force training" OR "defensive tactics" OR "Special Physical Training" OR "martial arts in policing" OR "stress training police"). The search covered publications from 2000 to 2025, along with carefully selected earlier sources of high theoretical relevance.

Selection Criteria

The retrieved literature was screened based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and methodological rigor.

Inclusion Criteria: Studies and reports were included in this review if they met the following criteria: 1) explicitly addressed systems of Special Physical Training or police use-of-force training; 2) provided detailed descriptions of training structure, duration, content, dominant skills (e.g., martial arts systems), or objectives; 3) originated from peer-reviewed journals, official governmental/institutional reports, or relevant professional publications; 4) offered insight into at least one of the defined analytical dimensions, such as psychological conditioning or legal-ethical frameworks.

Exclusion Criteria: Sources were excluded if they: 1) lacked a clear methodological foundation; 2) contained insufficient, anecdotal, or unverifiable data; 3) focused purely on civilian martial arts without application to law enforcement; 4) were not available in full text or were published in languages other than English (unless officially translated institutional data was available).

The initial database search and screening yielded 245 records. After evaluating titles and abstracts, 85 sources were selected for full-text assessment. Applying the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria resulted in the exclusion of 29 sources (primarily due to lack of verified data or a focus on civilian/general fitness rather than law enforcement training). Ultimately, 56 primary sources, peer-reviewed articles, and institutional reports directly focused on police training systems were selected for the final comparative synthesis, supported by 3 additional references addressing general methodological and psychological frameworks.

Data Extraction and Analytical Dimensions

Data from the included sources were systematically extracted and synthesized using a set of predefined analytical dimensions:

- Structure and duration of training programs (e.g., duration of basic training, estimated volume in hours/credits).
- Types of physical and tactical skills applied.
- Integration of specific martial arts (e.g., Krav Maga, Sambo, Judo, Taiho-Jutsu).
- Psychological conditioning and stress management techniques (e.g., Stress Inoculation Training).
- Legal and ethical frameworks regulating the use of force.

Data presented in the comparative tables (Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3) were systematized based on recurring indicators identified across sources, applying consistent criteria to all global cases representing diverse legal systems and security environments (e.g., Western Europe, USA, Russia, China, Japan, and the Balkans).

Data on training volumes (expressed in hours, weeks, or ECTS credits) across different national police forces were extracted from the official curricula of national police academies, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed case studies cited in this review. Due to profound structural differences in police education systems and varying degrees of institutional transparency worldwide, these metrics are not always directly comparable. Consequently, these figures should be interpreted as representative institutional baselines rather than standardized global equivalents.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. A critical consideration in this review is the heterogeneous nature of the retrieved sources. The analyzed literature consists of both official institutional curricula and reports, as well as independent academic studies. While official government and academy publications provide direct insights into intended training frameworks, they may present idealized versions of reality. Conversely, peer-reviewed empirical studies offer independent evaluations but are often limited to specific cohorts or regions. This review critically balances these perspectives to minimize institutional bias. Additionally, differences in wording and institutional transparency may influence the interpretation of specific training models. Finally, as a narrative review, the study does not include a formal quantitative synthesis or a quality assessment of individual studies, which may limit the generalizability of the findings.

The application of this analytical framework enables not only a descriptive mapping of existing systems but also their theoretical positioning within a broader conceptual understanding of Special Physical Training.

Theoretical Framework of Special Physical Training

In the context of police training, SPT goes beyond the boundaries of sport or fitness training. It is defined as a systematic, professionally guided educational and training process aimed at developing the psychological, biomechanical, motor, social, functional, and biological characteristics for police officers to act safely, legally, and effectively in daily operations ([Milošević et al., 2005](#); [Amanović et al., 2015a](#); [Milošević & Milošević, 2014](#)).

According to scientific classification, SPT belongs to the field of police sciences and is considered part of the group of specialized police sciences ([Amanović et al., 2017](#); [Banović & Amanović, 2019](#)), although it is also recognized as a component of physical education and sport ([Amanović, 2012](#); [Dopsaj et al., 2007](#)). SPT training is grounded in science, scientific methods, and police practice, and contributes to building personal integrity and professional capabilities of police officers through specially designed educational programs ([Amanović, 2013](#); [Amanović et al., 2015a, 2015b](#); [Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#); [Staller et al., 2021a](#)).

Modern models strive for interdisciplinarity, combining martial arts with mental training, communication skills, legal knowledge, and ethical conduct. Increasing emphasis is placed on realistic scenario simulations as preparation for high-stress situations ([Staller et al., 2021a, 2021b](#); [Koerner & Staller, 2022](#); [Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#); [Andersen et al., 2015](#)). This approach not only improves physical competence but also supports cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation.

Psychological Aspects and Stress

In modern Special Physical Training (SPT) systems across global police forces, the development of psychological resilience has become as critical as the cultivation of motor skills. A primary focus of international training models is stress management and the ability to make sound decisions under extreme pressure. Countries such as the USA, Germany, and the Scandinavian nations utilize Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) a methodological approach that prepares officers for real-world interventions by exposing them to controlled, incremental stress conditions ([U.S. DOJ, 2019a, 2019b](#); [Kleygrewe et al., 2024](#); [Andersen et al., 2016](#)). This approach has proven effective in reducing misjudgment and excessive use of force, leading to its increasing adoption in police academies across Central and Eastern Europe ([Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#); [Staller et al., 2021a](#)). The practical integration of stress inoculation within SPT is not simply an auxiliary psychological tool but a structural necessity for the valid execution of use-of-force. When an officer experiences acute physiological stress (e.g., elevated heart rate, tunnel vision), the cognitive capacity to recall complex martial arts techniques decreases. Therefore, scenario-based SPT must combine high-pressure environments with the execution of gross motor defensive tactics. This ensures that the transition from verbal de-escalation to physical intervention remains legally compliant and effective even under extreme pressure.

A growing body of research emphasizes that psychological preparedness in police physical education goes beyond mere stress exposure. Contemporary training models focus on developing cognitive control, emotional regulation, and situational awareness through attentional control drills and scenario-based simulations that replicate the ambiguity of real-life encounters. The goal is to enhance an officer's capacity to accurately assess threats and inhibit impulsive, maladaptive reactions ([Kleygrewe et al., 2024](#)).

To clarify the psychological and operational dimensions discussed in this review, three key concepts require brief definition:

1. Mental Toughness refers to a psychological edge that enables law enforcement officers to consistently perform at high levels, maintain focus, and cope with extreme stress or adversity during operational duties.
2. Dark Triad is a psychological framework comprising three personality traits narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. In policing literature, examining these subclinical traits is essential for assessing risk behaviors, emotional regulation, and ethical decision-making under pressure.

3. Policing by Social Skills represents a modern operational paradigm that focuses on communication, empathy, emotional intelligence, and de-escalation techniques over physical coercion and positions physical intervention as a last resort.

The integration of physical and mental training in modern police psychology encompasses a range of interconnected concepts that shape officer behavior. Specifically, Mental Toughness serves as a psychological buffer, allowing officers to sustain focus and control under operational duress and preventing panic during physical interventions. Conversely, screening for Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) in research helps understand risks related to emotional regulation, impulsivity, and potential misconduct or excessive use of force. To balance these factors, modern academies promote Policing by Social Skills, a paradigm in which empathy, active listening, and verbal de-escalation are prioritized, and physical SPT is strictly treated as a subordinate, last-resort tool when social compliance fails.

A major advancement in the scientific approach to SPT systems is the recognition of the link between neuromuscular characteristics and cadets' psychological profiles. Recent studies on national security and police students indicate that the mechanical characteristics of handgrip strength specifically the Rate of Force Development (RFD) can serve as objective indicators of psychological constructs ([Milošević et al., 2025](#)).

Furthermore, global trends in police education are increasingly emphasizing the concept of "policing by social skills." In this framework, empathy is viewed not just as a moral trait but as a core operational competency required for de-escalating conflict in high-stress environments ([Bloksgaard & Prieur, 2021](#)). The evaluation of both cognitive and affective empathy is becoming a standard component of selection and training in modern academies, as it directly reduces the likelihood of excessive force and improves professional conduct under pressure ([Inzunza et al., 2022](#); [Milošević et al., 2026](#)).

The integration of psychological skills such as tactical breathing, visualization, and cognitive reframing into physical training enables officers to maintain consistent performance. These global developments indicate a shift toward a holistic model of SPT, in which psychological resilience and emotional intelligence are not merely supplementary but the very foundation of operational readiness in the contemporary policing environment. This integration of stress inoculation training and psychological conditioning varies significantly across the analysed national frameworks. For instance, Anglo-Saxon models (e.g., the USA and the UK) heavily emphasize reality-based, high-stress scenarios to practice operational decision-making. In contrast, many Eastern European systems traditionally prioritize structural and repetitive physical conditioning, though they are increasingly incorporating modern tactical simulation methods to bridge the gap between physical exertion and mental resilience under pressure. Conversely, screening for Dark Triad traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy) in research helps understand risks related to emotional regulation, impulsivity, and potential misconduct or excessive use of force. To balance these factors, modern academies promote Policing by Social Skills, a paradigm in which empathy, active listening, and verbal de-escalation are prioritized, and physical SPT is strictly treated as a subordinate, last-resort tool when social compliance fails.

Martial Arts as the Foundation of Physical Intervention

In most SPT systems (means of physical restraint), martial arts form the foundation of practical training in physical intervention, with a clear emphasis on situational control and minimizing harm to both the officer and the individual subjected to police measures. This approach is grounded in the principles of proportionality, necessity, and legality in the use of force, with the primary objective of establishing control with the least possible level of aggression ([Amanović, 2003](#); [Milošević & Milošević, 2014](#); [Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#)).

Within this context, martial arts are not oriented toward competition or demonstrations of strength, but rather toward the effective resolution of conflicts in real-world, often unpredictable situations. The techniques employed include joint control, takedowns, restraint and handcuffing procedures, and methods for safely overcoming

resistance without causing unnecessary injury. Particular emphasis is placed on the development of motor abilities, coordination, risk assessment, and tactical decision-making under stress.

A comparative overview of martial arts integrated into police training programs across different countries provides valuable insight into regional preferences and cultural influences in the development of SPT systems. The following table (Table 1) illustrates some of the dominant martial arts systems utilized in police training worldwide:

Table 1. Examples of dominant martial arts in police training programs

Region / Country	Dominant Martial Arts	References
Serbia / Balkans	Judo, Jiu-Jitsu, Karate	Milošević & Milošević (2014)
Russia	Sambo, Systema (combat systems)	Volkov et al. (2019)
USA / Western Europe	Defensive tactics, control techniques, Krav Maga, Judo, BJJ	Reaves (2016) ; Cummings (2020)
Japan	Judo, Kendo, Taiho-Jutsu (as part of police code)	Bennett (2015)
China	Sanda, Kung Fu, Chin Na, traditional schools	Burkitt et al., (2003)

Table 1 clearly demonstrates that the selection of martial arts is not arbitrary, but rather reflects deeply rooted cultural traditions, historical development, and institutional priorities of each country. For instance, in the Balkan region and Eastern Europe, judo and jujutsu predominate due to their effectiveness in controlling an opponent through throws, ground techniques, and joint locks, whereas Russia has developed its own systems, such as sambo, which integrates elements from various martial arts adapted to military and police requirements.

In contrast, Western countries increasingly emphasize the so-called “defensive tactics” approach, which integrates elements of multiple martial arts with contemporary safety protocols, conflict psychology, and legal standards governing the use of force. These systems often incorporate team coordination, the use of equipment (e.g., handcuffs, batons, sprays), and scenario-based training designed to simulate real-life field situations ([CEPOL, 2020](#); [Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#)).

In Asian countries such as Japan and China, traditional martial arts play a deeply embedded role not only in training but also in the identity of police forces. In Japan, systems such as Taiho-Jutsu represent a formalized set of techniques specifically adapted to police practice, while in China, techniques such as Chin Na emphasize control through joint manipulation and the efficient use of energy in movement ([Lo, 2001](#); [Japan Police Agency, 2022](#)).

The choice of dominant martial systems reflects the broader professional paradigms of police work. Systems based on judo and jiu-jitsu emphasize control and proportionality of force, while systems such as combat sambo or militarized tactics favor threat neutralization and operational dominance. In this way, martial arts function not only as technical tools but also as a reflection of the institutional philosophy of police action.

These differences indicate that martial arts in police training are not universal but are instead tailored to the social norms, legal frameworks, and security challenges specific to each context. At the same time, contemporary trends point toward increasing internationalization and knowledge exchange, in which different systems are combined and adapted to achieve an optimal balance among effectiveness, safety, and respect for human rights.

In conclusion, martial arts represent an indispensable component of professional police training; however, their true value lies in their capacity to evolve from traditional disciplines into modern tools for conflict management within complex social environments ([Žigić, et al, 2019](#)). The evolution of martial arts integration within SPT reflects a strategic shift from traditional, compliance-based combat styles toward dynamic, law-enforcement-

specific defensive tactics. Traditional martial arts (e.g., traditional Judo or Jiu-Jitsu) often focus either on strict competitive sporting rules or on inflicting maximum physical damage, neither of which aligns with modern policing mandates. Consequently, contemporary SPT frameworks have transitioned toward hybrid control-and-restraint systems. These modern programs deconstruct traditional techniques, filtering out high-risk maneuvers and adapting them into simple, gross-motor skills that prioritize subject control, officer safety, and strict compliance with proportionality and use-of-force legal standards.

The operational acceptance and validity of specific martial arts within contemporary SPT are largely determined by empirical evidence of injury reduction and force effectiveness. Traditional systems that rely on complex, fine-motor joint locks or high-impact strikes have shown low operational validity, as they frequently fail under high-stress conditions and increase injury rates for both officers and subjects. Conversely, modern police practice widely accepts and validates hybrid defensive tactics derived from disciplines like Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ), wrestling, and judo. These systems focus on gross-motor leverage, body positioning, and ground control, providing an empirically supported and legally defensible framework that maximizes subject control while minimizing physical trauma during real-world interventions.

Legal and Ethical Aspects of Training

Modern European models of police training are increasingly aligned with international norms, especially with the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms (1990), The European Code of Police Ethics and TO SERVE AND TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW FOR POLICE AND SECURITY FORCES, which emphasize legality, proportionality, necessity and responsibility in the use of force ([Amanović, 2003](#); [De Rover, 1998](#)). According to international norms, any form of physical force used by a police officer must be:

- Legally justified
- Proportional
- Necessary under the given circumstances

To illustrate their operational relevance, these ethical principles must be directly mapped onto real-life intervention scenarios. For example, the principle of necessity is operationalized when an officer faces a non-compliant but unarmed subject; physical force within SPT is strictly withheld as long as verbal de-escalation tactics remain viable. The principle of proportionality is directly applied in high-stress encounters, such as a physical assault on an officer, where the defensive response must match the level of threat utilizing compliance holds or operational takedowns to neutralize the danger without inflicting unnecessary injury. Finally, the principle of legality ensures that any applied technique is structurally aligned with domestic and international use-of-force continuums, eliminating arbitrary or punitive physical actions in the field.

Countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and Germany integrate these principles into their special police training (SPT) programs through mandatory legal education ([Miller & Blackler, 2005](#)). In addition to meeting legal standards, there is an increasing emphasis on ethics and human rights as essential components of daily training.

The integration of legal-ethical standards into SPT goes beyond theoretical classroom instruction; it requires operationalization within tactical modules. International human rights standards specifically the core principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality must serve as the absolute boundary for any physical intervention. In modern SPT, this is achieved by legally benchmarking every defensive tactic. Training scenarios are designed so that an officer's physical response must dynamically shift or de-escalate the moment a subject complies. By embedding these legal thresholds directly into scenario-based muscle memory, academies ensure that physical force is never treated as an isolated skill, but rather as a strictly regulated legal instrument.

Comparative Analysis of Special Physical Training Systems

Based on the previously elaborated theoretical framework, the following section presents a comparative analysis of selected national systems to identify structural patterns, differences, and converging trends in the development of Special Physical Training (SPT). The comparative analysis of SPT systems across countries reveals pronounced heterogeneity in approaches, extending beyond mere differences in technique selection or training organization. The observed variations reflect deeper structural determinants, including legal frameworks, institutional capacities, security priorities, and dominant policing professional paradigms.

Structural Frameworks and Tactical Integration in Global SPT

It is essential to examine how training durations, organizational structures, and specific martial arts systems are integrated across global police forces. The analysis of the temporal dimension of professional training indicates significant variation in both the extent and intensity of Special Physical Training programs. While Western European and North American models, in line with a pragmatic approach, often favor condensed, high-intensity initial training programs lasting from six to twelve months, systems with a more pronounced military and academic tradition such as those in the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China integrate SPT into long-term educational cycles lasting four to five years. This distinction directly influences the level of motor automatization and psychophysical adaptation. Longer-duration models enable gradual and deeper integration of tactical skills. In contrast, shorter training cycles require more rigorous systems of periodic assessment and continuous professional development.

In contrast, systems with a more pronounced militarized or traditional legacy, such as those in Russia and China, emphasize physical endurance, discipline, and combat effectiveness. In these contexts, SPT is often structured as an extension of military training models, focusing on collective coordination, hierarchical organization, and readiness for high-intensity operational environments. While this approach may ensure a high level of operational readiness in crisis situations, its limitations include limited integration of psychological and communication components, as well as the potential for excessive use of force due to insufficient normative modulation ([Gao, 2011](#)).

Mediterranean and Middle Eastern models are characterized by a functional orientation of training, with an emphasis on applicability in real operational conditions. These systems often combine elements of military and police approaches, with a significant role assigned to martial arts and high-intensity training. While this approach enhances operational effectiveness, its limitations are evident in underdeveloped mechanisms of legal-ethical reflection and standardization, which may affect the consistency in the application of force ([Grossman & Christensen, 2007](#); [Gül, 2007](#); [Rodríguez López, 2008](#); [Renden et al., 2015](#)).

These findings indicate that differences in SPT models are not determined solely by operational requirements but are also shaped by broader institutional, cultural, and legal frameworks that influence how the use of force and officer preparedness are conceptualized.

The following table (Table 2) presents a comparative overview of public security models in selected countries, highlighting their respective martial arts systems, training emphases, and structural characteristics.

Table 2. Comparative Overview of Special Physical Training Models

Country	Duration of Basic Training	Est. PE/DT Volume (Hours/Credits)	Dominant Skills / System	References
USA	~21 weeks (approx. 840 hours)	~70 hours Defensive Tactics + ~50 hours Fitness	Integrated Defensive Tactics (Control & Restraint, PPCT, hybrid law enforcement systems)	Reaves (2016)

Germany	2.5 – 3 years (Bachelor degree)	Integrated semester modules (High volume)	Ju-Jitsu (Official system), EKA (Baton)	Staller et al. (2021a)
Norway	3 years (180 ECTS)	~26 ECTS (Arrest techniques & Tactics modules)	Arrest Techniques, Communication- first approach	Lagestad (2014)
Serbia	~1 year (Vocational training)	~240 classes (Special Physical Training)	Judo, Karate, Ju-Jitsu mix (SFO)	Milošević & Milošević (2014)
Russia	5 years (University) or 6 months (Initial)	High frequency (Sport & Combat Sambo focus)	Combat Sambo	Volkov et al. (2019)
China	4 years (University - PPSUC) or ~6 months (Basic)	>144 hours (Curriculum req.) + Daily drills	Sanda (Kickboxing), Qin Na (Joint locks)	Burkitt et al. (2003)
Japan	6 – 10 months (Education dependent)	Daily practice (~1h/day); Total >200h	Taiho-Jitsu, Judo, Kendo	Bennett (2015)
UK (Eng & Wales)	18 – 22 weeks (Initial learning phase)	~60 hours (Public & Personal Safety Training - PPST)	PPST (Control & Restraint), SPEAR System	Cummings (2020)
France	12 months (Police Academy)	~44 hours TSI (Techniques) + Physical Prep	Operational Defensive Tactics (Boxe Professionnelle, Savate, and specialized intervention techniques)	Cour des comptes (2022)
Israel	~7 months (Basic Recruit Course - Shaham)	Integrated / Intensive (Krav Maga focus)	Krav Maga (Contact combat)	Cohen & Klieman (2018)

Table 2 provides insight into how different states and regions adapt their Special Physical Training (SPT) programs to reflect their respective national security cultures. The comparison highlights distinct training philosophies, ranging from militarized, endurance-oriented models to legally constrained, ethically grounded approaches, with direct implications for operational behavior. The data presented in the table represent approximations based on publicly available institutional sources and literature. Direct comparisons should be interpreted cautiously due to differences in the structure of education, terminology, and level of institutional transparency between countries.

Psychological Conditioning and Scenario-Based Training

Beyond structural mechanics and martial arts integration, the modern policing environment demands a profound focus on officers' psychological readiness. Despite these differences, the analysis indicates the presence of certain common elements of SPT globally. In particular, scenario-based training and psychological preparation are becoming increasingly prevalent across most systems, regardless of their traditional orientations. However, this convergence remains partial and is often contingent on available resources and institutional support, resulting in uneven implementation quality.

The United States represents a specific hybrid model in which high standards of physical and tactical training coexist with a strong normative framework regulating the use of force. However, the decentralized structure of the policing system leads to significant variation across jurisdictions, complicating both standardization and the evaluation of training quality. This model demonstrates a high degree of innovation, particularly in the implementation of scenario-based and technology-supported training, yet it is also subject to criticism for inconsistent implementation and limited empirical evidence on the long-term effects of different approaches ([Kennedy, 2010](#); [Stoughton, 2016](#); [Westmarland, 2005](#)). Countries in the Balkans and the broader Southeast European region occupy a transitional position, where traditional martial arts models coexist with more recent approaches aimed at standardization and alignment with European norms. Although there is a strong foundation in physical control techniques, challenges arise in the systematic evaluation of training, instructor development, and the integration of contemporary psychological preparation and scenario-based training. These systems demonstrate developmental potential; however, their further evolution depends on institutional reforms and investments in resources and methodology ([Amanović et al., 2015a](#); [CEPOL, 2020](#); [Gužvica & Paspalj, 2020](#); [Staller et al., 2021a, 2021b](#); [Žigić et al., 2019](#)).

Legal-Ethical Constraints and Trends in Professionalization

Finally, we can examine how these physical and psychological training models intersect with human rights, legal mandates, and ethical standards. At one end of the spectrum are systems that emphasize the normative regulation of the use of force, characteristic of most Western and Northern European countries. In these models, SPT is closely integrated with legal and ethical standards, with physical intervention regarded as a last resort within the hierarchy of responses. Training is largely oriented toward de-escalation, communication skills, and decision-making in complex situations, whereas martial arts are oriented toward control-oriented techniques with minimal risk to the parties involved ([Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#); [Banović et al., 2012](#)). Such an approach contributes to greater alignment of operational behavior with human rights standards; however, it simultaneously raises questions regarding the adequacy of preparation for high-risk situations requiring rapid and decisive physical responses ([College of Policing, 2020](#); [Granér, 2004](#); [Kleygrewe et al., 2022](#); [Paoline & Terrill, 2007](#); [Torgersen & Steiro, 2009](#)).

From a critical perspective, a key issue across most of the systems analyzed is the lack of standardized, empirically validated models for evaluating training effectiveness. In the absence of clearly defined and empirically grounded evaluation criteria, SPT systems risk remaining either normatively desirable but operationally insufficiently effective, or operationally robust yet inadequately aligned with contemporary standards of legality and human rights.

In this regard, the comparative analysis suggests that differences between SPT systems should not be interpreted solely as advantages or shortcomings, but rather as reflections of specific normative contexts. The effectiveness of each model depends on its internal coherence and its alignment with the broader institutional and societal environment, further underscoring the importance of a conceptually sensitive approach to the development and improvement of police training.

Ultimately, differences among Special Physical Training systems do not merely reflect technical or methodological choices but also fundamental conceptions of the police's role in society. Therefore, the question of SPT effectiveness cannot be reduced to performance in controlled training conditions; it must also encompass the capacity to ensure lawful, proportionate, and socially legitimate conduct in real operational situations.

The identified patterns and differences point to the need for deeper interpretation in light of the institutional, legal, and cultural factors that shape contemporary SPT models, a need that will be addressed in the subsequent discussion.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of SPT systems across different police forces reveals universal principles alongside significant differences in approach. Systems are developed in accordance with local laws, historical heritage, security challenges, and cultural expectations. The categorization of training models as Western and Eastern should be understood as an analytical framework that highlights dominant pedagogical trends rather than as absolute, uniform characteristics of all nations in these regions. While structural variations exist within each group, these categories serve to illustrate broad philosophical shifts in contemporary SPT. Despite geographic, political, and institutional differences, Special Physical Training (SPT) systems across various countries exhibit several consistent characteristics. One significant convergence is the growing emphasis on realistic simulations. Training programs are increasingly shifting away from purely traditional physical exercises and moving toward scenario-based training that enhances readiness for unpredictable, real-world conditions ([Staller et al., 2021a](#)). Martial arts also serve as a foundational element across these systems. Techniques focused on control, neutralization, and immobilization drawn from disciplines such as judo, karate, jiu-jitsu, kung fu, Krav Maga, sambo, and systema are widely implemented. These systems emphasize the principle of minimum use of force, reinforcing both operational effectiveness and legal accountability ([Amanović, 2003](#); [Amanović et al., 2015a](#); [Lo, 2001](#)).

In more advanced models, particularly those found in Scandinavia, the United States, Germany, and Austria, psychological resilience has become a key training dimension. Modules for emotional regulation, situational awareness, and stress management are integrated to help officers perform effectively under pressure ([Amanović & Milošević, 2022](#)). Nonetheless, a comparative analysis reveals substantial differences between countries shaped by distinct legal frameworks, cultural values, and specific security threats. For example, the United States has implemented Stress Inoculation Training (SIT). This methodology places officers in high-pressure scenarios to build resistance to panic and reduce operational errors during interventions ([U.S. DOJ, 2019a, 2019b](#)). Meanwhile, several European countries, particularly Austria, the Netherlands, and Germany, have begun incorporating advanced technologies, such as virtual reality simulations and video analysis of real interventions, into their SPT programs, reflecting a shift toward evidence-based, technology-integrated training paradigms ([Milošević & Amanović, 2023](#)).

The following table (Table 3) summarizes key regional differences in Special Physical Training (SPT) systems, reflecting the influence of legal standards, cultural priorities, and levels of institutional development.

Table 3. Summary of Special Physical Training System Differences by Region

Western Countries	The focus is on legality, proportionality of force, de-escalation, and psychological training. International standards and mandatory legal modules are applied (CEPOL, 2020).
Eastern Countries	Emphasis on strength, endurance, and traditional combat systems; less psychological training. Dominated by hierarchical approaches and ideological components.
Serbia and Region	There is a strong foundation in martial arts, but there is a need for stronger institutional evaluation, licensing of trainers/instructors, and the introduction of technology (Žigić et al., 2019).

As shown in Table 3, most Western countries emphasize legality and psychological preparedness, while many Eastern countries prioritize physical strength and traditional combat. At the same time, Serbia and its neighboring region face challenges in institutional modernization and in standardizing training.

To make a clearer synthesis of the global landscape, the fundamental pedagogical similarities and differences across the analyzed national SPT systems are summarized below:

1. Key Similarities:

- Human Rights Alignment: All analyzed modern frameworks strictly subordinate physical techniques to legal principles of proportionality and necessity.
- De-escalation Priority: Physical intervention is universally taught as a last resort, secondary to verbal and tactical de-escalation.
- Stress Integration: There is a global consensus to shift away from isolated drills toward high-stress, scenario-based training.

2. Key Differences:

- Curriculum Focus: Anglo-Saxon models strongly prioritize reality-based, tactical communication, whereas Eastern European and Asian models traditionally place greater emphasis on structured physical conditioning and combat-sport mastery.
- Institutional Transparency: Western European systems generally exhibit higher transparency in publishing standardized curricula, while other regions often maintain higher levels of operational confidentiality regarding specific tactical protocols.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this narrative review successfully answers the three core research questions established at the outset. Regarding program structure, the global landscape of SPT shows a clear shift away from traditional, sports-oriented martial arts toward unified control-and-restraint defensive tactics. In terms of psychological conditioning, modern police academies are increasingly replacing isolated physical drills with high-stress, scenario-based training to build functional muscle memory under pressure. Finally, regarding regional and legal-ethical trends, while distinct pedagogical preferences persist across different training models, all analyzed systems are evolving toward greater alignment with international human rights standards and quantified use-of-force frameworks.

The results of this narrative review demonstrate that Special Physical Training (SPT) constitutes a central component of contemporary police education systems, evolving far beyond basic motor skill acquisition to integrate operational, psychological, and normative dimensions of professional readiness. By systematically addressing the core research questions, several consistent patterns emerge across the global models analyzed.

Structurally and tactically, while there is a widespread reliance on martial arts and control techniques adapted for operational use, training philosophies vary significantly ranging from long-term, militarized endurance models to condensed, pragmatically driven academies. Psychologically, there is a universally recognized shift toward scenario-based training and stress inoculation, which have proven critical for bridging the gap between static skill acquisition and dynamic decision-making under pressure. Finally, regarding legal and ethical constraints, modern professionalization dictates that every physical intervention must be deeply rooted in human rights and de-escalation principles, an integration that is currently most pronounced in European and North American contexts.

The direct findings of this narrative review for each research question can be summarized as follows:

- Answer to research question 1: Globally, SPT programs are shifting away from traditional, sports-oriented martial arts (such as traditional judo or karate) and isolated physical conditioning. Instead, modern structures predominantly integrate unified, hybrid control-and-restraint defensive tactics specifically adapted to ensure subject control and officer safety.

- Answer to research question 2: Contemporary police academies are increasingly moving away from isolated, non-stress physical drills. They are replacing them with integrated, high-stress scenario-based training and stress inoculation modules, forcing officers to practice tactical decision-making and manual interventions under high physiological strain.
- Answer to research question 3: Regional legal-ethical frameworks heavily dictate the boundaries of physical intervention. Modern professionalization trends have forced academies to benchmark every physical technique against international human rights standards, ensuring that force is taught not as an isolated physical skill, but as a regulated legal instrument strictly tied to de-escalation.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the development and application of a novel, multidimensional comparative framework that synthesizes previously fragmented national data. By moving beyond mere descriptive accounts of police training, this research establishes a clear niche: it conceptualizes SPT not merely as a set of operational tactics, but as a deeply institutionalized practice shaped by distinct cultural and legal environments. This theoretical synthesis provides a vital foundation for the global standardization and "humanization" of police use-of-force training, enabling a more systematic evaluation of these systems in both academic and applied settings.

From a practical perspective, the findings strongly advocate for an evidence-based evolution of police academies. The future development of police training systems must prioritize the seamless integration of high-stress scenario simulations, continuous psychological conditioning, and robust mechanisms for continuous evaluation. Additionally, the growing role of technological tools such as simulation-based training and performance analytics indicates a necessary shift toward empirical, data-driven approaches to policing. Systems that successfully integrate these physical, psychological, and legal-ethical elements within a unified framework exhibit a much higher degree of internal coherence and societal legitimacy.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. As a review based on secondary sources, the availability, institutional transparency, and level of data detail vary significantly across countries, which may affect the depth of the comparative analysis. Furthermore, cross-cultural differences in terminology regarding the use of force pose challenges for exact comparative alignment. An additional limitation is the uneven terminology across countries, since concepts such as "defensive tactics", "use-of-force training", "special physical education," and "arrest techniques" often denote functionally similar but institutionally distinct training models.

Future empirical research should build upon this comparative framework by conducting primary, quantitative evaluations of scenario-based methodologies across different jurisdictions, ultimately striving to optimize training models that safeguard both officer safety and human rights in complex operational realities.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethical Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with relevant ethical standards and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Author Contributions (CRediT Taxonomy)

Conceptualization: M.M., Đ.A., M.J., M.LJ.; Methodology: M.M., Đ.A., M.J., M.LJ.; Formal analysis: M.M., Đ.A., M.J., M.LJ.; Investigation: M.M., Đ.A., M.J., M.LJ.; Data curation: M.M., Đ.A., M.J., M.LJ.; Writing – original draft preparation: M.M., Đ.A., M.J., M.LJ.; Writing – review and editing: M.M., Đ.A., M.J., M.LJ.; Supervision: Đ.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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