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Emerging Issues in American Policing is a quarterly digest intended for police-practitioners and community members that presents innovations in the field of policing from the leading academic journals and research publications. Please forward any questions or suggestions to EmergingIssuesPolicing@vera.org.

Mental Health Calls in a Rural Police Department

A recent study shows that police officers in a rural police department are not satisfied with their training on responding to mental health calls for service.

Police officers are often the first and only resources available to respond to individuals experiencing mental health crisis, especially in rural communities where access to social services and mental health resources is limited. Responding to mental health calls, however, can be time-consuming and difficult due to a lack of other stabilizing services in rural areas. To better understand officers’ perceptions of available options when responding to mental health crises, researchers at George Mason University evaluated call data from the Roanoke County, Virginia Police Department (RCPD) and administered surveys to officers.¹ Survey responses were collected from 73 sworn personnel at RCPD, including rank-and-file officers, sergeants, and commanders.

Over 80 percent of officers reported that they encountered individuals with mental health illness at least once a week. However, analysis of 911 call data revealed that only 1.4 percent of all calls were related to mental health.² Despite this small percentage, researchers found that mental health calls are particularly time consuming: in 2016, each mental health call took four hours on average—which was more time on average than domestic-related calls, property crime, violent crime, calls pertaining to disorder, and drug- or alcohol-related incidents. Importantly, the data also demonstrated that mental health calls had a higher risk for use of force compared to other incidents. While most of the surveyed officers said that helping people with mental health issues is a duty of first responders, only half believed that their department had adequate resources to do so.

The researchers suggest that rural police departments might overcome some of these challenges by relying on creative solutions and discretion for lower-level offenses. For example, officers can proactively visit individuals affected by mental health illnesses to understand their needs or collaborate with local service providers and other community institutions (e.g., schools, community centers, places of worship) for support.

The issues raised by RCPD are not unique. Across the nation, police frequently interact with individuals in mental health crises and do not always have the tools to successfully and safely manage these incidents. To bridge this gap, Vera offers resources to police departments to improve interactions between police and persons affected by mental illnesses and developmental disabilities, through its Serving Safely initiative. To learn more about Serving Safely go to www.servingsafely.org.
Government Reliance on Fines and Fees and Clearance Rates

Findings from a recent study suggest that decreasing municipal government reliance on fines and fees for revenue is important for changing police behavior and improving public safety.

There is little research on the role of institutional structures and incentives within police departments—for example, generating municipal revenue by issuing traffic tickets and imposing fees.¹ According to Census of Governments data from 2012, however, 80 percent of American cities with law enforcement institutions derived some of their revenue from fees, fines, and asset forfeitures.² Some law enforcement agencies experience pressure from municipal authorities to raise revenue through fines and fees, which may detract from the primary duty of providing public safety. To test this understanding, researchers at Harvard University, the University of Memphis, and New York University investigated whether revenue collection compromises police departments’ criminal investigations by evaluating the relationship between police-generated local revenue and crime clearance rates.³

Using data from the Census of Governments, a U.S. Census Bureau program that collects local governments’ revenue and expenditure data, the researchers found that a 1-percent increase in the revenue from fees, fines, and forfeitures was associated with a 6.1-percent decrease in violent crime clearance rates and 8.3 percent decrease in property crime clearance rates. Results also showed that the effect on violent crime clearance was driven by the country’s smallest cities—that is, cities with populations in the bottom 80 percent of the U.S. city population distribution. This suggests that larger police departments are not as affected by pressure to collect revenue. Unlike smaller departments, larger police departments may not be required to choose between different types of activities, such as solving crimes versus generating revenue (e.g., collection of fees, fines, and civilly forfeited assets). Thus, decreasing the reliance on fines and fees for revenue is important for changing police behavior and working to improve public safety.

Racial Disparities in Nashville’s Traffic Stops

A recent study on the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department’s traffic stop practices finds no evidence that traffic stops curtail serious crime.

Traffic stops are one of the most common ways in which police interact with the public. According to a recently released study, the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department (MNPD) has made more traffic stops per capita than other similarly sized cities in the United States within the past few years.¹ Further, a report of traffic-stops made in Nashville between 2011 and 2015 revealed that MNPD stopped more black drivers per year than the number of black driving-age residents.² To better understand this occurrence, researchers at the Stanford Computational Policy Lab conducted a study of MNPD’s racial makeup of traffic stops in 2017—a year in which MNPD’s traffic stops declined over 50% from their peak.³ The researchers also examined whether racial disparities could be explained by public safety concerns (e.g., testing whether racial disparities in police stops could be fully explained by officers policing higher crime neighborhoods in Nashville). The researchers used data from traffic
stop records, crime reports, and U.S. Census data from 2011 to 2017.

The results revealed that the stop rate for black drivers was 44 percent higher than the stop rate for white drivers, particularly for non-moving traffic violations (e.g., stops for equipment, safety, or registration violations). Officer deployment patterns of MNPD demonstrated that high crime neighborhoods, which have a larger population of racial/ethnic groups in Nashville, were more likely to be hyper-policed. The results also showed little connection between traffic stops and serious violent crime, with Part I crime rates remaining flat while traffic stops decreased. Given that the largest racial disparities appeared for non-moving violations, the researchers suggest that MNPD could reduce racial disparities by decreasing these non-moving traffic-stops—especially violations that involve minimal or no safety concerns. This study suggests that departments should consider curtailing some types of traffic stops in order to decrease racial disparities and improve police-community relations.

Body-Worn Cameras and Procedural Justice

A study of Los Angeles police officers shows that employing body-worn cameras is related to significant increases in procedural justice during police-civilian encounters.

Body-worn cameras (BWCs) have been implemented as a tool to improve transparency and accountability in policing. To date, BWC research has typically focused on whether they successfully reduce civilian complaints and police uses of force. One outcome that has not previously been examined is the extent to which BWCs impact procedural justice. Encounters that are procedurally just (e.g., embody fairness, transparency, voice, and neutrality)—are more likely to produce compliance and cooperation. Researchers from the Rochester Institute of Technology, Justice and Security Strategies, and Temple University were interested in the role that BWCs have in promoting procedural justice and predicted that the implementation of BWCs would lead to higher levels of participation, neutrality, dignity and respect, and care and concern by police in their encounters with civilians.

To test these hypotheses and their effects on procedural justice, the researchers examined officer behavior using systematic social observation—an effective tool to measure what officers do by observing and coding elements of encounters according to an organized protocol. They used this tool to examine police officers in two patrol divisions in the Los Angeles (California) Police Department. The researchers collected data on police behavior in two waves, first prior to BWC implementation and then again after BWC implementation. A total of 549 civilian encounters were observed across both waves. Analyses revealed that BWCs positively influenced procedural justice outcomes—there were increases in the amount of officer participation (e.g., officers asked for civilians' viewpoints), neutrality (e.g., officers asked to hear all viewpoints), dignity and respect (e.g., officers showed respectful behaviors), and care and concern (e.g., officers asked about civilians' wellbeing) during encounters in both patrol divisions. The researchers concluded that the presence of BWCs was related to officers acting in a more procedurally just fashion—without training or reference to improving procedural justice in the department. The researchers note that BWCs likely lead to procedural justice directly—such as through officers' exercising more discretion, resulting in reduced uses of force, and indirectly—such as through greater cooperation from civilians when they know they are being recorded. Thus, employing BWCs may offer one way for a police department to improve procedural justice during police-civilian interactions.
Crisis Intervention Team Training for Youth and Officer Awareness

A recent study finds that Crisis Intervention Teams for Youth Training Leads to Improved Understanding of Youth Affected by Mental Illnesses

According to research, at least 20 percent of young people involved in the criminal/legal system have a serious mental illness. Often, youth experiencing mental illnesses have higher rates of recidivism compared to adults, suggesting that young people affected by mental illnesses may be best served through mental health interventions rather than by arrests. Given that officers are often the first and only responders to mental health incidents, it is important that they are knowledgeable around issues of mental health and youth intervention. A recent study conducted by researchers at Wayne State University and Wichita State University examined if the Crisis Intervention Teams for Youth (CIT-Y)—a training model that provides officers with the knowledge and skills to de-escalate youth in crisis make connections to treatment—would successfully improve an officer’s understanding of youth development, mental illness, and the availability of community resources.

To test the effectiveness of CIT-Y, the researchers employed eight-hour trainings in two Midwestern counties. The main outcomes of interest were the feasibility (e.g., implementation of the intervention), acceptability (e.g., officers endorse the methods of the intervention), and fidelity of the training program (e.g., program is implemented as specified by the designer of the program), which were measured using researcher observations of the training, interviews, and pre- and post-tests with CIT-Y trained law enforcement. Findings showed that the majority of officers were accepting of the CIT-Y program and its underlying philosophy. Approximately 98 percent of officers agreed that problematic youth behavior is a serious problem for law enforcement, and 78.3 percent wanted to take action by participating in the CIT-Y training. Officers also stated that the training content helped them recognize the signs and symptoms of mental illness. Thus, this study suggests that youth-intervention trainings should be implemented within police departments to educate officers about responding to youth with mental illnesses.

Law Enforcement Agency Size and Police Stress

A study conducted in Utah and New York suggests that the size of a police department can affect how an officer perceives stress.

Research has shown that law enforcement personnel often experience a great deal of stress. Researchers, however, do not know what factors are considered to be the most stressful components of officers’ work culture, or whether police department size has any influence on officers’ stress. A recent study conducted by a researcher at Walden University examined whether police agency size (e.g., small, medium, or large) impacted officers’ perceptions of administrative, physical, and psychological stress, and lack of support.

The researcher had 144 police officers from police agencies in Utah and New York complete the 60-question Spielberg Police Stress Survey (PSS) (which has officers rate various police work tasks on stress and frequency scales). Fifty-eight responding
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Endnotes

Mental Health Calls in a Rural Police Department


2. Ongoing Vera research suggests that the limited proportion of calls coded as mental health-related may be a factor of challenges in accurately and reliably coding 911 calls for service. For example, calls that involve mental health concerns plus a particularly serious crime may be coded as a related to the latter, despite also displaying evidence of the former. For an overview of this research, and updates when the report goes live, see: https://www.vera.org/projects/understanding-police-enforcement/learn-more.

Government Reliance on Fines and Fees and Clearance Rates


**Racial Disparities in Nashville's Traffic Stops**


4. The FBI defines Part I crimes as: "serious crimes that occur with regularity in all areas of the country, and are likely to be reported to police (i.e., aggravated assault, arson, burglary, criminal homicide, larceny, motor vehicle theft, rape, and robbery)."

**Body-Worn Cameras and Procedural Justice**


**Crisis Intervention Team Training for Youth and Officer Awareness**


Law Enforcement Agency Size and Police Stress
