Emerging Issues in American Policing

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Digest

*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.

Shift-Type and De-Escalation

A simulated research experiment reveals that day-shift officers resolve situations more collaboratively and are less likely to use deadly force.

In recent years, researchers and police practitioners alike have begun to recognize the benefits of de-escalation strategies (e.g., calming individuals down verbally, exhibiting non-threatening body language) in preventing deadly outcomes in police-civilian interactions. However, to date, few have examined how organizational factors—such as work shifts and officer fatigue—affect officers' abilities to successfully implement these strategies.

Researchers from Washington State University partnered with a mid-sized metropolitan police department to examine how shift type, timing within a work week, and fatigue affect an officer's ability to effectively de-escalate situations. In this study, 50 officers were assigned to work either during the daytime (day [06:00-16:40] and swing shifts [10:00-20:40]), or the nighttime (power [16:00-02:40] and grave shifts [20:00-06:40]). Officers then participated in a series of simulations designed to represent potential use-of-force scenarios, such as welfare checks, community meetings, and vehicle stops. These were conducted twice: once at the beginning, and once at the end of their work week. During the simulations, researchers measured officer fatigue and the outcomes of their interactions with civilians—noting whether the civilian encounter was cooperative, neutral, or deadly.

Results indicated that both nighttime shift officers and officers tested at the end of the work week were significantly more fatigued than daytime officers and officers tested at the beginning of the work week. In addition, day-shift officers were the most likely to resolve simulated encounters cooperatively. Day shift officers prevented deadly encounters 56 percent of the time, compared to swing-shift (35%), power-shift (45%), and grave-shift officers (39%). However, neither timing within the work week nor level of fatigue were found to have a significant effect on scenario outcomes. The variation in outcomes across shift type indicates that officers' abilities to successfully de-escalate situations vary based on whether they are working during the early day or evening/night, thus highlighting the need for additional support, trainings, and resources for officers working later shifts to ensure adequate safety and service delivery.
Mental Health Crisis Hotspots

Research conducted in Baltimore, MD demonstrates that mental health-related civilian calls for police service occur in hotspots, which can inform police deployment decisions.

One out of every ten police-community encounters involves an individual with a mental illness. In light of this and the fact that most police agencies have a limited number of mental health response-trained officers on staff, proper resource allocation is particularly important. Likewise, if mental health incidents occur in high rates at certain geographic locations, assigning trained officers to these locations could be particularly beneficial. To better understand whether mental health related incidents occur in hotspots—or concentrated geographic areas—researchers at George Mason University released a study on the geographic patterns of mental health calls occurring in Baltimore, MD in 2012. They found that all of the recorded mental health calls originated from just 14.4 percent of street segments (i.e., street sections that exist between intersections), and 50.9 percent of the calls originated from just 3 percent of them. Furthermore, researchers found that these hot spots were dispersed throughout Baltimore, and that they were more closely correlated with violence hot spots than drug-related ones.

By mapping calls for service, police agencies can more efficiently allocate their mental health resources to concentrate outreach in neighborhoods most acutely at risk for crises and promote earlier diversions into the mental health system. The researchers also recommend establishing professional mental health resources in identified at-risk areas to encourage residents to actively seek out help. Overall, by identifying mental health hot spots, police agencies can improve their efficiency, identify areas most in need of other social services, and ensure that vulnerable populations are adequately served and protected.

Job Demands, Resources, and Psychological Strain

Research suggests that high job demands increase emotional exhaustion, depression, and anxiety in officers, but the availability of job resources can reduce the likelihood of these outcomes.

As officers continue to experience both high work demands and stress levels, police agencies across the country are implementing strategies to support their mental health and wellbeing. In a recent
study, researchers specifically examined how job demands and available resources interact and contribute to psychological strain amongst police officers. To answer this question, they administered an online survey to 843 police officers in an urban police department in Germany, and analyzed the results using a statistical approach known as structural equation modeling. Results revealed that high job demands—such as workload and assaults by civilians—predicted elevated risk for emotional exhaustion, which in turn amplified experiences of depression and anxiety amongst officers. However, the availability of job resources (e.g., positive leadership, shared values, and support from colleagues) was found to mitigate emotional exhaustion and reduce feelings of depression and anxiety.

Overall, while this research was conducted in Germany, the findings suggest that police leaders everywhere should be proactive in implementing programs that promote emotional support for officers. One such example can be seen in the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) Police Organization Providing Peer Assistance program. Here, NYPD officers are trained to serve as peer support officers, providing emotional aid to fellow officers who are experiencing personal or work-related stress and referring more distressed officers to professional mental health services. Furthermore, leaders should look to create supportive work climates and promote shared values within their organizations. By providing these resources while simultaneously addressing job demands, agencies can begin to reduce the psychological strain of police work.

Body-Worn Cameras and Use of Force

Implementation of body-worn cameras for law enforcement in Spokane, Washington reveals that they may decrease civilian complaints, but more research is needed.

Advocates of body-worn cameras (BWCs) argue that they promote transparency and accountability in police-community encounters, but research on their efficacy has generated mixed results. In an effort to resolve these mixed findings, researchers at Arizona State University conducted a randomized control trial (RCT; a research design involving randomly assigned experimental and control groups) on the Spokane Police Department’s (SPD) roll out of BWCs. The goal of this study was to assess whether BWCs reduce use of force, officer injuries, and/or complaints against officers.

SPD rolled out BWCs across the entire department (149 officers total) in two phases, six months apart. Results revealed that both use-of-force and complaints against officers decreased six months post-BWC implementation (8 percent and 78 percent, respectively), though similar reductions were not observed one year post-implementation (17 percent increase and 22 percent decrease, respectively). Officer injury rates were unaffected by BWCs in both the short and long term. It is important to note, however, that these results may still not be replicable because use of force, officer injuries, and complaints against officers happen relatively infrequently—both with and without BWCs. While
these findings are therefore still largely inconclusive, they demonstrate the need for studies that involve more participants, and indicate that BWCs do not hurt community outcomes and in fact might help them.

Trauma, Coping Strategies, and Job Motivation

Emerging research indicates that coping mechanisms employed by officers after the 2016 police killings in Dallas and Baton Rouge had adverse effects on job motivation.

The high-profile officer killings in Dallas and Baton Rouge led many police practitioners to worry about their safety and relationships with the community. Six months after these officer killings, researchers from Virginia Tech and Louisiana State University administered an online survey to 2,659 police officers nationwide to better understand officer coping mechanisms and job motivation following traumatic events. Participants self-evaluated their job motivation following the Dallas and Baton Rouge incidents, and reported how often they engaged in various coping strategies. The three most prevalent coping strategies were:

- accessing support networks (advice from family, friends, or fellow officers);
- isolation as a form of self-help (keeping to themselves, moving on, exercising); and
- self-medication (eating, smoking, or drinking)

Further, a reliance on any of these three coping mechanisms was associated with a decrease in job motivation following the shootings. Research already demonstrates that certain coping strategies—namely self-help and self-medication—are inadequate for overcoming trauma. However, this particular study’s findings are surprising in that they highlight how even certain adaptive strategies, such as accessing support networks, might not be sufficient in promoting officer job motivation after highly stressful events like officer-targeted attacks. These findings indicate a pressing need to provide more adequate coping strategies—including trauma resilience trainings and professional support networks—in order to promote officer wellbeing.

Community Policing and Social Equity

Qualitative research suggests that careful implementation of community policing strategies improves perceptions of social equity.
Perceptions of social equity (i.e., fairness in public service access, outcomes, and processes) are a key component of positive police-community relationships. Police agencies across the country routinely implement several strategies that contribute to this goal, such as:

- **Community policing programs (CPPs)**, which encourage proactive police problem-solving in partnership with community members;
- **Social equity performance measurements (SEPM)**, which utilize data to examine policing’s disparate impacts on various subpopulations; and
- **Ethics trainings**, which focus on values such as prejudice, decision-making, and equality.

Surprisingly little research has measured how these strategies specifically affect perceptions of social equity. To answer this question, a researcher at the University of Colorado Denver conducted 72 interviews with community members, locally elected leaders, and police officers from 12 communities utilizing some combination of the strategies described above. Qualitative analyses of interview themes revealed that perceptions of social equity increase when:

- CPPs successfully integrate community priorities and result in more effective policing;
- SEPMs are actively used to inform policing policies and practices; and
- Ethics trainings are required and supported by agency resources.

These findings demonstrate that police agencies’ efforts to improve social equity do not go unnoticed. However, the implementation of these strategies without concrete action may not always be sufficient in building the community’s trust or perceptions of fairness. The research suggests that it is important for police agencies to remain transparent about social equity issues and continually involve members of the community to inform and improve their practices.

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Endnotes

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