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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.

Associations between Police Work Stressors and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms: Examining the Moderating Effects of Coping

A new study finds that the coping styles an officer employs can help reduce symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Occupational stressors and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have the potential to impact a police officer’s ability to effectively serve the community. In this study, researchers from the University at Buffalo and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention examined the impact of active and passive coping strategies on factors that make police work stressful and PTSD symptoms among a sample of police officers from a Northeastern U.S. police department. Active coping strategies are proactive in nature and directly address the problem (e.g., acceptance and strategic planning) whereas passive coping strategies are reactive and generally fail to address the stressor—and in some cases make the situation worse (e.g., alcohol use, self-blame, and doubt).

In the present study, data were collected from the long-term Buffalo Cardio-Metabolic Occupational Police Stress study. Researchers examined the stress levels of 342 police officers with the 60-question Spielberg Police Stress Survey (PSS). Officers were asked to recall and rank how stressful an event was on a scale of 1-100, with 1 being least stressful and 100 being most stressful. Results showed that officers who employed lower active and higher passive coping skills were more likely to be impacted by work stressors and display symptoms of PTSD compared to officers who employed higher active and lower passive skills. The researchers recommended that police departments educate and train officers on the use of active coping strategies to help reduce the risk of PTSD. Such training and education can help officers learn how to deal with work stress and also promote a sense of organizational support for officer wellbeing.
When used prior to employment, base rate indicators can determine a potential hire's job performance as a police officer.

"Base rates" are pre-employment indicators that can predict a potential hire's job performance based on personal background information, job history, and individual characteristics. However, prior research shows that base rates are often overlooked during the hiring process. In response, researchers at the University of South Alabama, Our Lady of the Lake Medical Center, and Matrix, Inc. conducted a study examining the effectiveness of using base rates when hiring law enforcement personnel.

Officers were eligible for the study if they completed the Matrix Diagnostic System pre-employment exam between the years 1997 and 2003. The researchers analyzed 1,536 officers' Matrix Diagnostic pre-employment exam results and categorized employees as bad hires if they were arrested, had five or more misconduct episodes, or experienced termination within five years of being hired. This resulted in a total sample of 205 bad hires out of the 1,536 officers. Survey results from the police chiefs overseeing the hired officers were used to determine each officer's post-employment outcome data after one-, three-, and five years on the job.

The researchers found prior work-related suspension history (53.7 percent for bad hires; 25.4 percent for good hires) to be the most effective base rate to determine job performance. Good hires also had significantly fewer reprimands and fitness for duty evaluations than bad hires. There was no statistically significant difference between good and bad hires in base rates of personal and professional conduct, including substance use, use of force, and wrongful termination. The researchers recommend that law enforcement hiring committees integrate pre-employment evaluations in the toolkit they use to make employment recommendations.

A Systematic Social Observation Study of Police De-Escalation Tactics

Results from a recent study reveal that officers are likely to use de-escalation tactics while interacting
with civilians.

De-escalation tactics can be incorporated in officer-civilian encounters to minimize use of force, although questions remain about how often officers actually employ these tactics. Researchers at the University of Alabama and Washington State University accompanied 29 police officers from Spokane Police Department (SPD) on ride-alongs to examine how often officers made use of de-escalation tactics (e.g., the “calm” tactic where officers remain emotionally neutral when interacting with civilians, the “honest” tactic where officers are truthful about their role in the law enforcement process, etc.). The researchers also investigated whether any civilian actions or behaviors (e.g., crying or being disrespectful) were related to officers’ use of de-escalation and the outcome of the encounters, such as an officer’s choice to make an arrest, apply force, or divert someone to public health services.

The researchers found that officers regularly used de-escalation tactics, even in the absence of formal training and policies mandating their use. In fact, officers only arrested civilians in approximately 18 percent of the cases. In more than 75 percent of the officer-civilian encounters, officers used the “human” de-escalation tactic. This tactic involves the police officer working to reduce the power dynamic between themselves and a civilian, by making small gestures such as introducing themselves by their first name and making small talk with the civilian. Officers also made use of the “active listening” tactic about 50 percent of the time, allowing civilians to tell their side of the story. The researchers noted that this approach had a positive impact on police-community relations, and suggested that police agencies should increase officers’ exposure to de-escalation trainings to promote greater use amongst the department.

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Procedural Injustice and Victimization Reporting to the Police

A new study on decisions to report violent victimizations to the police in Seattle reveals that perceptions of procedural injustice play a key role.

Victimization reporting is critically related to police departments’ ability to solve and prevent crime, acting as the primary platform for drawing police attention to crime incidents. Despite this, research has shown that approximately half of all violent victimizations go unreported to the police. Researchers at the University of Arkansas, University of Tennessee, and Minnesota Department of Corrections teamed up to study how perceptions of street codes of violence, procedural injustice, and police effectiveness affect people’s decision to report victimizations to the police. Data came from 687 respondents of the Seattle Neighborhoods and Crime Survey (conducted from 2002-2003), who identified as being victims of non-sexual violent crime within two years prior to taking the survey. Respondents were asked questions about their perceptions of a street code of violence in their neighborhood (e.g., to what extent they thought young people have to be willing to fight to gain respect...
among their peers), their general perceptions of procedurally unjust treatment by the police (e.g., their beliefs that the police treat certain groups of people better than others), to what degree they thought the police were ineffective, and the number of times they’d been victimized as an adult.

The researchers found that perceptions of procedural injustice were related to a lower likelihood of victimization reporting, with an even lower likelihood if the victim was uninjured during the incident. Additionally, perceived codes of street violence and perceived police ineffectiveness reduced the likelihood of crime reporting, but only for black victims. Furthermore, odds of reporting a victimization to the police all increased if the victim was female or was older, if the incident involved a weapon, or if the incident resulted in an injury to the victim. The researchers recommended that police departments focus on policies and practices that promote procedural fairness, given its critical relationship to victim reporting and public willingness to report crime. They also noted that these findings underscore the importance of law enforcement recognizing the cultural contexts in which crime occurs (e.g., being aware of civilians’ perceptions of codes of violence) in order to better understand how victims perceive their circumstances.

Police Officers’ Attitudes towards Citizen Advisory Councils

Police officers who are aware of their local citizen advisory councils are more likely to recognize the councils as a legitimate form of community policing.

Citizen advisory councils (CACs) are committees comprised of community members who assist local police departments with strategy implementation, employment disciplinary actions, and civilian complaints against officers. If implemented and managed properly, CACs can be a valuable tool in promoting democratic public safety engagement and increasing community awareness of policing matters. Until recently, however, it was not clear empirically how police officers feel about this oversight. A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and Michigan State University examined whether police officers perceive CACs as legitimate policing organizations.

In this study, an online survey was administered to 567 officers in a Southeastern U.S. police department. The sample size was reduced to 288 officers, however, because only half of the officers were familiar with their organization’s CAC. Officers who responded to the survey were asked if they believed the CAC improves police-community relations, and if they thought the councils make community-informed recommendations and decisions. The researchers also examined whether factors such as organizational justice within the department (i.e., perceived fairness from command staff), self-legitimacy as a police officer (i.e., officers’ belief that their authority as police officers is morally justified), and public perceptions and opinions of policing influence officers views of the CAC. The researchers hypothesized that officers who had higher ratings on organizational justice and self-legitimacy would also perceive the CAC as legitimate whereas stronger perceptions of public scrutiny would
result in an officer disregarding the legitimacy of the CAC.

Findings showed that there was a lack of awareness of the CAC, despite the department’s active 26-member CAC at the time of the survey distribution. However, more than 50 percent of officers who were aware of the CAC believed that the council had legitimacy. These findings suggest that departments with CACs should raise awareness of the councils, as they can improve transparency and accountability through their direct involvement in the department’s internal processes.

Community Views of Milwaukee’s Police Body-Worn Camera Program

A recent study shows that community members are generally supportive of the implementation of body-worn cameras.

The implementation of body-worn cameras (BWCs) in many departments has led researchers to question community views of the new technology. Toward that end, the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) collaborated with the Urban Institute to evaluate the local community’s perception of officers wearing BWCs. The research was conducted in three phases between April 2016 and July 2018. In this study, 2,035 community members who lived and/or worked in Milwaukee, Wisconsin completed a survey asking about their general knowledge of MPD officers wearing BWCs, perceptions of officer accountability and respectfulness, and whether or not they believed BWCs would improve police-community relations in Milwaukee.

Results showed that the community’s awareness of MPD officers using BWCs increased from 35.6 percent to 75.9 over the duration of the study, and over 80 percent of community members in all three phases were supportive of the BWC implementation (80.2 percent, 85.3 percent, and 83.6 percent respectively). Interestingly, these results parallel those of researchers at Arizona State University, who recently studied Phoenix Police Department officers’ willingness to use BWCs and found that those who agreed to wear a BWC were more likely to have had prior exposure to BWCs. The Urban Institute researchers also found that black community members in Milwaukee were at least 15 percent less likely than white and Hispanic community members to view MPD officers’ behavior as respectful in every phase of the study. The researchers note that recent events, such as the officer-involved shooting of Milwaukee resident Sylville Smith and traffic stop of NBA Milwaukee Bucks player Sterling Brown, may have contributed to black survey respondents’ beliefs about officer respectfulness, particularly since the BWC footage of these events were not immediately made available to the public.

The findings from both the Milwaukee and Phoenix studies suggest that community members and patrol officers are more likely to support BWC implementation after they’ve gained familiarity and exposure to the technology. As such, police departments implementing BWCs should consider the importance of public education to increase awareness of the technology, and when handling community dissatisfaction, departments should have a standardized method of and policy for releasing camera footage in order to enhance accountability and community support.
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End Notes

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1 Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a frightening event; symptoms often include flashbacks, anxiety, nightmares, and/or uncontrollable thoughts about the event; for more information on PTSD, see Mayo Clinic. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder." 2018. https://www.mayoclinic.org/dis...


Can We Identify Bad Cops Based on History? Base Rates of Historical Markers in Law Enforcement Pre-Employment Evaluations

1 Stephen Aita, Benjamin Hill, Mandi Musso, and Drew Wm, “Can We Identify Bad Cops Based On History? Base Rates Of Historical Markers In Law Enforcement Pre-Employment Evaluations,” Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology 33, no. 3 (2018), 201-208.

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1 For example, from 2006-2010, 52% of all victimizations were unreported to police, see Lynn Langton, Marcus Berzofsky, Christopher Krebs, and Hope Smiley-McDonald, “Victimizations Not Reported to the Police, 2006-2010,” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2012. NCJ 238536.

Notably, a new tool being launched this month by the Vera Institute of Justice will allow users to explore this trend with more recent data. The tool, Enforcement Trends, gives users the chance to visualize data on arrests at the agency, county, state, and...
national level, as well as compare those numbers to victimization data.

2 Elijah Anderson explains that the street code functions as an alternate strategy to gain and maintain respect by promoting personal responsibility for one's safety. This code emerges as a response to a deeply rooted lack of faith in the police along with structural disadvantage. For more information about the street code of violence, see Elijah Anderson. *The Codes of the Streets: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City.* New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.


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