Can De-escalation Training Reduce Use of Force and Injuries to Citizens Without Risking Officer Safety?

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Source Article

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Take Home Messages

- The authors evaluated the effects of customized police de-escalation training in Tempe, AZ, by comparing officers who did, or did not, receive the training. This training was designed with interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, tactical skills, and officer safety/wellness as key pillars, along with scenario-based assessments and refresher training. The authors investigated the impact of the training using administrative data, as well as body-worn camera (BWC) footage for all use of force incidents six months pre- and post-training. The key outcomes were use of force (overall and by type), encounter length, and citizen and officer injury.

- Both officer groups saw declines in use of force encounters after training delivery, which is likely attributed to reduced police-citizen contacts due to the global pandemic. Trained officers decreased certain force types that are likely to cause injury (e.g., strikes). Trained officers also spent significantly more time on scene for use of force encounters. Finally, trained officers were less likely to injure community members when using force. These changes occurred with no increased risk of injury to officers who received the de-escalation training.

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Why did the researchers conduct the study?

Use of force incidents and resulting tension between the police and their respective communities have led to increased calls for de-escalation training as a tool to reduce unlawful use of force. The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing[1] highlighted de-escalation as a priority for law enforcement, and the Police Executive Research Forum[2] called for de-escalation to be the "preferred, tactically sound approach in many critical incidents" (p. 2).

Though quite popular among law enforcement agencies across the country,[3] the evidence base on de-escalation training is limited.[4] We know little about the impact of de-escalation on the prevalence of use of force, types of force used, injuries to citizens, as well as the length of encounters.

The growing popularity of de-escalation has also raised concerns regarding risks to officer safety. Critics of de-escalation training argue that it limits officers' use of force and increases the risk of injury.[5] Prior research has not tested this claim.

How did the researchers conduct the study?

As described in the source article, the authors evaluated a customized police de-escalation training program in Tempe, Arizona. The Tempe Police Department delivered the training to a randomly selected group of patrol, traffic and specialty (e.g., K9, bicycle) squads (the Trained group) while others did not receive the training (the Control group). The authors investigated the impact of the training on the prevalence and types of force, citizen and officer injuries, and duration of encounter.

The authors examined administrative use of force data from August 1, 2019, to August 31, 2020. This thirteen-month period represents six months before training delivery (August 2019–

January 2020) and six months after (March–August 2020), with February 2020 as the intervention month. Use of force prevalence overall and by force type were analyzed across both groups as well as by assignment (patrol, traffic, specialty).

The authors also analyzed BWC footage for those same use of force incidents (six months before and after the training). The authors used a comprehensive, rigorously tested BWC coding instrument to capture key aspects of each encounter.

What did the researchers find?

Use of force prevalence and type

- All Trained and Control squads experienced large declines in use of force (declines ranging from 53% to 68%) in the post-training period (likely a result of reduced activity during the global pandemic). Further analyses showed no significant difference in overall use of force among the various study groups.

- The authors identified several notable differences in certain types of force for Trained squads pre-post training. Trained specialty squads' use of strikes and takedowns declined by 95.7% (23 to 1) and 62.5% (72 to 27), respectively. Trained patrol squads' use of the TASER declined by 46.7% (15 to 8). These reductions were unique to the Trained group.

Body-worn camera footage

- Trained officers spent significantly more time on scene at use of force encounters, compared to Control officers. The time on scene at use of force encounters involving Trained officers increased by 15.2 minutes pre- to post-training (26.2% increase), while Control officers' encounters declined in time on scene by 15.0 minutes (19.7% drop). This finding aligns with the curriculum's emphasis on slowing down, using patience, and ongoing assessment during interactions.

- Community members were significantly less likely to be injured post-training during use of force encounters with Trained officers (58% less likely to be injured, compared to Control officer encounters).

- Officer injuries were uncommon and did not differ among study groups post-training (6.7% for Trained; 4.8% for Control).

How can the police use these findings?

The source article highlights the benefits of developing a curriculum tailored to agency needs. This process should be collaborative and include perspectives from sworn personnel who double as "embedded champions" to promote the curriculum. Officer buy-in is essential for effective delivery of de-escalation training.[6,7]

A major concern voiced by critics of de-escalation training is the belief that it will place officers at risk by restricting their ability to use force.[4] The results of this study demonstrate the importance of rooting the curriculum in officer safety and wellness and ensuring that it is emphasized throughout. The source article also demonstrates the importance of refresher training that reinforces core principles in the training curriculum, ideally using BWC footage to demonstrate effective, or ineffective, de-escalation.

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