The De-escalation Training Center at LEMIT

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Police De-escalation Training Executive Summary

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Introduction

The growing social unrest regarding volatile police-citizen encounters has led to an emphasis on identifying solutions to resolve these interactions with the least necessary force (White & Orosco, 2021). In December 2014, under the Obama Administration, the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing listed de-escalation training as an action item recommendation to address police use of force (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The final report indicated that law enforcement agencies should emphasize de-escalation and alternatives to arrest when applicable. Since then, the adoption of de-escalation training has become commonplace in the United States. However, due to a lack of a uniform definition of de-escalation, strategies and training can vary significantly across agencies (Engel et al., 2020).

A generally accepted definition of de-escalation is "taking action or communicating verbally or non-verbally during a potential force encounter in an attempt to stabilize the situation and reduce the immediacy of the threat so that more time, options, and resources can be called upon to resolve the situation without the use of force or with a reduction in the force necessary" (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2017, p. 2). Law enforcement agencies may require officers to be trained in specific programs such as the Police Executive Research Forum's (PERF) *Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics* (ICAT). The ICAT educates officers in de-escalation tactics and critical thinking skills to manage potentially problematic situations (Isaza, 2019).

The principles of de-escalation posit that its application can reduce police use of force by enhancing conflict-resolving skills (Oliva et al., 2010); however, there is the possibility that these initiatives can have no effect or a counter-intuitive effect on police-citizen encounters and use of force (Fyfe, 2000; Isaza, 2019). In addition, de-escalation tactics have been criticized for undermining officer safety. Despite the increased adoption of de-escalation practices in law enforcement agencies, there is limited empirical evidence on the outcomes of de-escalation in policing (White & Orosco, 2021). Three recent evaluations in major cities provide systematically gathered information about the effectiveness of police de-escalation.

Cincinnati, OH

The evaluation of the University of Cincinnati Police Division's (UCPD) adoption of in-service de-escalation training May 2018 to February 2019 aimed to assess the impact of ICAT training on officers' attitudes toward the use of force, citizens, individuals in crisis, and the effectiveness over time. Officer survey data were collected at three time periods: (1) pre-training, (2) post-training, and (3) four months after training (follow-up) (Isaza, 2019). The survey instrument consisted of seven sections measuring perceptions that may be influenced by the use of force training.

The study revealed that officers reported positive changes in their perceptions of citizen interactions and persons in crisis (Isaza, 2019). Notably, scores on the Officer Confidence Scale increased after the training, compared to scores before training. Simply put, officer confidence in handling situations with persons in crisis increased immediately after the de-escalation training and continued to increase over the next 4-month period. In contrast, nearly all items assessing the utility of the Critical Decision-Making Model (CDM) revealed changes in the opposite direction, thus inconsistent with the training. This could be due to officer disagreement or lack of complete comprehension of the CDM.

Tempe, AZ

The Tempe Smart Policing Initiative was a project aimed to design, deliver, and evaluate a de-escalation training program that was sufficient for the Tempe Police Department (TPD) and the community's needs (White & Orosco, 2021). The Tempe team sent officers to popular de-escalation trainings (ICAT and T3), shadowed officers to assess their expertise in de-escalation. In addition, researchers administered an internal survey to examine officer perceptions of de-escalation. This was all completed in order to design a curriculum that was suited for the TPD and their community context. The curriculum TPD developed was delivered as a 10-hour training to randomly selected units during February and March 2020. The evaluation project is unique because researchers used an experimental design, which allows for confidence in conclusions about training effects. In addition, the TPD evaluation measured officers' behaviors. Outcomes were measured for a treatment group of officers who received the training and a control group of officers who did not complete the training. Outcomes were measured with pre- and post-training officer perception surveys, phone surveys of citizens, administrative data on the use of force, and a review of BWC footage (White & Orosco, 2021).

The researchers note that the analysis of trends using the administrative data was confounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the death of George Floyd; the other data sources showed positive impacts of the training (White & Orosco, 2021). Notably, the officer surveys showed that officers who received the training placed greater emphasis on compromise and self-report higher usage of compromise, knowing when to walk away, and preserving officer safety after the training. The results of the citizen phone surveys revealed that citizens were more likely to have favorable views of the treatment officers after their encounter compared to control officers. The results of the randomly selected BWC footage of use-of-force incidents demonstrated that citizens who interacted with treatment officers were *58% less likely* to be injured during encounters. Overall, the Tempe Smart Policing Initiative revealed that the developed de-escalation training positively altered police-citizen encounters.

Louisville, KY

Like UCPD, the Louisville (KY) Metro Police Department (LMPD) evaluated the effectiveness of ICAT de-escalation training. The evaluation was designed to assess the influence of de-escalation on outcomes such as officers' knowledge and attitudes toward persons in crisis, confidence in handling critical incidents, and frequency of officer use of force (Engle et al., 2020). Both a repeated measures survey (pre-training, post-training, and follow-up) and a cross-sectional survey design were employed to measure officers' and first-line supervisors' perceptions, respectively. Additionally, a stepped-wedge randomized control trial was utilized to observe the impact on officers' behavior.

The stepped-wedge regression results revealed significant drops in overall use of force by LMPD, citizen injuries, and officer injuries in correspondence with the de-escalation training across the police divisions (Engle et al., 2020). Regarding officer reaction to the de-escalation training, ICAT was generally perceived positively immediately after training but slightly declined in the months following (Engle et al., 2020). Notably, a small number of officers reported not being convinced of the positive effect of the ICAT training. Similar to the findings from the UCPD evaluation, the LMPD officers generally did *not* perceive the CDM positively over time. In other words, the officers perceived the CDM to be less helpful with practice. The results of the cross-sectional survey revealed that the LMPD officers held more positive perceptions of their own use of the ICAT tactics. Additionally, the LMPD supervisors believed they effectively supervised and trained lower-level officers in de-escalation skills.

Takeaways

The three evaluations summarized here aimed to examine the effectiveness of police de-escalation training in three different police departments in major cities. Overall, all three evaluations emerged with promising findings regarding the implementation of de-escalation training. Similarly, the three initiatives incorporated the ICAT training program, suggesting it could be an effective de-escalation curriculum.

Scholars have stressed the importance of examining officer perceptions in research (Bayley & Bittner, 1984; Willis, 2013; Willis & Mastrofski, 2017) to account for practitioners' views in creating successful evidence-based policing practices (Todak & White, 2019). All three evaluations generally revealed positive officer perceptions of the training; however, the Louisville project did show a slight reduction in positive perceptions over time. Conversely, officer perceptions of their confidence increased in the months following the de-escalation training in the Cincinnati project. The Tempe project reported favorable officer perceptions of the de-escalation tactics before and after training administration (White et al., 2021; White & Orosco, 2021).

Uniquely, the Tempe project advanced research by examining officers' *behaviors* after receiving their training. The results showed that the de-escalation training administered to the treatment officers was associated with changes to their behaviors during encounters with citizens.

Moving Forward

During a time of high-profile use of force incidents by police officers, a call for reform has emerged across the United States to protect both citizens and officers in their encounters (Engel et al., 2020). A widespread reform adopted by agencies is the incorporation of de-escalation training and policies. Despite the expansion of de-escalation training, there is limited empirical evidence on the outcomes (White & Orosco, 2021).

The evaluations conducted in Cincinnati, Louisville, and Tempe provide a better understanding of the effectiveness of police de-escalation training. Future research should continue to study officer perceptions of training and de-escalation. Research into perceptions and attitudes is important because prior research has suggested attitudes play a critical role in shaping behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen et al., 2019; Fazio, 1986, 1990; White & Orosco, 2021). Simply put, what officers think about de-escalation may influence their willingness to use these tactics (White & Orosco, 2021).

While examining perceptions is an important first step, future research should also explore the impact of the training on *actual officer behavior*. This line of research is especially important for understanding the effectiveness of de-escalation tactics (White & Orosco, 2021). There is a significant lack of empirical data about the relationship between de-escalation training and actual officer behavior. The Tempe project accomplished this; however, more work is needed to enhance our knowledge base that can be used to formulate training and policies.

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