EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Evaluating the Impacts of Statewide Use of Force Reform in New Jersey

In December of 2020, the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General (NJOAG) announced a statewide reform package to reduce police use of force. This Initiative included changes to the statewide use of force policy, mandatory use of force training, and the collection and publication of systematic use of force data. These changes impacted more than 500 police departments and over 31,000 officers. Through external funding, researchers from the National Policing Institute and the University of Cincinnati collaborated with NJOAG to conduct an independent, multi-year evaluation using multiple analytical approaches to assess implementation fidelity, impacts on perceptions, and behavioral outcomes across New Jersey's 520+ law enforcement agencies. **This study represents the first-of-its-kind, groundbreaking research into police use of force reform.**

The evaluation examined whether the Initiative achieved its primary goals of reducing use of force incidents and minimizing injuries to officers and community members. The researchers also examined the impact of the mandated training—including the Police Executive Research Forum's Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) de-escalation training and Georgetown University's Active Bystandership for Law Enforcement (ABLE) peer intervention training—on officers' perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported behaviors. Notably, the high response rates to the surveys—ranging from 12,623 to 17,036 responses at pre- and post-training—offer insights representative of law enforcement officers across New Jersey. Finally, the evaluation considered the views of law enforcement executives on the implementation and impact of the Initiative.

KEY FINDINGS

- Officers reported substantial receptivity to the mandated de-escalation and peer intervention training and perceived their leadership to support these training programs.
- De-escalation training enhanced officers' attitudes on topics like the use of force, interactions with community members, and responding to people in crisis, aligning with training goals.
- Peer intervention training enhanced officers' perceptions of police misconduct, attitudes toward peer intervention, and self-reported likelihood of peer intervention, aligning with training goals.
- Statewide use of force did not decrease consistently after Initiative implementation. Some agencies decreased, others increased, and many remained stable.
- From 2021 to 2024, total statewide use of force reports increased by approximately 9.5% alongside similar increases in arrests and serious offenses.
- Mandated use of force training did not produce direct, statewide reductions in use of force or officer injuries when agencies crossed over from untrained to trained.
- In nearly three-quarters of agencies, force events were so infrequent that detecting statistically significant changes was difficult.
- Surveys and interviews with law enforcement executives confirmed that while many observed the value of the reform package's goals, variability in implementation experiences and challenges related to available support and resources for implementation were common.

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KEY LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

- Agencies are not at uniform risks for use of force issues. Some may benefit from additional training, while others may need to consider structural or organizational factors as part of effective interventions. Problem analysis can help identify local issues that influence force patterns.
- To use resources more effectively, focus intervention efforts on the smaller number of agencies or units that generate a large portion of force and injuries (following the 80/20 rule).
- Trends in use of force should be interpreted alongside trends in arrests, calls for service, and offenses.
- Mandated training, whether through state reform or other forms of oversight, can still be positively received by officers and have similar effects as training programs that police departments voluntarily implement.
- De-escalation and peer intervention training can support changes in officers' views to facilitate safe, effective interactions with community members.
- Agencies should develop and implement relevant policies and practices to sustain organizational change efforts in the long term. For instance, police agencies should integrate follow-up training opportunities (i.e., booster or refresher training) and organizational methods (e.g., first-line supervision) to keep officers' knowledge current, mitigate training decay, and support skill practice over time.
- Law enforcement executives should collaborate early with reform initiators (e.g., external policymakers), identifying potential barriers and facilitators to implementation, to enhance collaboration and capacity for successful organizational change.
- Future use of force reform initiatives should use structured implementation frameworks to identify and address factors that may influence implementation success. These factors can include stakeholder perspectives, organizational readiness, and available resources.
- Future initiatives should also incorporate oversight mechanisms such as dedicated personnel, regional implementation liaisons, and scheduled follow-ups to support implementation.

Please visit this link to review each of the three final reports and corresponding executive briefs produced from this work.