Evidence and Police Use of Force: Theories without Data

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Good Ideas, Little Research

Not enough research

What research there is, is largely disconnected

Need a more coordinated response via increased funding and incentives for replication

Policies

"Model policies" absent empirical evidence—typically generated by expert panels

Generally, evidence supports that more restrictive policies result in fewer uses of force

Good Ideas:
◦ Sanctity of life
◦ Duty to intervene
◦ De-escalation
◦ Shoot to incapacitate
◦ Report pointing a firearm

Training

Increasing growth of experiments on training, BUT:
- Typically limited to single-day/single-event training programs
- Virtually always limited to in-service training

Good Ideas:
- De-escalation
- Active bystandership
- Martial arts

Officer Selection

Considerable amount of research on individual-level differences in uses of force

◦ Conflicting evidence and often suffer from weak methodological designs

◦ Best designs suggest some differences exist (e.g., Ba et al., 2021 on racial differences).

Problem: Implementation

◦ Legal restrictions on quotas

◦ Desirability of the job

◦ Conflicting requirements

Supervision

Evidence suggests that supervisors influence officers' uses of force.

◦ Particularly strong evidence of modelling effects—supervisors model behaviors that officers then replicate.

Paying it forward.

◦ Promising program for treating officers in a procedurally fair manner to review recent incidents (Owens et al., 2018).

Limitations

◦ We know that supervisors influence officers, but we have little idea of how to train/promote/etc. supervisors that have a positive influence.

  ◦ In many agencies, there are even limitations on this.

◦ Need replication of Owens and colleagues' study.

Accountability

Varying strategies for providing accountability with varying levels of support:

- *Early intervention systems*: Modest support, but studies should be expanded to multiple sites. Effect sizes are generally small (see e.g., Chalfin & Kaplan, 2021).
- *Decertification*: Limited programs, but seems like a good idea.
- *Civilian Review Boards*: No rigorous research, but seems like a good idea.
- *Consent Decrees*: Some evidence that these programs work during period of supervision. Concern that these effects are reversed when oversight is concluded.
- *Qualified Immunity*: Reforming to improve ability to hold officers accountable seems like a good idea.

Key Takeaways

There are a lot of areas of promise in reducing the use of force in policing.

Use of force research, however, is hindered by:
◦ Scattered research agenda
◦ Complete lack of replication studies
◦ Limited funding