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Police Officer Training

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I Executive Summary

While there is at present very little evidence about the effectiveness of police training as it is currently carried out in the U.S., what we can say is that it is highly variable across departments, of limited duration (relatively speaking), and differs in its content and delivery from what many other occupations believe to be best training practice.

At present, police officer training in the U.S. is of limited duration relative to police officer training in other wealthy countries and as compared to training required in other U.S. occupations. Police officer training requirements also vary widely across U.S. states from department to department. While it is logically possible that the benefits of training could vary across departments, so that each department is providing just the right amount of training for their local context, the variability in training requirements could instead suggest that some departments are likely providing too little (or too much) training. While we do not have evidence on the benefits of more police training in the U.S. context, from studies of other industries and occupations we have data suggesting that increased training levels do seem to yield benefits in general.[1]

With respect to content, U.S. police officer training skews heavily toward physical and technical skills in general, rather than communication skills. U.S. training also frequently employs a "stress-based" model that is based on a military training model and involves intensive physical demands and psychological pressure (Reaves, 2016). While there does not exist rigorous research comparing the status quo structure of training to proposed alternatives, we do know that some "soft skills" trainings, such as de-escalation training, appear to reduce officer use of force and improve outcomes of officer-citizen interactions (Engel et al., 2020). In addition, we know that the existing "stress-based" model is in some cases associated with maladaptive coping techniques among prospective officers (Violanti, 1993). Understanding whether existing training programs are allocating time across topics in a way that achieves policing objectives and are doing so within a framework that is conducive to improving police resiliency represents an important research objective.

[1] See the Methods for Research Review report for a summary of the criteria used to assess the methodological rigor of existing research and to determine which prior studies to discuss in detail in the present report.

Organizationally, there are also important questions regarding how training should be provided to smaller departments that do not have the resources to run their own police academies. At present, some states permit "open" academies run by private universities or community or technical colleges (as opposed to the state) to operate and enroll prospective officers without any departmental affiliation, and there is a concern that this structure may worsen training outcomes across the board. A centralized model employed in a small number of states, whereby a single state-run academy trains all prospective officers from the state who are associated with departments but does not permit unaffiliated enrollees, represents one important alternative approach that is worth studying.

Stepping back, police officer training in the U.S. also differs in a number of other ways from what research in other areas suggests is training `best practice.' For example, police training has typically relied heavily on classroom-based lectures. However, educational research consistently shows that autonomous learning activities (as opposed to lecture-based approaches) are more effective for achieving learning goals among adult learners (i.e., police cadets) (Mugford et al., 2013). Evidence from cognitive psychology has also identified promising approaches for promoting information transfer, including an emphasis on the spaced repetition of information to facilitate sustained learning gains. The effectiveness of these modalities in the context of police training represents another important avenue for future research.

II Police Officer Training: `Dosage'

Police officer training typically entails three distinct phases:

* Entry-level recruits first attend police academy training which incorporates classroom and hands-on training on a variety of topics (weapons use, patrol procedures, etc.).

* Prospective officers participate in field training. Field training aims to introduce new officers to the realities of the job and to better prepare them for their work.

* Lastly, officers may participate in ongoing in-service training that provides continuing education opportunities for members of the police force.

Training benefits are multi-dimensional, but presumably include officers' ability to effectively police criminal activity, to resolve citizen encounters in a way that minimizes risk of injury to officers and citizens, and to promote police legitimacy and fairness.

U.S. training requirements are typically set at the state level (Semuels, 2020). One rationale for this type of policy is that there is an information problem; namely, that local jurisdictions may have a difficult time on their own determining the appropriate quantity of training. So higher-level agencies, either states or even the federal government, may be better positioned to solve this information problem and essentially share the results with localities through the training requirements.

While we lack direct evidence on the benefits of longer-duration training for police, we can examine how police training requirements vary across countries and within the U.S., and we can

compare police training requirements to training requirements for other professions. By assessing whether there is any evidence of positive returns to longer-duration training (from outside of the policing context) and by identifying where U.S. training requirements fall in the cross-country and cross-occupation distributions, these comparisons can inform future research related to optimal training duration.

In practice, officer training requirements vary widely across countries and across states in the U.S. Compared to the U.S., police training in most western European countries is more intensive (Kates, 2020). In Finland and Norway, for instance, where policing is approached in a more academic fashion, officers are required to attend three-year police universities. Finland's use-of-force training does not begin until four months into police training, by which point recruits in some U.S. departments would have already received their badges and guns (Kates, 2020). Within the U.S., the average length of basic training is 647 hours (with state requirements ranging from 0 to 1,321 hours), the average length of field training is 52 hours (with state requirements ranging from 0 to 960 hours), and the average yearly in-service training requirement is 21 hours (with state requirements ranging from 0 to 40 hours) (The Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform, n.d.).

The hourly training requirements to become a police officer are much lower than those for many other professions.[2] For comparison, across states, becoming a licensed cosmetologist requires around 1,500 hours of training, on average. Similarly, barbers must complete around 1,300 hours of training, on average, to satisfy state-level licensing requirements. In other fields, such as plumbing, the requirements are even more extensive: plumbers must typically complete an apprenticeship before becoming fully licensed that can take up to five years (Carpenter et al., 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

In sum, there is significant heterogeneity across states in training requirements and U.S. police training requirements are lower than police training requirements in other countries and lower than training requirements for other U.S. professions. In the absence of substantial variation in the location-specific and/or occupation-specific benefits of training, the degree of heterogeneity in police training requirements suggests that some departments are likely providing too little (or too much) training.

While we lack rigorous evidence on the benefits associated with longer-duration training in the context of U.S. policing, we do know from other fields that there are potential benefits associated with longer-duration trainings more generally. For instance, Bezrukova et al. (2016) identifies the returns to longer-duration trainings in a meta-analysis of diversity training impacts on a range of outcomes such as acceptance of diversity, participant approval of the training, etc. Similarly, Bluestone et al. (2013) provides support for the hypothesis that longer-duration continuing education trainings for healthcare workers may improve communication skills and practice behaviors. Whether policing outcomes would be similarly improved in response to longer-duration

[2] In addition, 37 states currently allow police officers to serve before attending basic training (The Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform, n.d.).

training requirements and/or requirements that were more uniform across states remains an open research question and an important avenue for research.

III Police Officer Training: Content

While police training curricula also varies to some degree across states, the composition of academy training skews heavily toward physical and technical skills in general, rather than communication skills (Reaves, 2016). According to a report from the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), which conducted a survey in 2015 of 280 member departments, the median academy provides 10 hours of training on communication skills, 8 hours on de-escalation, and 8 hours on crisis intervention, as compared to 80 hours on weapons training and 49 hours on defensive tactics training (PERF, 2015). [3] This focus of U.S. police training on weapons and defensive tactics trainings contrasts with the structure of police training in other countries. In Germany, for example, firearms training is instead focused explicitly on how to avoid using force (Cheatham and Maizland, 2020). In Norway, the first full year of training is focused on the social role of police and their ethical obligations (Kates, 2020). When officers outside of the U.S. are trained in the use of force, there also remain important differences in when lethal force is taught to be permissible. In Spain, for example, police are trained to "provide verbal cautions and warning shots before resorting to deadly force" (Serhan, 2020). In Japan, police are discouraged from using firearms and trained to employ martial arts as an alternative (Berger and Noack, 2020).

Just as the optimal training duration is determined by the relative benefits and costs associated with increased duration, the optimal training curriculum should allocate increased hours to those topics where officer benefits on the margin may be substantial and should reduce coverage of material that can be taught more succinctly without significantly reducing officer performance. At present, we lack rigorous evidence on the aggregate benefits associated with academy training curricula that focus more heavily on "soft skills," including communication, de-escalation, and crisis intervention. However, we do know that some "soft skills" trainings appear to improve outcomes of officer-citizen interactions. For instance, there is evidence that de-escalation training leads to reduced officer use of force (Engel et al., 2020; Goh, 2021). We also know that police use of force is lower in settings such as Germany—for example, in 2019 there were 33.5 killings per 10 million people by U.S. law enforcement, as compared to 1.3 in Germany—where training includes a greater focus on officer "soft skills" (though one should of course be wary of interpreting this correlational evidence as causal) (Cheatham and Maizland, 2020). As such, a clearer

[3] Police academy training has two main components: classroom learning and hands-on training. In addition to covering the topics previously referenced, the classroom component of training typically includes modules on constitutional law, report writing, radio codes, etc. Performance in this portion of academy training is typically evaluated by written test. The hands-on component of training provides an opportunity for officers to practice skills including driving, firearms handling, and arrest and control tactics, and ends with a physical assessment of whether recruits are proficient in those skills (Blumberg et al., 2019). Most academies permit recruits with failures on some portions of the assessments to re-take them, but if any portion is not passed the recruit cannot complete their training (Blumberg et al., 2019). The basic training completion rate across U.S. departments was 86% during the 2011-2013 period (Reaves, 2016).

understanding of whether necessary "hard" skills (weapons use, defensive tactics, etc.) can be acquired with fewer training hours and whether increased training hours allocated to topics such as de-escalation can improve policing outcomes represents an important avenue for future research.

Another important question related to training content is whether the current reliance on a "stress-based" training model, which parallels the military training model and involves intensive physical demands and psychological pressure, can be justified. A 2011-2013 survey of police academies found that about half of recruits were trained in academies with a stress-oriented approach, while 18% of recruits were trained in academies categorized as having "nonstress" models which permitted a more relaxed relationship between instructors and recruits (the remainder of academies employed a hybrid approach) (Reaves, 2016). The stress approach often incorporates violent stories told by retired officers, warning recruits that they must "kill or be killed" and conveys a starkly different message from that taught in the de-escalation and mental health-based trainings currently being championed by many police reformers (Semuels, 2020; Bykov, 2014).

Although research on the consequences of this stress-based approach is limited, researchers have hypothesized that it may lead some recruits to develop maladaptive coping techniques to deal with stress (Violanti, 1993). In contrast, there is evidence that resilience-building training that focuses on officers' ability to recognize and self-regulate their responses to stressors leads to officers reporting less stress, negative emotions, and depression (McCraty and Atkinson, 2012).

More generally, some researchers have emphasized the need for training to move from the traditional stress-based approach to one that helps recruits to develop strong psychological skills, specifically with respect to critical thinking, communication, and emotional intelligence. These skills are seen as central to a community policing-oriented approach in contrast with those developed through the stress-based approach outlined above (Blumberg et al., 2019). Ultimately, more evidence is needed on whether the current stress-based approach employed in many academies is in practice any more effective in improving policing outcomes than the alternative models proposed. [4] Nonetheless, existing research suggests that the stress-based approach may impose substantial mental health costs on officers themselves and may limit officers' acquisition of those "soft skills" that some hypothesize will lead to improved policing outcomes.

IV Police Officer Training: Organization

Another important feature of police academies is whether they employ an "open" model, whereby departments can send recruits or individuals can enroll without a departmental affiliation, or a "closed" model, whereby only those hired by the department that runs the academy are eligible to

[4] One study of 300 police academy recruits that evaluated the differences between a traditional curriculum and a community-oriented policing-based curriculum found that more highly educated recruits and female recruits performed better in the community policing curriculum, though on average recruits assigned to the community policing curriculum ended up performing similarly to those in the traditional curriculum (Chappell, 2008). These results should be interpreted cautiously given concerns about the comparability of the treatment and control groups.

receive training.[5] To the best of our knowledge, there is no comprehensive data at the national level on the distribution of "open" and "closed" academies. As such, a case study analyzing Ohio's 68 academies offers the best available descriptive evidence on the variability in academy structure. In Ohio, departments in large cities have their own "closed" police academies; these academies train those already hired by the associated department and pay salary to recruits during their training. In contrast, "open" academies in other parts of the state permit departments to pay tuition and salary for their recruits to attend but are also are open to anyone who can pay the $5,000+ tuition fee (Semuels, 2020).

The "open" academy model is designed to leverage economies of scale in training by offering small departments an opportunity to essentially outsource training responsibilities. There are likely fixed costs associated with training provision, including infrastructure requirements and other curriculum delivery costs, that make the establishment of "open" academies attractive. However, one key downside of the "open" academy model (at least in Ohio) is that these academies are also able to enroll individuals who are not affiliated with any law enforcement department. As such, "open" academies may be financially incentivized to enroll low-quality applicants and to ignore problem recruits (Semuels, 2020). It seems plausible that independent enrollees may thus negatively impact outcomes for recruits who have been sent by participating police departments (through peer effects or other channels). Evidence of lower police exam passage rates in Ohio for those trained in a number of "open" as compared to "closed" academies is consistent with this hypothesis, although additional research would be needed to evaluate the extent to which these differences in outcomes can be attributed to compositional differences versus training quality (Semuels, 2020). At present, a small handful of states utilize one statewide police academy in lieu of multiple "open" academies (Semuels, 2020). In Washington, for instance, prospective officers are not permitted to independently attend the single statewide academy, which may help to mitigate concerns about participant quality. To date, the efficacy of such centralized training systems has not been rigorously assessed. Thus, whether training quality is indeed lower at "open" academies and, if so, whether alternative models hold more promise represent important avenues for future research.

V Police Officer Training: Modalities

An extensive body of work by educational and cognitive psychological researchers has investigated how information can be most effectively taught to maximize learning and knowledge retention. As highlighted in Lum et al. (2016), however, there remains little rigorous evidence on the efficacy of police training, and the evidence on the efficacy of particular training modalities for police officers is particularly sparse. That research which does exist is largely focused on

[5] There is also variation within and across states in where trainings take place. From 2011-2013, almost half of the police academies providing basic training were based at an educational institution. The next most common locations were municipal police departments (20%) and sheriffs' offices (10%) (Reaves, 2016).

process evaluations that qualitatively assess the degree to which current training modalities employ "best practices" as identified by existing theories of learning.

In Bennell et al. (2007), for instance, the authors evaluate Canadian use of force simulation training and emphasize the importance of applying principles from cognitive load theory to training evaluation. Cognitive load theory suggests that effective trainings minimize unnecessary cognitive demands and carefully manage the complex nature of the material being taught. In practice, this means teaching in a way that cements concepts in a person's long-term memory, which is done by repeated exposure to information or repeatedly conducting a task (Bennell et al., 2007). The value of applying lessons from cognitive load theory to training design has also been emphasized by other researchers in the context of policing (see, for instance, Mugford et al., 2013). Though not studied explicitly in the context of police training, there are complementary lessons on information delivery from other fields that could also be used to inform training design. For instance, as highlighted in Kang (2016), there is a large body of research by cognitive psychologists demonstrating that spaced repetition (i.e., repeated practice with material that is spaced out over time) is effective for maximizing knowledge retention. Evaluations related to how these lessons from educational and cognitive psychological research can be applied in the context of police training is much needed.[6]

With respect to pedagogy, educational researchers have also emphasized the particular value of autonomous learning activities (as opposed to lecture-based approaches) for adult learners (Knowles, 1980), and criminal justice researchers have posited that the same lessons are applicable in the context of police training (Mugford et al., 2013).[7] Blumberg et al. (2019) emphasizes in particular that alongside lectures and classroom discussion, the "practical application of theoretical knowledge into a simulated training environment has been proven to be quite efficient in improving learning, health promotion, job performance, and officers' capacity to translate theoretical knowledge into police practice."[8] At present, the two most commonly utilized field training models (the San Jose Field Training Officer Program Model and the U.S. Department of Justice Police Training Officer Program Model) differ specifically with regards to the emphasis placed on problem-based learning exercises.[9]

Blumberg et al. (2019) also highlights the importance of continuity between academy and field training to ensure that officers recognize that what is learned in the academy will prove directly

[6] One descriptive study, O'Neill et al. (2018), does indicate that booster training sessions may be effective in promoting cadet task performance (at least in the short run). In other instances, police trainings have been designed to leverage booster or refresher sessions (see, for example, McLean et al., 2020) even when the associated training evaluations are not able to rigorously assess the effects of these sessions.

[7] In the context of continuing education in the healthcare field, Bluestone et al. (2013) concludes that employing multiple training techniques (simulations, case studies, practice, and feedback) also improves knowledge acquisition, while passive instruction is generally less effective.

[8] Considering a wide range of training domains, Burke and Hutchins (2007) highlights that learner characteristics and the work environment, which influences trainees' capacity to translate learning into practice, may also play an important role in influencing training outcomes.

[9] The U.S. Department of Justice Police Training Officer Program Model emphasizes problem-based learning and also employs weekly coaching reports, among other distinguishing features (Baric, 2020).

applicable in the field. Supervisor (i.e., field training officer) practices may play an important role in promoting this continuity and past research has provided correlational evidence in support of this hypothesis. Dulin et al. (2020), for instance, finds that trainees' reported intent to transfer academy training to the field is positively correlated with a grouping of supervisory behaviors that includes an emphasis on the modeling of trained behaviors, the demonstration of confidence in the trainee, and the provision of feedback. Other researchers have similarly concluded based on the existing policing literature that supervisors play an important role in promoting officer success and have speculated that opportunities for reflection and de-briefing between trainees and trainers may be valuable (Belur et al., 2019).[10]

Vander Kooi and Palmer (2014) represents one of the few studies that empirically evaluates the efficacy of alternative training modalities in the policing context. In that study, the authors examine whether trainees respond differently to a problem-solving oriented training approach as compared to a traditional lecture-based approach. The authors find mixed evidence, with some indications that participants' self-reported critical thinking skills may respond positively to the problem-solving based approach. However, the non-randomized assignment of treatment status raises some interpretation concerns.

Although more work must be done to understand how police training can be structured to maximize learning gains, there are a number of research-supported indications that status quo training modalities are not achieving their objectives. For instance, O'Neill et al. (2018) finds in some cases that improvements in officers' skills after completed training begin to decay in subsequent weeks. Separately, pre-post evidence indicates that police training programs do not consistently increase self-reported police integrity (Blumberg et al., 2016). One small, qualitative study of 31 Minnesotan police chiefs found that a number of police supervisors report negative opinions of the recruits who complete police training, suggesting that police training programs may not weed out (or improve) initially unfit applicants (Hilal et al., 2017). Finally, many have hypothesized that existing police trainings may reinforce race and gender stereotyping and thus discourage women and people of color from entering the field (Barajas, 2021; Bykov, 2014; Haarr, 2005; Semuels, 2020). Future research that evaluates those alternative training modalities that have been shown to hold promise in other settings could help provide guidance on how to most effectively structure police training moving forward.

[10] Getty et al. (2016) provides complementary evidence that field training supervisors may also influence the number of complaints subsequently filed against officers.

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