Use of Force and De-escalation Training
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Benjamin Feigenberg
University of Illinois at Chicago

Leah Luben
University of Chicago Crime Lab

Broadly speaking, use of force training is structured to teach officers to apply a continuum of force based on the degree of threat faced. This continuum ranges from the use of verbal commands to bodily force to "less lethal" techniques (e.g., the use of pepper spray or a taser) to lethal use of force involving the officer's firearm. Within the context of use of force training, de-escalation training is intended to help officers to "resolve police-citizen encounters with less frequent and severe uses of force and, thereby, also increase officer safety" (Engel et al, 2020c). To achieve this objective, de-escalation training focuses on expanding officers' skills in creating time and space between themselves and citizens. While all police officers receive use of force training, de-escalation training remains relatively uncommon; only 16 states mandated de-escalation training as of 2017.[1] Of those 34 states without mandated training, most training decisions are left up to local departments and many departments offer a few hours or less of relevant training (Gilbert, 2017; CBS, 2019).

The most compelling evidence on these training topics comes from two recent studies designed to isolate the impact of de-escalation training on policing behaviors. These two studies both analyze the impact of the Police Executive Research Forum's (PERF) Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) training program. One study employs a randomized controlled trial design to estimate the impact of training provided to officers in Louisville, Kentucky, while the second study employs a quasi-experimental synthetic control methodology to analyze the impact of the same training curriculum in Camden County, New Jersey.[2][3]

In Engel et al. (2020), the authors exploit a stepped-wedge (staggered rollout) randomization design whereby nine police divisions (grouped into three strata) received a two-day de-escalation training across three randomly assigned dates between February and November 2019. The authors' analysis includes survey data collected from officers prior to and subsequent to the training. In sum, surveyed officers reported that they benefited from the training, although supervisors' self-reported reinforcement of the training topics was limited. In any case, this survey-based analysis does not leverage the randomized timing of training provision. Turning to the analysis of officer behaviors that does exploit the randomization of training timing, the authors find that training

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[1] More recently, lawmakers have introduced bills in a number of additional states to mandate de-escalation training (NCSL, 2021).

[2] A number of trainings that include de-escalation components but that focus more broadly on procedural justice and/or officer-citizen social interactions have also been evaluated. See, for instance, McLean et al. (2020), which concludes that the T3 social interaction training led officers to prioritize procedurally fair communications but did not significantly impact police use of force. We analyze this body of research in detail in our report on Procedural Justice Training for Police.

[3] 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.

reduced the number of use of force incidents by 28% and generated comparable declines in citizen and officer injuries (26% and 36%, respectively). These results are explained in part by a decline in arrests made by officers who received the training treatment. While these results are certainly encouraging, the authors are clear that this research output is part of a larger ongoing analysis of the experimental findings. As such, the presently available analysis lacks a comprehensive balance check that would strengthen the interpretability of findings. In addition, the robustness of estimates to specifications other than the Poisson model employed is not assessed, and there is some concern that the standard errors presented are downward biased (as they do not appear to account for the clustered randomization design).

Goh (2021) presents a complementary analysis of the impact of de-escalation training introduced in Camden County, New Jersey. There, an initial vendor trained 71 officers in 2015; ICAT training was introduced in late 2016 and provided to all officers in Camden County by the end of 2017. In this work, the author first employs an officer-level difference-in-differences design and finds little evidence that training reduced use of force. In subsequent analyses, the author moves to department-level specifications designed to account for possible within-department spillovers in training treatment effects. To conduct these analyses, the author employs a synthetic-control approach comparing Camden County to a combination of other large New Jersey police departments and finds evidence of a steep (40%) decline in serious use of force incidents per arrest in Camden in response to the introduction of de-escalation training. However, these results should be interpreted with caution. One concern is that the Camden County takeover of Camden policing duties prior to the intervention may have impacted use of force outcomes through alternative channels. A series of placebo checks also indicate that other municipalities that did not receive training nonetheless experienced comparable relative declines in serious use of force. Finally, the author's approach is constrained by the fact that Camden's crime rate and use of force rate are outliers in New Jersey; as a result, only pre-period trends in outcomes are used to construct the synthetic control group.

Turning to use of force training, we identified only a single study that specifically evaluates associated impacts: a randomized trial conducted in Finland with a sample of only 12 officers, which finds a statistically significant increase in scenario-based threat-awareness for the treatment group, as well as improvements in overall performance and in the number of correct use of force decisions made (Andersen and Gustafsberg, 2016).

In the remainder of this review, we summarize the large body of prior work that has examined de-escalation and use of force training impacts but has typically relied on less rigorous empirical methods to do so, such as cross-sectional or pre-post analyses. One additional limitation of this prior literature is that most studies have evaluated training impacts outside of the policing context (in the case of de-escalation) or have examined the effects of various training topics in conjunction (in the case of use of force).

A 2020 meta-analysis on de-escalation research provides useful guidance regarding the state of the literature prior to the dissemination of the two studies discussed above. This meta-analysis reviewed 64 studies conducted in industries like nursing or psychiatry, and the authors found that the methodologies of the studies examined were typically fairly weak. Overall, the results from

these underlying studies were indicative of "slight-to-moderate individual and organizational improvements" due to the training interventions examined, and the authors concluded that currently "not one study had been conducted to examine the impact of de-escalation training on officer attitudes or behavior" (Engel et al, 2020b; Norwood, 2020). Pre-post analyses related to de-escalation training offer more cause for optimism. For instance, the Dallas Police Department increased its emphasis on de-escalation after David Brown became Dallas Police Chief in 2010 and excessive force complaints there dropped by 83 percent between 2010 and 2016 (Baer, 2016; DPD, 2016). As discussed, however, the pre-post methodology is not well-suited for recovering the causal impact of an intervention of interest (in this case the introduction of de-escalation training).

Rigorous evidence from the policing context on how use of force training impacts officer attitudes and behaviors is similarly lacking. One key challenge is that use of force training is often bundled with other topics at the police academy, in the field, and while in service, making independent evaluations difficult. Existing studies related to the effects of training intensity have typically relied on cross-sectional comparisons across departments. This approach is exemplified by research such as Stickle (2016). In that work, the author relies on a large sample of law enforcement agencies and concludes that higher pre-employment screening standards, higher educational requirements, and increased training hours (encompassing *all* training) are associated with reductions in use of force complaints. However, the author is unable to assess the isolated effects of particular types of training. More generally, research employing similar methods is subject to the concern that omitted factors may significantly bias estimated impacts. Indeed, Lee et al. (2010) employs a cross-sectional analysis approach and arrives at essentially the opposite conclusion in finding that higher hours of in-service training are associated with more intensive use of force. Whether this finding indicates that more in-service training really leads to greater use of force, or whether departments that have higher levels of use of force (due to various unmeasured factors) respond by increasing training intensity, cannot be determined from this sort of research design.

Although distinct in focus, there also exist complementary studies that estimate correlational relationships between officer use of force outcomes and use of force restrictions as well as suspect, officer, and encounter characteristics. The most relevant study related to use of force restrictions is a 2016 review of the 100 largest police departments in the U.S. (McKesson et al., 2016), focused primarily on the 91 departments which recorded civilian deaths. This work identified a negative correlation between departmental force restrictions and civilian deaths in encounters. However, the role of use of force restrictions in improving policing outcomes is distinct from the role of use of force training and this analysis is subject to the standard concerns associated with interpreting correlational evidence as measuring causal relationships of interest. In work focused on the importance of situational factors, Klahm and Tillyer (2010) summarize prior analyses of the relationships between suspect, officer, and encounter characteristics and officers' use of force decisions. The authors conclude that most factors examined show no strong correlations with officer use of force decisions.

In sum, while the findings from the two recent and complementary studies on de-escalation training are not definitive, the standardization of de-escalation training curricula across many large

police departments, paired with the set of on-going evaluations being conducted, indicate that both the depth and breadth of the available evidence on de-escalation training impacts will continue to grow over the coming years. In contrast, the prospects for clear research-based guidance regarding the efficacy of use of force training remain more limited and generating such evidence represents an important direction for future research. Consistent with this lack of rigorous work on the efficacy of use of force training, the National Association for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement recommends that de-escalation training, rather than use of force training, provides the greatest promise for use of force management (U.S. CCR, 2018). The final report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing also emphasizes the need for widespread adoption of de-escalation training. At the same time, police departments have begun implementing alternative approaches aimed at promoting de-escalation practices. One such example comes from the Philadelphia Police Department, where Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey noted in 2015 that commendations in departments seem to prioritize "dramatic fire fights." Recognizing that the ways in which officers are commended and promoted could be another avenue by which de-escalation efforts are reinforced, Philadelphia subsequently introduced a commendation explicitly intended to recognize successful de-escalation. The Los Angeles Police Department offers a similar commendation (Gilbert, 2017). Research on the efficacy of similar changes to either explicit or implicit officer incentives represents another fruitful direction for future research.

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