Enhancing POLICE RESEARCH *Partnerships*

A Path to Actionable Findings and Community Trust

MARCH 2026

Edited by Janice Iwama, Ph.D., American University, and Shawn Hill, University of California, Santa Barbara

Acknowledgment

As Guest Editors of this special issue, we are honored to highlight the innovative scholarship of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) LEADS Scholars. Each contribution in this collection reflects the creativity, rigor, and commitment to evidence-based practice that define the LEADS program. Together, these articles bridge research and practice, advancing our collective understanding of policing, officer wellness, technology, and community engagement.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the NIJ LEADS Scholars who contributed their research and to the reviewers whose constructive feedback strengthened this issue. We are grateful to Ian Adams, Lisa Barao, Laure Brimbal, Brandon del Pozo, Liz Groff, Melissa Kilmer, Scott Mourtgos, Nusret Sahin, and Ashleigh Wojslawowicz for carefully reviewing these articles and Steve Schuetz for his assistance in shaping this special issue. Special thanks are also due to Dr. Nancy La Vigne for her continued support in fostering practitioner–researcher collaboration and cultivating a new generation of scholar-practitioners in criminal justice.

Finally, I wish to thank the staff of the National Police Institute for their guidance and professionalism throughout the publication process. It is our hope that this special issue not only celebrates the achievements of the LEADS Scholars but also encourages ongoing partnerships that bring research to life in the service of safer, more effective, and equitable policing.

Janice & Shawn

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Enhancing Police Research Partnerships: A Path to Actionable Findings and Community Trust

Nancy La Vigne, Ph.D., Rutgers University

In recent years, the landscape of policing has undergone significant scrutiny and transformation, driven by calls for reform, accountability, and increased community trust. A critical element in this evolution is the collaboration among police officers, analysts, and academic researchers to address pressing questions that impact policing strategies and community relations. The articles in this edited volume underscore how police officers who engage in research—whether through independent inquiry or partnerships with academics—are uniquely positioned to produce actionable findings. The goal of bridging evidence to action is foundational to the National Institute of Justice's (NIJ) mission to build knowledge that informs public safety and the fair and effective administration of justice.

NIJ's Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) program is central to that goal. Complementing NIJ's well-established track record in translating and disseminating research findings in ways that are understandable and compelling to those who can make use of them, LEADS works from the inside out, nurturing law enforcement agency officers and staff who have self-identified as being research-minded and interested in further developing their skills. LEADS has spurred a new generation of police practitioner researchers, affectionately known as "pracademics," who attend academic conferences, conduct research in their agencies, expand their data analysis and methodological skills, and importantly, network with each other in a highly collaborative and supportive manner. It is my belief that this program, and the research products generated from it as represented by the articles in this volume, not only advance the field of policing but also foster an environment conducive to meaningful reform, enhanced community policing, and restored trust between police and the communities they serve.

At the heart of effective policing is the ability to communicate and build relationships with the community. The chapter by Brimbal et al. on improving communication skills of patrol officers through evidence-based interviewing underscores the importance of this foundational work. Theoretically, officers trained in these skills are better equipped to engage with community members, particularly in high-stress situations. When officers identify communication as a key area of improvement and partner with researchers to design effective training programs, the outcomes become not only relevant but tailored to the specific needs of community members. This collaboration allows for the development of training protocols that go beyond theoretical

frameworks, ensuring they are community-centered and grounded in the realities officers face daily. The positive findings on trained officers' knowledge acquisition about communications skills along with their positive perceptions of the training holds promise for the program achieving its intended impact.

Closely related to communications skills are active listening skills, which are essential in all manner of community interactions and are particularly crucial in high-stakes situations like hostage negotiations. Poorboy and Quinby's research on active listening skills by hostage negotiators sheds light on the degree to which negotiators apply best practices in areas in that need improvement. This vital information can inform models for both crisis negotiations and all manner of communication strategies within police work. By investing in training that emphasizes these skills, departments can enhance their operational effectiveness, resolve high-stakes crises safely, and establish stronger relationships with community members.

The evaluation of critical incident response training by Hall and Hoard also reflects the broader theme of addressing training needs versus merely completing checkboxes. Many departments grapple with the challenge of ensuring that training is not just a formality but is relevant and impactful. By engaging in research to evaluate the efficacy of training programs, officers can help identify gaps and propose modifications that address actual performance outcomes. Such research-driven evaluations not only improve the skills of officers but also signal to the community that law enforcement is committed to ongoing improvement and accountability.

Labeling theory presents another critical lens through which police officers can examine their practices. David Miner argues persuasively that by reconsidering how officers think about, refer to, and designate people based on the types of offenses they may have committed in the past, officers can better understand the implications of labeling individuals and the long-term consequences it may have on community relations. This theoretical approach, when combined with empirical research, can inform policies that minimize stigmatizing labeling and foster rehabilitation rather than recidivism.

The chapter on translating academic evidence into actionable strategies underscores the essential role of police leaders in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Mourtgos and Adams document how authentic engagement between police and academic researchers can yield reductions in crime. Officers who learn from and apply academic findings can implement reforms that are not only evidence-based but also contextually relevant. This process of translation is crucial in creating a culture of research within police departments, where officers are empowered to question, investigate, and innovate based on their unique insights and experiences. The more officers are engaged in research about what makes for effective and equitable policing practices, the more likely the findings will be used to make improvements in service of public safety.

Retention of officers is another area where research partnerships can lead to significant advancements. The exploration of the relationship between recruit characteristics and officer retention by Phiri and Alan underscores the importance of understanding how the needs and

motivations of officers can directly impact their longevity in the profession. By evaluating workplace factors that influence retention, agencies can develop targeted strategies to support officers throughout their careers. This is especially important in fostering an environment that values officer well-being, professional growth, and community engagement. Such efforts not only reduce turnover but also build a workforce that is better equipped to serve and connect with the community.

Kilmer et al.'s evaluation of multi-agency peer support programs highlights the necessity of addressing the mental health and well-being of officers. By researching and implementing support systems designed to meet the specific needs of law enforcement personnel, agencies can create an environment that not only promotes resilience but also cultivates trust within the community. The use of peers in this process holds promise in overcoming the stigma of help-seeking that is often a part of police culture. The impact of effective officer well-being programs cannot be overstated: Theoretically, officers who benefit from such programs are more likely to engage positively with the public, thereby fostering an atmosphere of collaboration and understanding.

Lastly, Herold's chapter explains the importance of using implementation science to translate research into practical and sustainable policing strategies. One implementation science principle, the co-production of research, specifically highlights the need for collaboration between police, researchers, and other stakeholders. Working together as equal partners throughout the entire research and intervention process ensures that research findings are relevant and practical, leading to better outcomes and the sustainability of new practices.

Collectively, these articles highlight how police officers and analysts who conduct their own research or partner with academics play a pivotal role in generating actionable findings that can lead to meaningful reform. By focusing on the critical questions that arise within their agencies and communities, these practitioner-scholars are uniquely positioned to build knowledge that enhances their practices, supports community policing initiatives, and restores trust between law enforcement and the public. As policing continues to evolve, NIJ will continue to have a key role in fostering a culture of inquiry and collaboration through LEADS and its other translational research activities. These investments will be essential for ensuring that the field progresses in ways that are responsive to the needs of both officers and the communities they serve. Through research, training, and a commitment to improvement, police departments can become catalysts for positive change, ultimately contributing to a safer and more just society.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

NANCY LA VIGNE, PH.D., is a distinguished criminologist who began her tenure as Dean of the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice in March 2025, having previously directed the U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice. Throughout her career, she has been at the forefront of advancing data-driven, research-informed criminal justice policy—spanning policing, corrections reform, prisoner reentry, and bridging researchers with practitioners and policymakers.

“Supporting Our Community:” Exploring the Impact of a Multi-Agency Police Peer Support Program

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. Policing is a high-stress career which can have a serious impact on officers’ mental health and wellness. This study expands upon one evidence-based practice to promote officer well-being: peer support programs. In addition to training with mental health professionals, peer support officers engage with colleagues on various mental health and wellbeing topics. Using data from a multi-agency peer support program in southern New Jersey, this study describes experiences during the development and design stages as well as specific challenges faced by officers and administration. Descriptive analyses offer insight into the prevalence of wellness topics discussed among officers and the types of interventions taking place among peer support members.

Policy Implications. There is limited research on the development and implementation of peer support programs among U.S. law enforcement agencies. The current study fills this gap by providing a nuanced look at both a peer support program’s early stages (i.e., design and development) and the later stages evaluating ongoing program and participant processes. Findings provide information that may prove useful for future program development and this study offers recommendations to guide the planning and execution of future peer support programs.

Keywords: mental health, officer well-being, peer support

Introduction

Policing is an extremely taxing occupation characterized by dangerous and stressful situations that can adversely affect officers' mental health (Purba & Demou, 2019; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019). In comparison to the general population, police officers are more likely toexperience higher levels of anxiety, burnout, depression, and stress (Gullon-Scott & Longstaff, 2024; Lees et al., 2019). Moreover, officers are more likely to struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and suicide ideation (Chae & Boyle, 2012; Soomro & Yanos, 2019). The job demands quick and effective decision-making in stressful situations, which can take a toll on officers' mental health and wellbeing. However, many officers find it difficult to ask for help due to distrust, stigma, and/or fear of repercussions (Jetelina et al., 2020; Karaffa and Koch, 2016).

Peer support programming, which emerged within several law enforcement agencies in the 1980s, was introduced as a promising practice to provide officers with mental health support (Reese, 1995). Not only do these programs emphasize the importance of relying on peers, but they also supply advice and support based on shared experiences and common social identities (Uhl et al., 2023). The number of mental health programs and services offered to officers is growing and now includes annual wellness visits, crisis hotlines, and employee assistance programs (EAPs). Peer support programs are another avenue for referring officers to professional services when peers cannot provide the necessary support (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2023; Van Hasselt et al., 2019). Peer support programs are usually led by professionals and sustained by the insights of fellow officers. But program development and administration vary tremendously from place to place. As a result, there is limited research about peer support programs' impact on law enforcement agencies.

In response to this gap in the literature, this article presents preliminary findings from a study of a multi-agency peer support program. We first discuss the development and impact of law enforcement peer support programs based on prior research. Next, we describe the development of a multi-agency peer support program in New Jersey known as the Multi-Agency Police Peer Support (MAPPS) Program, which is the focus of the authors' ongoing evaluation. Since 2020, MAPPS team members have provided support to officers across three New Jersey agencies in Camden County. Looking at preliminary evidence during an 11-month period, we provide some findings on the frequency of interventions, topics discussed, and referrals made by MAPPS team members. We discuss the study's next steps and future considerations for research evaluating peer support programming.

Literature Review

Starting in the 1980s, several major law enforcement agencies, such as the Boston Police Department, Los Angeles Police Department, and San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department, introduced peer support programming as a crucial component of assistance and intervention

for the mental health and wellbeing of officers (Klimley et al., 2018; Reese, 1995). Peer support programs offer emotional support to officers navigating both work-related and non-work-related trauma. These programs, which generally involve one-on-one meetings between officers and peer supporters, acknowledge the reality that many officers prefer to speak to peers with shared experiences (Feuer, 2021; Venville et al., 2024). Not only are peers often the first to hear about an officer's mental health concerns and/or symptoms, but they are also the first to see any signs of psychological distress in their daily interactions (Klimley et al., 2018). Peer supporters may offer advice and support to their fellow officers and, in some instances, encourage officers to seek professional help for mental health concerns. Therefore, peer support programs not only serve to improve individual officers' wellbeing, but they can also serve as an important tool in overcoming the barriers and stigmas associated with seeking mental health help (Bell & Eski, 2016; Bonner & Crowe, 2022; Dowling et al., 2005).

As peer support programs have gained popularity over the years, some have expanded to provide peer supporters with specialized training on pro-active mental health and wellness support options. In other words, peer supporters undergo training on mental health and wellness from a licensed mental health clinician who holds a graduate or post-graduate degree and is certified to work with first responders (Uhl et al., 2023). There are numerous advantages to these types of programs. First, this training provides peer supporters with additional knowledge to more effectively identify officers' needs and engage with them before their challenges become significant. While some agencies may offer their officers the opportunity to meet with mental health professionals, these professionals may not be as readily available as peer supporters. Thus, trained peer supporters can apply evidence-based practices and mental health techniques to support their fellow officers rather than wait to schedule an appointment with a mental health professional. Second, this training potentially reduces the influence of police subculture. Because the stigmatization of help-seeking is influenced by police subculture, these trainings offer peer supporters the opportunity to gain a non-law enforcement perspective from a mental health professional who has been trained on interventions and programs to assist fellow officers (Drew & Martin, 2021). Because mental health professionals are bound by confidentiality, ethical guidelines, and other laws, peer supporters can receive feedback within a judgement-free space and without fear of negatively impacting their career during the training. Finally, the continued partnership between peer supporters and mental health professionals cultivates trust and may reduce some of the stigma attached to seeking help for issues associated with mental health among officers.

Despite the increasing popularity of peer support programs among law enforcement agencies, a limited number of studies have examined their impact (Castellano, 2012; Jones et al., 2022; Van Hasselt et al., 2019). First, while peer support programs are becoming increasingly common, there is limited information on the availability of peer support programs across the country. Bonner and Crowe (2022) found that officers from larger agencies were more likely to report having access to peer counseling or support. Specifically, 89% of respondents in agencies with more than 250 officers reported access to peer support while only 42% of respondents from

agencies with fewer than 50 officers had access to peer support (Bonner & Crowe, 2022). Second, it is unclear why officers reach out to peer supporters. In other words, there is limited research on what topics officers are most likely to request support for (Fallon et al., 2023). For example, Milliard (2020) found that peer support team members provided the most support for organizational stressors among police given their shared lived experience. Venville and colleagues (2024), on the other hand, found that officers indicated their experience with peer supporters provided them with a judgement-free space and helped them restore their social and family relationships. Finally, officers may not use any of the existing mental health and wellness programs and services, including peer support programs, even when agencies offer them (Padilla, 2023). For example, Drew and Martin (2023) found that nearly 40% of officers who had access to peer supporters sought to use the programs. Therefore, it is important to identify whether peer supporters are being utilized, what the reasons are for officers reaching out to them, and whether officers are utilizing other programs for mental health support to determine their impact on officers’ mental health and wellness.

Overall, research provides some promising conclusions on peer support programs in law enforcement. First, peer support programs are instrumental in helping officers develop a social network and reconnect with their family and social relationships—factors that are associated with lower stress (Page & Jacobs, 2011). Second, peer support programs offer officers a judgement-free space to confide in peers who have shared experiences (Chae & Boyle, 2012; Crowe et al., 2022). Third, peer support programs are valuable for addressing mental health concerns among officers while mitigating stigmatization. However, despite their popularity, some officers criticize the lack of confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and connection to law enforcement culture since they are generally comprised of fellow officers (Uhl et al., 2023). Therefore, more research is needed to evaluate their effectiveness.

Multi-Agency Police Peer Support (MAPPS) Program

While attending Temple University’s Police Leadership graduate certificate program in 2016-2017, Captain William Walsh developed a strategic plan for the Voorhees Township Police Department to implement a holistic organizational health and wellness program in partnership with Dr. Jennifer Kelly, a police and public safety psychologist. The goal of the program was to provide officers with the opportunity to access several mental health and wellness resources and services, including an annual wellness visit with Dr. Kelly, family wellness seminars, an employee assistance program, and an employee and family wellness guidebook. After implementing the program, the Voorhees Township Police Department partnered with Dr. Patricia Griffin of Holy Family University to conduct a pre- and post-evaluation of the program’s mental health and wellness services, which offered recommendations on how to improve their existing resources and services. In particular, the findings revealed that some officers preferred to speak with a peer who had similar experiences rather than a licensed mental health clinician, chaplain, or EAP provider. Thus, the research helped

drive the creation, mission, selection process, and training curriculum of the peer support program.

In 2020, Captain William Walsh and Dr. Jennifer Kelly developed the MAPPS Team with the assistance of several key individuals who had experience in developing peer support programs in other agencies. For example, Dr. Medina Baumgart, who is a police psychologist with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, provided assistance and support in the design of the program's table of organization, selection process, and training. Dr. Vincent Van Hasselt,[1] who is a faculty member at Nova Southeastern University, also provided support in the 40-hour training. Captain Walsh, who served as the program's first coordinator, and Dr. Kelly, who served as the qualified mental health professional, partnered with the following three Camden County, New Jersey agencies to create the multi-agency peer support program: the Cherry Hill Township Police Department, the Gloucester Township Police Department, and the Voorhees Township Police Department.[2] Officers interested in serving as peer supporters were recruited from the three agencies and asked to complete an application form. The goal was to select individuals with whom their peers would feel comfortable speaking to about personal and/or professional adversity. Officers were disqualified from the applicant pool if they had internal affairs issues or poor work performance. The approved applicants were moved on to an application review and a confidential in-person interview with Captain Walsh and Dr. Kelly. At the conclusion of the process, the peer support team leaders selected the first cohort of 23 officers to participate in a mandatory 40-hour training program before becoming peer supporters.

A key component of the MAPPS Team's successful development is the quarterly eight-hour in-service training and debriefing sessions led by Dr. Kelly. Following the mandatory 40-hour training program during the selection process, peer supporters continue to participate in quarterly eight-hour in-service trainings and debriefing sessions throughout the year to discuss any challenges or questions about peer contacts over the past three-month period, review requests for psychological first aid debriefings following critical incidents, and consult with Dr. Kelly on cases and available referral options. These trainings and debriefing sessions allow Dr. Kelly clinical oversight to ensure team members have not experienced vicarious trauma, acted outside of their scope as peers, or caused harm. Information from these meetings helps team leadership provide feedback to the agencies to create healthier organizations while maintaining confidentiality of the individuals seeking help and their peer supporters.

Additionally, topics for new training presentations are identified from the needs demonstrated in their peer contact reports. Following every peer contact, peer supporters complete

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1 Dr. Van Hasselt, along with several doctoral students working towards careers as police and public safety psychologists, facilitated a virtual presentation of the NSU Peers As Law Enforcement Support (PALS) training program which represented one-half of the 40-hour initial training for team members. These students deftly contributed to the new peer supporters' skills acquisition through effective role-playing scenarios. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the initial team members were trained in two separate cohorts with a hybrid of virtual and in-person instruction.

2 Each agency involved in MAPPS identified as a smaller agency compared to some other U.S. law enforcement totals. Cherry Hill Township Police Department and Gloucester Township Police Department each had 140 and 135 total sworn officers, respectively. Voorhees Township Police Department was the smallest, with about 54 total sworn officers.

reports on each contact, including whether they felt prepared to discuss the concern with their peer. This data serves two purposes for the quarterly training. First, subject matter experts and research organizations are consulted to tailor the ongoing training to address any organizational needs based on the feedback provided in the reports. For example, in 2023, data showed that MAPPS members were increasingly asked to help their peers with issues relating to grief. In response, a local hospice facility was asked for training to assist peers’ navigation of the components of the grief process and how to act in an empathetic and supportive manner. The hospice graciously sent a trainer on several occasions to aid the MAPPS Team. Second, the MAPPS Team leaders review the data during each quarterly eight-hour in-service training to refine the measures and ensure accurate recording of every peer contact. Any relevant changes or concerns are communicated with the research team at American University (led by Dr. Iwama) for review. American University regularly participates in this portion of the training session to maintain an open dialogue with team members. Team members are able to better understand what the researchers are hoping to measure with the data collection tool, and researchers are informed of any improvements that only those actively engaging in data collection (i.e., the MAPPS Team members) could identify. Overall, the data collection serves as an internal performance management tool to track peer support team member activity and comfort with the peers’ scenarios to plan training for the following quarter.

Nevertheless, any shift in culture and movement away from “the way things have always been done” is bound to cause growing pains, blind spots, and communication issues. Although the initial development of MAPPS was uneventful apart from COVID-19 illnesses and safety protocol considerations, there were several challenges that emerged in the first year of the program. First, having three separate police departments with different cultures and organizational structures sometimes required delicate navigation to maintain the program’s integrity and ensure all partners were satisfied with their investment. Second, it became clear that peer supporters needed to be reminded about the limitations of confidentiality and mandatory reporting. Peer supporters tended to focus on protecting their contacts’ confidentiality rather than exceptions to it or the importance of providing informed consent. Third, several measures had to be taken to address burnout among peer supporters. While police officers are known to experience burnout, the risk is greater among peer supporters who are also experiencing it from their job as officers as well as their role as peer supporters. For this reason, the initial 40-hour training and continuous in-service trainings regularly discuss the importance of self-care and participating in therapy. For example, several MAPPS members, who have taken a hiatus from the team or removed themselves for their own health, wellness, and work-life balance, have been supported by the program. Team members and the three police department chiefs consistently receive the message that needing a hiatus or stepping down would not be viewed negatively but rather supported for the good of the team member, their families, and peers. Moreover, the mantra “first, do no harm” has been a driving force behind how and why the team was created, operates, and evolves. The team works to remain aligned with its ethos. Learning organizations must grow from challenges, and MAPPS continues to proactively seek, identify, and remedy weaknesses.

Data Collection

As mentioned earlier, the MAPPS Team has collected data to maximize the peer supporters' efficacy and confidence in their service provision. MAPPS Team leaders have refined the data collection system over time from monthly paper reports to online monthly reports to an online activity log following every peer contact. In 2024, MAPPS members began completing entries in real time following each activity and intervention with a peer rather than waiting until the end of the month to record these actions. The reports include information on the form of communication (e.g., phone call, text message, etc.), topics discussed (e.g., emotional/mental health concerns, physical health challenges), and any referrals made (e.g., private counseling). Not only do these reports offer administrators with an opportunity to address any gaps in training, but they also offer the opportunity to better understand the activities and interventions that peer supporters are engaging in to support their peers. Due to the limited research on peer supporters' activity, we discuss preliminary findings from the peer contact reports in the following section to better understand the type of outreach, areas requiring support, and referrals made by peer supporters.

Findings

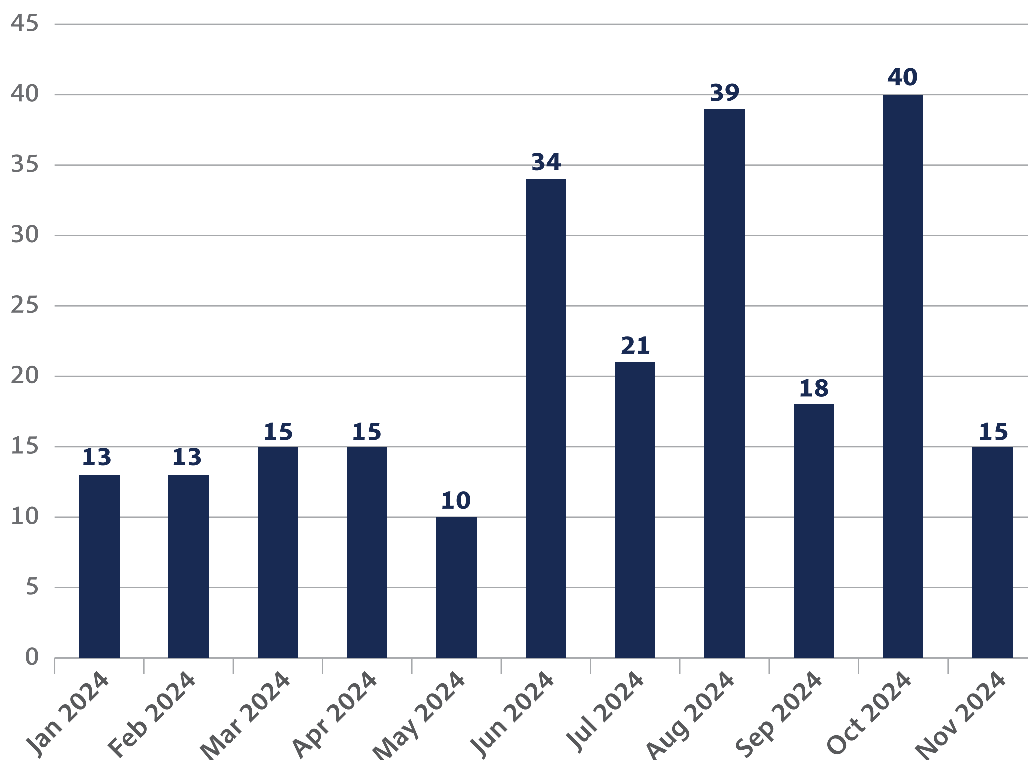

FIGURE 1. Total Number of Reported Peer Support Interventions by Month, January 2024-November 2024

The preliminary data represents 233 contacts made by 27 peer supporters during an 11-month period, from January 2024 to November 2024. On average, peer supporters made about 21 contacts per month with the largest share reported in June, August, and October (see Figure 1). However, it is important to note that during this time, a small number of officers conducted a large share of the peer contacts due to peer supporters who came in as new recruits, peer supporters who were on scheduled leave, or peer supporters who retired during the 11-month period.

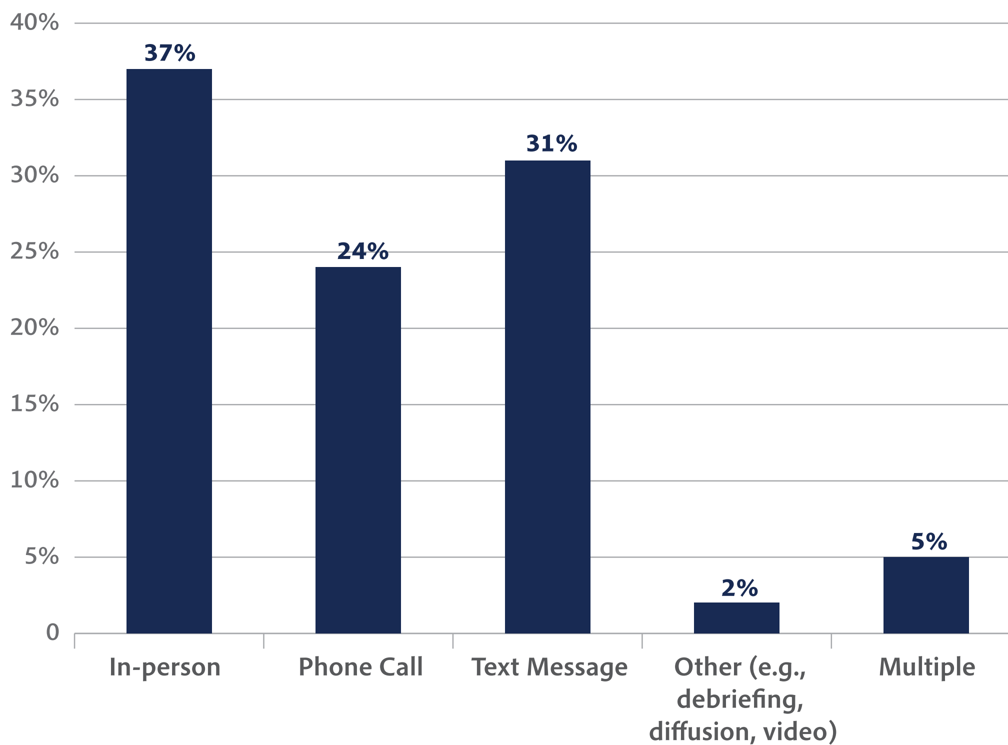

FIGURE 2. Percent of Reported Peer Support Interventions by Form of Contact, January 2024-November 2024

As shown in Figure 2, most peer supporters met with their peers in-person (37%) while others spoke on the phone (24%) or sent text messages (31%). A smaller share of peer supporters used multiple forms of communication (5%), and others met during critical incident stress debriefings/diffusions[3] or using video chat (2%). While peer supporters are available to support officers from any of the three agencies, most contacts were with members from their own agency (88%), which may explain why a large share of peer support meetings took place in-person.

3 Critical incident stress debriefings (CISD) refer to interventions, which are scheduled with officers that have been exposed to a stressful or traumatic event to provide them with space to process the incident. Critical incident stress diffusions, on the other hand, are shortened versions of CISD that take place immediately or soon after a critical incident to address basic human needs before a scheduled CISD.

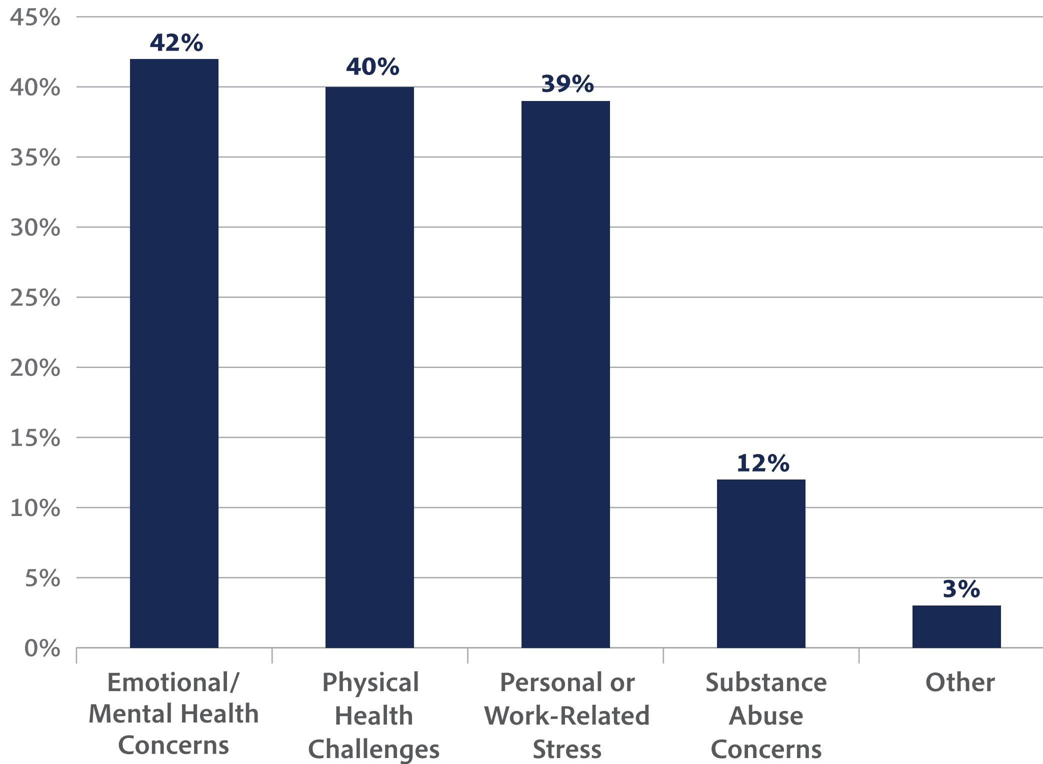

FIGURE 3. Percent of Reported Peer Support Interventions by Topic, January 2024-November 2024[4]

Turning to topics that were discussed during interventions, peer supporters were asked whether they addressed substance abuse concerns (e.g., alcohol abuse, etc.), emotional/ mental health concerns (e.g., anger issues, anxiety, depression, etc.), physical health challenges (e.g., injury on-duty, injury off-duty, trauma exposure, etc.), and/or personal or work-related stress (e.g., agency-related stress, job-related stress, financial stress, etc.). As shown in Figure 3, most peer supporters spoke to officers about their emotional/mental health concerns (42%), physical health challenges (40%), and/or personal/work-related stress (39%). On the other hand, substance abuse concerns (12%) and other topics (3%) were less likely to be discussed during a peer support activity/ intervention. However, about one-third (31%) of these peer contacts discussed topics from more than one area of concern.

Figure 4 displays the percentage of referrals given by peer support team members. Although peer supporters are encouraged to refer officers to programs/services when it is deemed necessary, they are not required to do so. More than three-quarters of the peer contacts that took place during the 11-month period resulted in no referral. In other words, officers felt that they had sufficiently addressed the officer's concern and/or indicated that they would continue to meet with the officer to provide their support. On the other hand, six percent of the peer contacts resulted in a

4 *Note*. Survey respondents were able to select more than one topic for each activity/intervention completed.

referral being made to another MAPPS Team member who the peer supporter felt would be better equipped to support the officer, and six percent of the peer contacts resulted in multiple referrals. Less than 4 percent of the peer contacts were referred to alcohol or substance abuse programs (3%), employee assistance program (3%), private counseling (4%), or another program (1%).

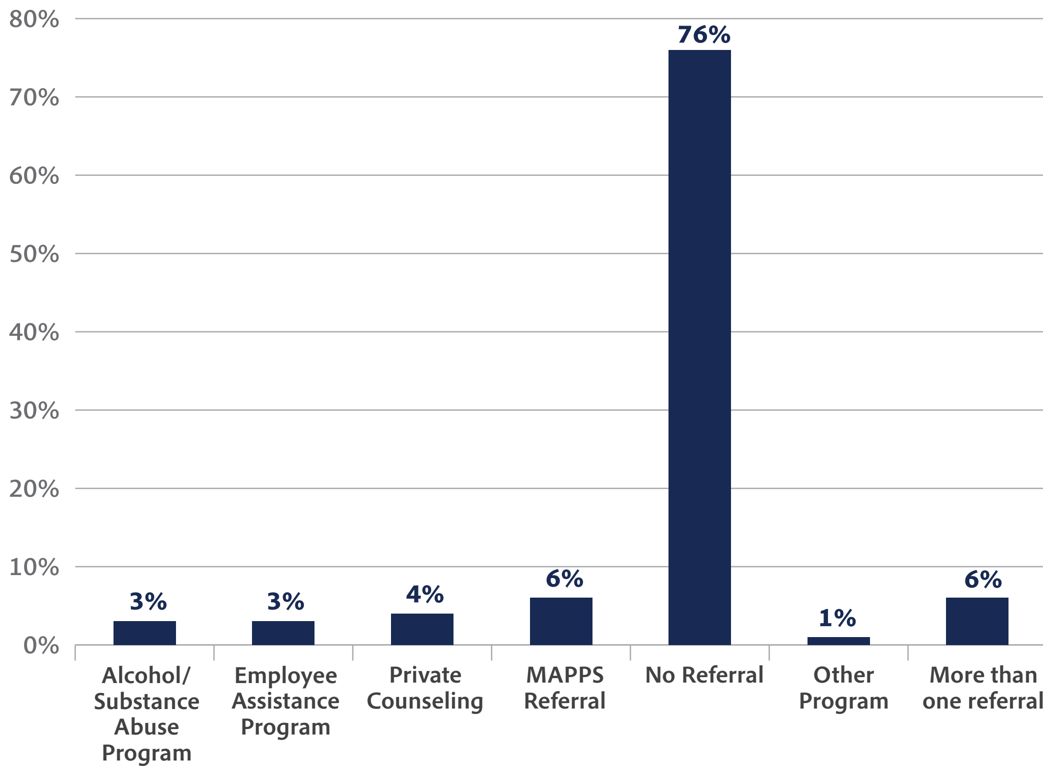

FIGURE 4. Percent of Reported Peer Support Interventions by Type of Referral, January 2024-November 2024

At the end of each report, peer supporters indicated how confident they felt in addressing the areas of concern brought up during the intervention. On a scale of 1 to 10, the average confidence rating among all peer supporters who submitted reports was 9.2, with a standard deviation of 1.04. Therefore, while ratings ranged from 5-10, most of the peer supporters felt confident about addressing the topics that they discussed with their fellow officers.

Summary and Conclusions

With the growing number of peer support programs offered by law enforcement agencies across the U.S., it is important to share experiences and lessons learned during the design and implementation of specific peer support programs. More importantly, it is essential to identify best practices for small law enforcement agencies, which make up the largest share of U.S. agencies and

face unique challenges (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2023). Based on this study's preliminary findings, peer supporters in the MAPPS program are actively engaging with officers. While the number of average activities/interventions can vary per month, officers do appear to be utilizing peer supporters. Continuous monitoring of monthly totals may be helpful to detect unique patterns given major events, changes in leadership, and/or policy changes. For instance, certain months may see greater need for peer support contacts and thus require more attention.

Overall, the preliminary findings revealed several key conclusions. First, peer supporters engaged more often with officers within their agency. While the MAPPS program is unique in that it encompasses three agencies working together, evidence suggests that officers are more comfortable engaging with peer supporters they know or meeting with a peer supporter in the same agency possibly due to their accessibility and availability. While past research has highlighted differences in the offerings of peer support programs by agency size (Bonner and Crowe, 2022), it is unclear what impact agency size has on the accessibility, availability, and utility of peer support programs. Second, findings indicate that peer supporters largely engaged in conversations about emotional and physical health concerns as well as personal- or work-related stress. Considering some of the most common negative health impacts identified among police including anxiety, depression, and burnout (Gullon-Scott & Longstaff, 2024; Lees et al., 2019), it is xxxnot surprising these are among the most commonly discussed topic categories during peer support interactions (Gullon-Scott & Longstaff, 2024; Lees et al., 2019). Third, peer supporters expressed confidence in discussing the topics encountered during contact, which can likely be attributed to regular MAPPS trainings. The MAPPS program prioritizes regular team meetings where members can request more training in specific topics. Once a topic area that could benefit from more training is identified, lessons led by a mental health professional are provided during the meetings. This continuous cycle of training not only teaches peer supporters best practices, it also provides the program with opportunities to direct the training according to officers' needs. While past research has highlighted the usefulness of incorporating training from mental health professionals (Uhl et al., 2023), research has not fully explored the benefits of continuous training—or the effects of having the peer supporters direct training topics. Finally, it is surprising to learn that a large share of officers are not being referred to other programs or services for support. It is possible that peer supporters are capable of addressing officers' concerns or challenges due to similar lived experiences. On the other hand, future research should examine how peer support programs compare to other existing mental health and wellness resources and services being offered to officers by their agencies and whether the lack of trust in other types of programs or services may influence referrals.

Considering the serious mental and physical health tolls policing can have on officers (Purba & Demou, 2019; Velazquez & Hernandez, 2019), reseach needs to further explore the development and implementation of peer support programs. Peer support has proven to be an effective tool for officers' mental health and wellness (Bell & Eski, 2016; Bonner & Crowe, 2022). For this reason, further research is warranted. It is important to advance this research by investigating what practices enhance the relationships between peer supporters and officers and how to replicate

these successes with agencies' available resources. This study provides first-hand experience before, during, and after designing a multi-agency peer support program. While our recommendations should not be generalized to every agency, they do provide an exploratory account of what other peer support program coordinators may encounter.

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Training to Needs or Checkboxes? An Evaluation of Critical Incident Response Training

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. Assessing critical incident training outcomes assists law enforcement agencies in identifying areas of strength, deficiencies, and outdated response plans. This information is instrumental to informing training initiatives and developing evidence-based policies that align with the evolving needs of law enforcement agencies. The Federal Law Enforcement Training Center developed a Critical Incident Response Training course with objectives that go beyond threat mitigation, advancing into scene management, communication, and incident command. This study explored law enforcement performance during critical incident scenarios, including large-scale, multiagency responses to active aggressors. The study employed pre- and post-surveys and qualitative focus groups to evaluate the impact of the novel course on officer confidence and preparedness during critical incident response. Results indicated the course's impact on confidence and preparedness was statistically significant and meaningful.

Policy Implications. Findings suggest agencies should maintain clear communication protocols to streamline the information sharing process and aid efficient performance. They should also develop mandatory critical incident training for commanding officers to ensure preparedness for critical incident response and management. Finally, agencies should conduct regular scenario-based training to keep skills sharp and ensure readiness for real-world incidents.

Keywords: critical incidents, police training, incident command, active aggressor

Introduction

Critical incident training for law enforcement equips officers with the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively handle high-stakes and high-stress situations. The dynamic nature of law enforcement responsibilities requires constant adaptation of training methodologies for officer and community safety. Existing critical incident training is often limited to officers responding to and addressing immediate threats. The Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) supplemented the learning objectives of their Active Shooter Threat Training Program in its novel Critical Incident Response Training (CIRT) that goes beyond threat mitigation and incorporates scene management, communication, medical intervention, and incident command. These curriculum additions expanded the tactical focus of the active shooter training course, providing additional knowledge on response to and management of critical incident scenes.

As law enforcement agencies explore progressive ways to enhance officer performance and provide relevant training to officers, departments have shifted to data-informed models of decision making. Assessing the impact of training identifies areas for improvement and highlights successes. This informs future training initiatives and develops evidence-based policies and practices that align with law enforcement's evolving needs. These initiatives have improved and expanded measures to improve officer performance and address operational deficiencies. Specifically, they provide data to inform departmental training and help develop courses based on performance measures generated from audits, peer review boards, internal investigations, and community responses. Moreover, they offer evaluative approaches to determine agency, unit, or individual needs. The development of the novel CIRT course was based on performance data from a large metropolitan police department that partnered with FLETC for updating the course, including reviews of the department's critical incident response and management. The reviews identified deficiencies in officer response. In these departmental performance reviews and for this study, a critical incident is identified as a mass casualty incident, active aggressor, hostage-involved situation, or officer-involved shooting. Following the large metropolitan police department's evidence-based approach, FLETC addressed multiple recommendations for officer training and updates in a way that extended beyond checking boxes, providing a crafted course to focus on critical incident response and management. The development of the novel CIRT training was centered on the deficiencies found, forming the course's main components and learning objectives.

The current study included an evaluation of the FLETC CIRT course to assess the impact on participants' perception of confidence in key critical incident response areas and preparedness in responding to, arriving at, and managing critical incident scenes. The aim was to fill the gap in the literature surrounding FLETC's critical incident response training to inform similar law enforcement training. The study also assessed participants' performance, determined areas for improvement (in participants' performance and for the novel training course), and identified future FLETC training needs.

Background

Several agencies provide courses in active shooter training, critical incident management, and other response skills. FLETC offers two versions of the active shooter training course—the basic training course and an instructor (i.e., train-the-trainer) version—that focuses on mass casualty incident response and addressing the initial threat.[1] The FLETC CIRT is an extension of these programs, closing the gap between threat mitigation and scene management, including training in medical intervention, communication, and scene preservation.

Evaluations ensure law enforcement training programs meet their objectives and contribute evidence to improve police response (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2021; Klose, 2024). Particular to critical incidents, evaluations can be used to assess training's effect on officers' abilities to de-escalate situations, make sound judgments under pressure, communicate with internal and external partners, assess resource needs, and facilitate incident command responsibilities. Through the collection of participant feedback, the evidence goes beyond anecdotal approaches to incorporate participants' (i.e., officers) experiences (Jonathan-Zamir & Weisburd, 2023; Ratcliffe, 2022). The results can inform future training and enable participating law enforcement agencies to identify gaps in training curricula, ensuring officers are well-prepared for the complexities of the field.

Evidence-based approaches to program improvement are emerging in areas of public safety. A prominent example is Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training, which aims to equip officers with the skills to handle situations involving individuals with mental illnesses. The goals are cost savings (e.g., civil litigation and incarceration expenses), keeping law enforcement's focus on crime by reducing the amount of time officers spend responding to calls for services involving mental health crises (i.e., officers become available again more quickly), and supporting officer safety and effectiveness in responding to persons experiencing mental illness (e.g., reductions in officer injuries; National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.). CIT training can lead to positive outcomes, including increased officer confidence in responding to persons experiencing mental illness, reduced use of force, and more diversion of individuals to mental health services rather than incarceration (Compton et al., 2014; National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.; Rogers et al., 2019). Evaluations of similar de-escalation training indicated changes in officer knowledge and behavior as well as decreased use of force and civilian injuries (Engel et al., 2020). By identifying areas for improvement, agencies can tailor training to meet specific needs and enhance officers' performance and professionalism. Although CIT and de-escalation training may differ in the course components and objectives, they share the goals of enhancing officer performance and improving confidence, preparation, and overall officer and community safety.

1 https://www.fletc.gov/active-shooter-threat-training-program

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the novel CIRT course on officers' confidence in areas of critical incident response and preparedness in responding to, arriving at, and managing a critical incident scene. The study included the first two iterations of the novel CIRT course, which was completed in different locations. FLETC will continue using the novel CIRT course model to address law enforcement training needs related to critical incident response and management.

FLETC CIRT Course

The FLETC CIRT course is an addition to existing FLETC active shooter response training, enhancing the critical decision-making abilities of law enforcement officers during their response to, arrival at, and management of critical incident scenes. The training addresses the need to provide law enforcement officers with knowledge and skills that extend beyond threat assessment and mitigation. The training is delivered over four consecutive eight-hour training days and includes communications (internal and external), resource allocation, and incident management—all of which are not addressed in the existing active shooter response training. Table 1 provides the learning objectives for the course and the outcome measures to assess participant performance. The distribution of course hours include orientation and course evaluations (two hours), lectures (five hours), scenarios (23 hours), and debriefs (two hours).

TABLE 1. FLETC CIRT Learning Objectives and Outcome Measures

LEARNING OBJECTIVES	OUTCOME MEASURES
1. Demonstrate timely, decisive action to mitigate an active threat.	Situation assessment and immediate tactical response to locate and neutralize the threat.
2. Demonstrate the ability to mitigate intel and communication degradation during a critical incident.	Control radio traffic, move to a dedicated channel, provide complete known (not assumed) information, and manage resources based on intel.
3. Identify and assess resources, direct appropriate action for victim care, and coordinate designated casualty collection points and/or extrication.	Time and number of casualties provided care. Coordinated effort/response with other public safety personnel.
4. Facilitate a cohesive transfer of incident command.	Flow of accurate information and established priorities, objectives, and resources.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of the novel FLETC CIRT course on the confidence and preparedness of law enforcement officers responding to a simulated critical incident?
2. What performance and operational challenges do participants face in critical incident response and management?
3. What critical incident response training areas need additional training in future FLETC CIRT courses?

Research Question 1 was addressed using pre- and post-survey data. Research Questions 2 and 3—both qualitative in nature—were explored during focus group discussions.

Methods

Setting

The study was conducted at two different metropolitan sites. One was located on the West Coast and the other in the Midwest region of the United States.[2] Both sites were large-size police agencies; the West Coast site had approximately 400 sworn personnel and the Midwest had 1,000. At both sites, the training included short scenarios with participants along with classroom portions to prepare and reiterate the scenario focus. The final large scenario included personnel from public safety agencies—police, fire, and emergency medical services—to portray a realistic response to a critical incident and provide simulated interagency collaboration. The study only evaluated law enforcement officers who enrolled and attended the FLETC CIRT course in its entirety.

Participants

The study included 64 participants: 35 from the West Coast PD and 29 from the Midwest PD. The participants included civilians, front line personnel (i.e., officers, deputies, detectives), sergeants, and lieutenants. As presented in Table 2, most of each site's participants were front line personnel, approximately 57% of West Coast PD's and 72% of Midwest PD's. The average law enforcement experience for the West Coast sample was 13.67 years and 14.63 years for the Midwest sample. Regarding participants who had received specialized training in critical incident response, West Coast had 20 and Midwest had 19.

2 West Coast PD and Midwest PD will be used as pseudonyms.

TABLE 2. Participant Demographics

	WEST COAST (*n* = 35)	MIDWEST (*n* = 29)
Rank		
Civilian	0	2
Officer/deputy/detective	20	21
Sergeant/corporal	14	5
Lieutenant	1	1
Law enforcement experience (average)	13.67 years	14.63 years
Time in current position (average)	4.29 years	5.78 years
Received specialized training in critical incident response	20 participants	19 participants

Instrumentation

Data were collected using pre- and post-surveys and focus groups. The surveys provided standardized means to measure participants' perceived critical incident response preparedness and confidence prior to and following the FLETC CIRT instruction. Participant confidence was assessed with the Likert scale in the following specific areas of critical incident response: tactics in approaching scene, recognizing and addressing the threat, intelligence gathering, scene management, mass casualty triage response, incident command, team or agency coordination, resource management, documentation, internal communication, and external communication. A Likert scale was also used to assess participants' preparedness in responding to, arriving at, and managing a critical incident scene.

Focus groups explored performance and operational challenges faced by law enforcement using a semistructured protocol, including experiences, perspectives, and contextual nuances (e.g., word choice, departmental culture) surrounding their engagement with the CIRT instruction. The key areas of the focus group protocol were incident overview, communication and coordination, decision making, resource allocation, incident command, training and preparedness, post-incident analysis, legal and ethical considerations, community engagement, continuous improvement, and well-being.

The key areas of the focus group discussions and the measured areas and actions in the surveys were developed using the newly developed FLETC CIRT learning objectives. Each key area and measure was directly related to one of the four learning objectives. Table 3 provides the structured mapping and interconnectedness of each item. Some key areas and measures were connected to more than one learning objective. For example, incident overview was a key area for the focus group discussions. Incident overview included participants discussing the scenario and detailing the nature of the incident, location, and key timeline events. This key area was connected

to all four learning objectives, which are delineated in Table 1. Incident command and decision making were also key discussion group areas connected to each of the four learning objectives.

TABLE 3. CIRT Course Learning Objectives and Instrumentation Alignment

	LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1	LEARNING OBJECTIVE 2	LEARNING OBJECTIVE 3	LEARNING OBJECTIVE 4
Focus group key areas	• Incident overview • Decision-making • Incident command	• Incident overview • Communication and Coordination • Decision-making • Resource allocation • Incident command	• Incident overview • Decision-making • Resource allocation • Incident command	• Incident overview • Decision-making • Incident command
Measured areas/ actions in surveys	• Tactics in approaching scene • Recognizing and addressing the threat • Responding to a critical incident scene • Arriving at a critical incident scene • Managing a critical incident scene	• Intelligence gathering • Scene management • Incident command • Team or agency coordination • Resource management • Internal communication • Managing a critical incident scene	• Scene management • Mass casualty triage response • Incident command • Team or agency coordination • Resource management • Internal communication • External communication • Managing a critical incident scene	• Scene management • Incident command • Team or agency coordination • Resource management • Internal communication • External communication • Arriving at a critical incident scene • Managing a critical incident scene

Note. The focus groups contained additional key areas that were not aligned with the FLETC CIRT course learning objectives, with the intent of using the gathered data to inform future training and CIRT course iterations. Additional areas included training and preparedness, post-incident analysis, legal and ethical considerations, community engagement, and responder well-being.

Data Collection

Data from the West Coast PD and Midwest PD sites were collected at three points during the 4-day training period using consistent models. Initially, participants completed a 20-item presurvey that captured demographic data, including job classification/assignment, rank, experience in service, and training. The presurvey also explored participants' experience with critical incidents; preparedness in responding to, arriving at, and managing critical incidents; recommendations for their respective agencies' training protocols; and expectations for the critical incident response training/assessment associated with this study. Participants completed the presurvey before the critical incident training.

The second data collection occurred after the FLETC CIRT instruction and simulated incident response (i.e., scenario). At the conclusion of the simulated incident, participants completed an 11-item post-survey that examined their perceptions of the training content's effectiveness, anticipated application of training content, and measured the same areas of preparedness and confidences as the presurvey.

The third data collection point included focus group discussions after participants completed post-surveys. There were five focus groups at the West Coast site and seven at the Midwest site. Each lasted approximately 90 minutes. Focus group moderators directed discussions using discussion prompts and open-ended questions. These group discussions mimicked tabletop exercises for the participants and trained them in incident debriefing, which provides insight to guide performance during real-world incidents (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF], n.d.; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020; U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2024). Each discussion was audio-recorded for subsequent transcription and thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Pre- and post-survey data were analyzed to develop descriptive statistics (i.e., demographic data) and trends in participants' responses regarding confidence and preparedness in critical incident response. For each confidence area and preparedness measurement, mean Likert scores were computed for pre- and post-surveys, along with percent changes for each site. Then, focus group discussions were transcribed and coded thematically to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' unique perspectives.

Results

Pre- and Post-Surveys

Results indicated participants' confidence for each of the analyzed critical incident responses increased after participation in the FLETC CIRT course, as shown in Table 3. For the West Coast PD, the most notable changes involved mass casualty triage response (up 65.4%), incident command (up 35.9%), and resource management (up 33.7%). West Coast PD participants also increased in confidence regarding team or agency coordination (up 38.5%), resource management (up 31.8%), and mass casualty triage response (up 29.2%).

TABLE 4. Confidence in Areas of Critical Incident Response — Mean Scores (Pre- and Post-Surveys)

AREA	WEST COAST PRE-SURVEY	WEST COAST POST-SURVEY	WEST COAST % CHANGE	MIDWEST PRE-SURVEY	MIDWEST POST-SURVEY	MIDWEST % CHANGE
Tactics in approaching scene	3.4	4.25	25%	3.6	4.3	18%
Recognizing and addressing the threat	3.6	4.55	25.4%	3.8	4.7	21.6%
Intelligence gathering	3.3	4.2	28.9%	3.5	3.9	11.9%
Scene management	3.0	3.9	27.1%	3.4	3.8	11.1%
Mass casualty triage response	2.6	4.3	65.4%	3.1	4.0	29.2%
Incident command	2.7	3.7	35.9%	2.8	3.4	22.2%
Team or agency coordination	3.1	4.0	30%	3.1	4.3	38.5%
Resource management	3.0	4.0	33.7%	3.0	4.0	31.8%
Documentation	3.1	3.9	26.2%	3.3	3.6	9.5%
Internal communication	3.3	4.1	24.8%	3.4	4.2	21%
External communication	3.1	3.9	23.6%	3.1	3.7	18.9%

Comparing the changes between levels of preparedness before and after participating in the FLETC CIRT course, the data show an increase (see Table 4). Both groups reported increases when responding to, arriving at, and managing a critical incident scene. The West Coast PD had a 31% change from pre-training to post-training and the Midwest PD showed a 37.4% change. The largest changes varied between agencies, with the West Coast's action being *responding to a critical incident* (47.8% pre-post change) and for the Midwest agency showing the greatest increase in *managing a critical incident* (39.1% pre-post change).

TABLE 5. Preparedness Pre- and Post-FLETC Critical Incident Training — Mean Scores

ACTION	WEST COAST PRE-TRAINING	WEST COAST POST-TRAINING	WEST COAST % CHANGE	MIDWEST PRE-TRAINING	MIDWEST POST-TRAINING	MID-WEST % CHANGE
Responding to a critical incident scene	2.3	3.4	47.8%	2.6	3.6	38.5%
Arriving at a critical incident scene	2.3	3.3	43.5%	2.6	3.5	34.6%
Managing a critical incident scene	2.1	2.9	38%	2.3	3.2	39.1%

A paired *t* test was conducted to further compare the pre- and post-survey results and determine if the changes were statistically significant as well as find the effect size (i.e., the impact) of the FLETC CIRT course (see Table 6). The results for confidence and preparedness are presented separately. They indicate statistically significant improvement in each for both samples. The *p* values for confidence and preparedness for each sample was < 0.05. Moreover, Cohen's *d* for confidence and preparedness for each sample was > than 0.8, indicating a large effect size.

TABLE 6. Paired *t*-Test Result for Confidence and Preparedness Measures

MEASURE	PRE-TRAINING MEAN (*SD*)	POST-TRAINING MEAN (*SD*)	*t*-STAT	*p*-VALUE	COHEN'S *d*	95% CI (LOWER)	95% CI (UPPER)
Confidence (West Coast)	3.1 (0.5)	4.0 (0.6)	-12.53	<0.001*	1.93	-1.23	-0.95
Confidence (Midwest)	3.3 (0.4)	4.2 (0.5)	-8.37	<0.001*	1.42	-1.05	-0.76
Prepared-ness (West Coast)	2.2 (0.3)	3.2 (0.4)	-10.96	0.008*	1.93	-1.40	-1.06
Prepared-ness (Midwest)	2.5 (0.4)	3.5 (0.5)	-28.00	0.001*	1.87	-1.50	-1.25

Note. * Statistically significant < 0.05

The presurvey examined participants' views on whether their agency provided them with the necessary equipment to respond to a critical incident (see Figure 1). Approximately 62% of

Midwest PD participants felt (i.e., responded *strongly agree* or *agree*) their agency provided the necessary equipment, and 41% of West Coast PD participants felt similarly. Moreover, roughly 17% of Midwest PD responded that their agency had not provided them with what they perceived as necessary, and 26% of West Coast PD felt the same.

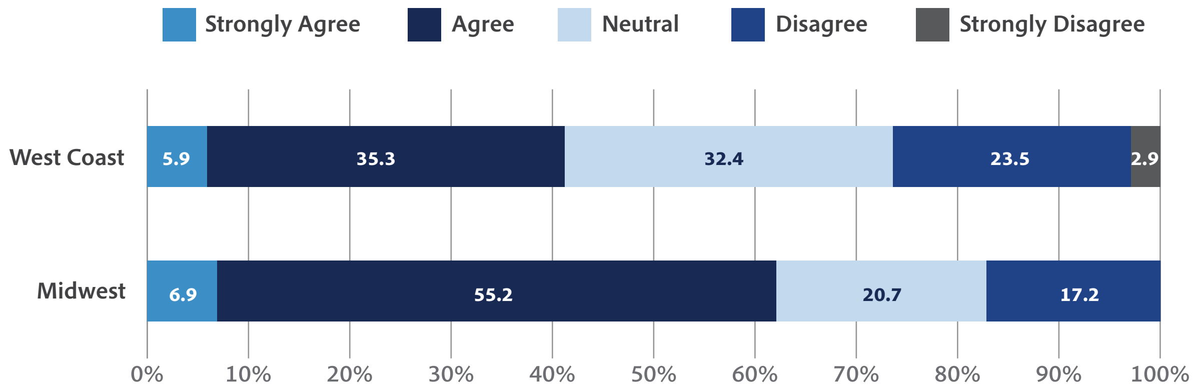

FIGURE 1. Participant Views on Whether Necessary Equipment was Provided by Agency (for Critical Incident Response)

Focus Groups

Thematic analysis of over 18 hours of focus group audio recordings resulted in six overarching themes: communication challenges, training gaps, coordination among multiple agencies, ego and leadership dynamics, incident command structure, and resource allocation. Additionally, focus group discussions were analyzed to determine successes, deficiencies, and recommendations for improvement from the perspective of the participants as these were major components of the focus group protocol.

Thematic Analysis

COMMUNICATION. Participants emphasized significant communication challenges during the incident. Challenges included the use of incompatible radio systems by different agencies that typically respond to large scale critical incidents, leading to confusion and the inability to share and receive pertinent information. One participant stated, "We were all on different channels, and it was chaos trying to coordinate." Similarly, one participant acknowledged radio communication was garbled and overwhelmed with nonpriority chatter, stating, "it was hard to hear anything important over the noise on the radio." Another offered, "We need a dedicated channel for tactical communication to keep things clear," suggesting different radio channels should be used for different types of communication. Finally, the use of acronyms and agency- or job-specific jargon emerged as an issue. One participant noted, "Not everyone knows what the acronyms meant, which led to misunderstanding."

TRAINING GAPS. Participants identified notable gaps in training, including inadequacies in active aggressor response, tactical medical, and leadership and crisis management. One participant stated, "I definitely need [tactical medicine training]. We got a brief 10-minute lecture on it early on, but the triage process needs to be covered in more detail and more length." Another participant addressed agency culture and expressed a need for officers to possess well-balanced abilities, saying, "We have a culture that when things happen, we call SWAT [special weapons and tactics]." Participants across agencies agreed leadership training also needed improvement. There was a consensus that leaders should train alongside participants, and leaders' training should be more realistic (i.e., their roles and responsibilities should mirror what they would be doing during actual responses) to adequately prepare both groups for real-world incidents. Lastly, participants emphasized the importance of conducting post-incident reviews to learn from experience and improve future responses.

MULTIAGENCY COORDINATION. The presence of multiple agencies (e.g., law enforcement, fire and rescue, emergency management, emergency medical services) responding to incidents created challenges in coordination efforts. One participant mentioned, "With so many officers on the scene, it was hard to keep track of who was doing what," highlighting the importance of understanding each agency's roles and responsibilities. Clear communication protocols for multiagency responses also surfaced as an issue, with several participants opining that existing systems were inadequate. One participant expressed a need for "greater understanding of allied agency coordination . . . especially in a massive incident." Relatedly, one participant noted issues with receiving conflicting orders from different commanders at different agencies, saying "We were getting mixed messages, and it was hard to know what to do."

LEADERSHIP AND INCIDENT COMMAND. Issues with leaders' egos and command dynamics were mentioned by several participants. They noted that some leaders did not listen to participants' input, which was based on their observations from being "on the ground." One participant remarked, "It's frustrating when leaders come in and ignore what we're saying." Similarly, they strongly expressed frustration with leaders overriding a decision made by individuals actively engaged in the situation, leading to confusion and inefficiency. When leaders refused to collaborate, participants raised concerns about leadership experience and competence. One participant stated, "Some leaders just [do not] have the hands-on experience to make the right calls." When promotions were discussed, some participants indicated that they were based on assessments rather than practical experience, leading to inadequately prepared leaders.

INCIDENT COMMAND STRUCTURE. Although closely related to communication challenges and coordination among multiple agencies, incident command structure presented as a standalone theme during data analysis. Participants significantly noted the command structure on the scene was unclear, leading to delays in critical decision making. One participant said, "We kept asking, '*Who's in charge?*' and no one seemed to know." Another participant expressed the need

for an immediate and clear determination of incident command, saying, "We need to establish who is in charge right away to avoid confusion." Participants also noted the need to transfer incident command during an incident (as more personnel arrive on scene) and clear communication of that shift.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION. Participants discussed the need for better resource allocation during critical incidents, which highlighted the necessity for better planning and communication. They agreed that clearer communication would improve scene efficiency and management. One participant mentioned many officers gathering in one location when they were needed in another area, saying "If we knew what resources we had and where they were needed, we could respond better." Participants also raised concerns about the adequacy of resources and the timing of resource supply, comparing the simulated scenario to real-life incidents. One participant said, "I think it is a little unrealistic to have so many [emergency medical services units] there so quickly." However, another participant mentioned, "I thought the [emergency medical services] contingent was superb in the amount that we had."

Successes and Deficiencies

Successes and deficiencies aligned with the overarching themes garnered from participant responses. FLETC CIRT program successes included the value and applicability of the training, the collaboration among multiple agencies, and the opportunity to improve decision-making. Participants clearly noted the training program's value, particularly the active aggressor scenarios and the tactical medical training. Additionally, participants expressed the importance of collaboration among different agencies during critical incidents, which was highlighted as a success of the training program. They discussed improved decision making regarding active aggressors, as well as reports of shots fired. One participant said, "I think the training was phenomenal for the department as a whole. And I think every department needs more of this training."

Deficiencies in participant performance during the scenario-based learning were also noted, aligning with the participants' emphasis on post-incident analysis of what went well and what did not. Participants underscored communication issues, training gaps, and incident command structure confusion as deficiencies in performance. Many participants acknowledged communication challenges, expressing how these challenges hindered their overall effectiveness and stifled decision making. They also noted gaps in their training, highlighting the need for more tactical medical training and its incorporation into active aggressor scenarios. One participant described this blending of trainings as "layering," noting that many of their past trainings were siloed and did not build on one another—even though the skills are expected to be deployed together during real-world incidents. Establishing and transferring incident command was a commonly discussed deficiency. Participants emphasized that these two actions must occur to facilitate clearer leadership roles. Each of the noted deficiencies was also cited as a theme for focus group discussions.

Limitations

While this study provides insights into the FLETC CIRT program, its limitations must be addressed. The course was open to all departmental personnel, and only those who volunteered participated. The participants who volunteered may not accurately represent all units, skill levels, and management areas. Those who chose to participate may generally be more proactive in their professional development; therefore, their levels of confidence and response to the simulated critical incident may differ from others. In short, unless the training is mandated by the agency for all personnel, the findings may not be representative of all departmental members' confidence in key areas of critical incident response and preparedness.

Because the purpose of the study was to evaluate the impact of the novel CIRT course on confidence in areas of critical incident response and preparedness in responding to, arriving at, and managing a critical incident scene, post-training behavioral outcomes were not assessed. Typically, training is expected to affect performance and facilitate desired outcomes. This study solely focused on participants' perceptions and did not address any behavioral outcomes.

Discussion

The findings provide robust evidence that the FLETC CIRT course significantly improved officers' confidence in areas of critical incident response and preparedness responding to, arriving at, and managing a simulated critical incident. Relatedly, the impact of the training course on participants' perceptions was meaningful (i.e., all effect sizes were > 0.8). The findings also underscore the importance of continuous evaluation and assessment of law enforcement training. Examples include collecting performance metrics and qualitative feedback from practitioners, as well as employing data-driven approaches to identify gaps in learning to inform future training practices, objectives, and outcomes.

Critical incident response and management faces multifaceted challenges, and participants provided valuable insights into these complexities and noted increases in preparedness and confidence. Participants expressed enhanced readiness in key critical incident areas: incident command, resource management, and interagency communication. However, they noted issues with communication systems, leadership ego and dynamics, and resource allocation that require attention and intervention. These findings aligned with broader trends in law enforcement training, highlighting the need for scenario-based training to enhance officers' decision making, communication, and interagency collaboration skills (Engel et al., 2020; PERF, n.d.). The FLETC CIRT training revealed the importance of moving beyond a checkbox approach and focusing on tailored training strategies that address specific agency operational deficiencies.

The results led to specific recommendations for future training protocols and learning objectives. First, participants suggested implementing clearer communication protocols to streamline information sharing during critical incidents. This includes the obvious practice of only

distributing pertinent information via radio, but also mandates knowledge of roles, job tasks, and needs during an incident. Such practices increase efficiency, decrease radio traffic, and diminish confusion at a scene. Second, participants called for mandatory training for sergeants and incident commanders to ensure they are well-prepared for managing critical incidents. Not only would this increase responders' confidence in their leadership but it would also improve safety for involved officers and the community. Lastly, participants recommended regular scenario-based training to keep skills current and ensure readiness for real-life critical incidents. Understanding these types of training are time and cost intensive, respondents still encouraged consistency using this method of teaching. This method decreases siloed learning, weaving skills into one overall training course.

To build on this study, future research should aim to replicate the findings using a larger and more diverse group of law enforcement personnel (e.g., additional regions or populations). Also, longitudinal analysis could explore the long-term effects of the training on real-world critical incidents and learning retention. Finally, the inclusion of more data points, such as instructor observations and assessments would help triangulate findings and improve understanding of how training influences field performance (i.e., behavior outcomes). For example, benchmark assessments could be completed for participants prior to commencing scenario drills. This would allow instructors to observe each small participant group and provide comparative data to highlight successes and deficiencies in key performance indicators related to critical incident response and management across the training program.

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Improving Communication Skills in Patrol Officers: A Training Study of Evidence-based Interviewing

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. Very little research has examined interviewing practices and their training in patrol officers. This paper argues for training patrol officer in evidence-based interviewing skills and describes results of an evaluation of a training for patrol officers. We trained a sample of frontline officers in evidence-based interviewing techniques, including information about the psychological research behind the use of investigative interviewing, good questioning practices, and rapport-building techniques. Trainees responded to knowledge, behavioral, and attitudinal questions before and after the training. We found improved knowledge in five different areas as well as positive perceptions of the training.

Policy Implications. Research over the past decade has helped develop and advocate for the use of ethical interviewing techniques in the interrogation room (Meissner et al., 2017). Our paper brings this evidence from investigative interviewing studies into the field by applying a robust body of research to patrol settings, where many interviews take place.

Keywords: policing, patrol, interviewing, training

Introduction

Despite decades of efforts to improve community policing practices, police-community relations remain a major concern in the United States (Morin et al., 2017). The majority of surveyed U.S. police chiefs cited that the most important issue they face is working to increase civilians' trust in the police (Police Executive Research Forum, 2020). This echoes recommendations from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015). The Proceedings of the National Institute of Justice's 2018 Chiefs' Panel on Priority Law Enforcement Issues and Needs further observed that police-community relations need to be strengthened and that law enforcement must gain the trust of the many communities that feel disparately treated by police (Hollywood et al., 2019). These communities' distrust is compounded by frontline officers' lack of "soft" skills training, such as communication, that could improve community relations. Most police academies devote less than 2% of training time to communication (Reaves, 2016; Sloan & Paoline, 2021; Bradford & Pynes, 1999), and even less time to interviewing skills. Inadequate interviewing skills risk alienating community members and missing crucial information at the outset of investigations. Given frontline officers' extensive interactions with the public, training in evidence-based interviewing could provide substantial and widespread benefits.

The benefits of evidence-based interviewing are already well established in formal interviewing and interrogation settings (Meissner, 2021; Catlin et al., 2024; Meissner et al., 2017) and detectives are frequently taught this skillset (Kingshott et al., 2015). Yet, there is little research on the use of interviewing skills by frontline officers (Dalton et al., 2020) and no research assessing the value of training frontline officers in interviewing. Specifically, we argue and provide preliminary evidence here that this type of training is needed at the patrol level.

Evidence-Based Interview Practices

Evidence-based interviewing skills, often referred to as part of an investigative interviewing model, are well researched in custodial interviews, as well as with witnesses and victims (Meissner, 2021). Compared to more traditional methods (i.e., a confrontational approach) that focuses on obtaining a confession, an investigative interview approach focuses on ethics and aims to obtain accurate and reliable information from subjects (Brimbal et al., 2019b). Research shows that an investigative approach consistently increases cooperation and disclosure in both laboratory studies (Brimbal et al., 2019a; Dianiska et al., 2021; Wachi et al., 2018) and field studies (Brimbal et al., 2021; McGurk et al., 1993; Rivard et al., 2014). It also provides the benefit of decreasing the likelihood of false confession without decreasing true confession rates (Catlin et al., 2024). An investigative interviewing model involves a generally respectful approach towards the interview subject as well as the use of rapport-building skills and productive questions (Meissner et al., 2023). Rapport building is typically aimed at improving the relationship and increasing trust between a subject and their interviewer. Generally, interviewers who build rapport with subjects leave them with more positive impressions (Abbe & Brandon, 2014; Gabbert et al., 2021; Vallano & Schreiber Compo,

2015). This improved attitude also leads to a more cooperative outlook, with subjects providing better-quality information (Brimbal et al., 2021). Training in rapport building motivates officers to be more mindful of how they present themselves and how they are perceived (Brandon et al., 2018). Rapport (specifically relational rapport) can be fostered with tactics such as reciprocity to build trust (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2018; Oleszkiewicz, et al., 2024) and self-disclosures (Dianiska et al., 2021; Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2014) and identifying similarities between the interviewer and the subject to develop affiliation (Brimbal et al., 2019a). Another effective set of techniques to build rapport during a conversation (conversational rapport) by using adaptation to provide a subject autonomy and evocation and acceptance to demonstrate empathy (Alison et al., 2013; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Use of conversational rapport increases information yield from suspects accused of terrorism (Alison et al., 2013; Christiansen et al., 2018) and reduces subjects' resistance strategies (Alison et al., 2014).

Best practices regarding productive questions include the use of open-ended queries that provide the opportunity for an unrestricted response, such as "TED" questions (Milne & Bull, 1999; Walsh & Bull, 2010) typically start with "Tell me..." "Explain..." "Describe...." These prompts are followed by more specific probing questions. The use of open-ended questions yields more information (Griffiths & Milne, 2006) and cooperation (Kelly & Valencia, 2020). In contrast, much information can be lost by asking unproductive questions (Oxburgh et al., 2010), for example closed-ended ("What color was the car?") or leading or suggestive questions ("Was the car yellow?") (Wright & Alison, 2004), as well as asking multiple questions in quick succession (Shepherd, 2007). Another key element of productive questioning is active listening (effective use of silence, reflections, and summaries) (Vecchi et al., 2005) through which the officer gives the subject a voice and displays empathy and respect—key components of procedural justice.

Interviewing to Implement Procedural Justice

The pillars of procedural justice dovetail with aspects of investigative interviewing. However, this overlap has been largely overlooked by researchers (Goodman-Delahunty et al., 2014). Indeed, interviewing strategies that employ a "humanitarian approach" (Holmberg & Madsen, 2014), such as rapport building and active listening, have shown effects on attitudinal (perceptions of rapport, trust) and behavioral (e.g., cooperation) variables that are commonly examined outcomes in procedural justice research. However, when studying interviewing, researchers often emphasize the information gained and do not measure mediational variables, such as willingness to cooperate with investigators (Brimbal et al., 2021) or public perception of interview techniques (Jones & Brimbal, 2017). Research focuses predominantly on interviews conducted in formal settings by detectives (Dalton et al., 2020). Yet, patrol officers responding to service calls often interview victims or witnesses in distress. Rapport-based information-gathering skills provide an opportunity for officers to engage the public in a procedurally just manner. Procedural justice concerns the perceived fairness of the decision-making process and treatment by authorities, including the police (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This sense of fairness increases when police engage in respectful, trustworthy,

unbiased two-way dialogue with the community (Tyler, 2019).

Training officers in procedural justice provides benefits to both officers by improving their attitudes toward procedural justice (Jannetta et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2020; Skogan et al., 2015) and the public by improving trust in the police (Mazerolle et al., 2012; Fontaine et al., 2019). These findings have been replicated in other contexts, including civil and criminal courts (Dollar et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2019; Somers & Holtfreter, 2018; Tyler, 2017). Notably, procedural justice training has effects beyond attitudinal changes. Training officers in procedural justice reduces use of force (Owens et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2020; McLean et al., 2020) and arrests (Owens et al., 2018; Weisburd et al., 2022) while increasing respectful and unbiased interactions with the public (Weisburd et al., 2022).

Relatedly, legitimacy—the belief that authorities, institutions, and social arrangements are appropriate, proper, and just—is often equated to the extent to which one trusts the police and feels an obligation to obey the police (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Meta-analyses provide support for this process-based model of regulation: procedurally just policing increases public perceptions of police legitimacy, which in turn influences compliance (Walters & Bolger, 2019) and cooperation (Bolger & Walters, 2019). Thus, when police use rapport-based skills, witnesses and victims should feel they are treated in a procedurally just manner. As a result of this fair treatment, witnesses and victims should cooperate more by providing more and better quality information to officers.

Interviewing to Improve Investigative Outcomes

While detectives are a police forces' main investigative body, in practice, patrol officers are also key actors in investigations (Horvath et al., 2001). Moreover, the information needed to clear a crime typically originates from the public, a group most likely to interact with first responders (Chaiken et al., 1991). Therefore police patrol units should develop and maintain effective lines of communication with their communities. Patrol officers support criminal investigations in at least three different ways. First, some police agencies employ an organizational model in which investigative responsibilities interviewing victims and witnesses, collecting evidence, arresting suspects—are typically assigned to the initial responding officers. Detectives are only involved in serious and complex cases such as murders, bank robberies, and major financial fraud. Other law enforcement agencies follow more or less similar divisions of labor. Smaller police departments, for example, often lack specialized detective units, while large agencies face logistic challenges that dictate a decentralized approach with geographical command structures deploying patrol officers and detectives units who support one another.

Second, patrol officers often play a supporting role in the criminal investigation process by setting the stage for detectives' follow-up work. As the initial police units on the scene, patrol officers are the first to deal with the public, gather information, and protect evidence. Timely communication with witnesses and victims is generally preferable as delayed interviews can lead

to memories fading and/or changing, Victims may also choose not to pursue their assailant and physical evidence may be lost or contaminated. Patrol officers' ability to establish rapport, gather comprehensive information, and assist in memory recall is vital for the initial investigation and the entire process. The initial interactions among victims, witnesses, and law enforcement are critical; they can significantly influence the course of the investigation and subsequent judicial procedures.

Finally, patrol officers assist detective functions by being the department's eyes and ears. Case resolution depends on the collection of information; members of the public often help police locate witnesses, identify suspects, and search for physical evidence (Klockars & Mastrofski, 1991; Rossmo, 2021). Unlike office-bound detectives, patrol officers are on the street 24/7. They observe routines, cultivate informants, conduct field checks, and generate intelligence. Their ability to successfully interact with the community is an important and necessary skill (Leovy, 2015).

Science-based interview techniques equip first responders with the knowledge and skills to effectively establish and maintain rapport, employ appropriate questioning techniques, elicit detailed accounts, enhance memory recall, recognize signs of deception, and address resistance. The effectiveness and outcome of numerous criminal investigations hinge on initial responders' adeptness at communication, their capacity for empathy, and their ability to extract comprehensive and precise descriptions of an incident. These attributes play a crucial role in paving the way for subsequent interviews with investigators and prosecutors and in providing high-quality testimony in a legal setting.

Training Patrol Officers in Interview Skills: A Pilot

Thus, officers using evidence-based interviewing skills can provide many benefits in their interactions with the public. The College of Policing, an independent organization linked to the Home Office in the United Kingdom, has developed interviewing guidelines for frontline officers (College of Policing, 2019). Although 78% of recently surveyed officers reported receiving some sort of academy training (Brimbal et al., 2024), there is no standardized model in the United States. Here, we describe such training and explore how it was received by a sample of officers.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our sample consisted of 26 patrol officers from a large urban police department (more than 100 patrol officers serving over one million residents) who volunteered to participate in an interview training. Participants were asked to respond to surveys about their knowledge before and after the training and answer questions about the training after completing it. Participants' responses were tracked pre/post through anonymous IDs.

Training

The two-day training was implemented by a practitioner-researcher team and included lectures, videos, and practical exercises. The program included modules on first impressions, rapport building, motivational interviewing, active listening, memory, productive questioning techniques, and resistance. It also covered the impact of first impressions, judgements about deceptiveness, and genuineness—and how these factors can affect rapport. We included information about rapport building tactics, such as appropriately using self-disclosure and similarities, expressing empathy and respect, drawing out a subject's perspective, using silence and actively listening, and addressing resistance within a rapport-based model. We discussed issues of memory contamination, problematic questions (e.g., leading and compound questions), and the value of productive questions (open-ended, well-timed probing, and closed-ended). See Appendix A for an outline of the training.

Measures

We measured the knowledge participants gained from the training (comparing pre/post responses) and their attitudes towards the training. Knowledge was assessed with 27 items, covering first impressions (e.g., "Is lack of eye contact a good indicator that a subject is lying?"), rapport (e.g., "Which statement is true of self-disclosure?"), memory (e.g., "Which factor affects memory storage?"), questioning strategies (e.g., "What are TED questions?"), motivational interviewing (e.g., "What is acceptance in an interview?"), and active listening (e.g., "When does an interviewer use paraphrasing?"). We also asked our trainees about their perceptions of the training with both quantitative (e.g., rating the extent to which the training was useful on bipolar 4-point scales: "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") and qualitative questions (e.g., "What was the most helpful part of the training overall?")

Results

Although we trained 26 officers, only 23 completed the pre-questionnaire, and 20 finished the post-questionnaire. Further, only 15 participants included their anonymous ID in the post-questionnaire allowing us to compare their responses. To assess potential knowledge gain, we are reporting the descriptives and effect sizes for the total sample (Table 1) and paired samples t-tests for those who we could match data (Table 2). Officers' knowledge performance increased for all topics, statistically significantly, except for the questioning block (see Table 1). When averaging all questions together, we found an increase in trainee knowledge post training ($t(13) = 10.17$, $p < 0.001$, $g = 2.56$, 95% CI [1.46, 3.64]).

TABLE 1. Descriptives for Full Sample Data

TRAINING SECTION	PRE *M* (SD)	POST *M* (SD)	HEDGE'S *g* [95% CI]
First impressions	0.45 (0.22)	0.88 (0.15)	2.21 [1.46, 2.96]
Rapport	0.42 (0.29)	0.67 (0.29)	0.85 [0.23, 1.46]
Memory	0.48 (0.21)	0.66 (0.17)	0.92 [0.30, 1.54]
Questions	0.26 (0.45)	0.50 (0.51)	0.49 [-0.11,1.09]
Motivational Interviewing	0.59 (0.20)	0.92 (0.15)	1.81 [1.11, 252]
Active listening	0.76 (0.21)	0.86 (0.13)	0.56 [-0.05, 1.16]
Total	**0.53 (0.12)**	**0.81 (0.10)**	**2.48 [1.68, 3.27]**

Note. Hedge's correction was used to account for our small sample size.

TABLE 2. Descriptives for Paired Samples Data

TRAINING SECTION	PRE *M* (SD)	POST *M* (SD)	TWO TAILED PAIRED SAMPLES *t*S	HEDGE'S *g*
First impressions	0.47 (0.22)	0.89 (0.13)	$t(14) = 8.50$***	2.08 [1.17, 2.96]
Rapport	0.42 (0.27)	0.69 (0.29)	$t(14) = 5.53$***	1.35 [0.65, 2.03]
Memory	0.45 (0.22)	0.64 (0.19)	$t(14) = 4.53$***	1.10 [0.47, 1.72]
Questions	0.27 (0.46)	0.47 (0.52)	$t(14) = 1.38$	0.34 [0.16, .083]
Motivational Interviewing	0.59 (0.18)	0.91 (0.17)	$t(14) = 5.87$***	1.43 [0.71, 2.13]
Active listening	0.77 (0.17)	0.89 (.13)	$t(13) = 2.28$*	0.57 [0.03, 1.10]
Total	**0.53 (0.13)**	**0.80 (0.09)**	**$t(13) = 10.17$*****	**2.26 [1.46, 3.64]**

Note. Hedge's correction was used to account for our small sample size. *** indicates significance at a $p < 0.001$ level. * indicates significance at a $p < 0.05$ level.

TABLE 3. Descriptives for Our Attitudes Towards the Training

QUESTION	*M*	SD	MIN	MAX
The training was interesting	3.80	0.41	3	4
The training was useful	3.75	0.44	3	4
The training will help me on the job	3.75	0.44	3	4
I feel prepared to use science-based interview tactics in the field	3.30	0.57	2	4

Perceptions of the training were overall positive (see Table 3) with means close to the maximum of 4 ("Strongly agree"). Trainees also provided comments in response to the open-ended questions such as "Simple techniques that can help an interview," "It is easy to do and has a lot of benefits," and "Good introduction to patrol level officers to enhance interviewing techniques." These comments illustrate trainees' belief in the training's utility for patrol officers.

Discussion

This small pilot of a two-day training achieved gains in knowledge and positive ratings. This illustrates two points: We were able to fill previous gaps in knowledge in our participants, and, because the trainees were satisfied with the training's content, this suggests they saw a need for this type of training. Our participants were self-selected into this training, so the sample presumably includes officers who were particularly interested in interviewing as a craft. Nonetheless, the gain in knowledge was still notable. Although tested with a small sample, the training highlights the need for more research in this area. The skills presented in this type of evidence-based interview training should directly improve officers' interactions with community members and strengthen police-community relations. This training should also improve the quality of information gathered at the beginning of an investigation, since frontline officers are most often the public's initial point of contact. Thus, future research should examine training patrol officers in this type of evidence-based interviewing skills on these attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Improved information quality can contribute to case clearance rates and reduce the risk of errors in criminal investigations (Rossmo, 2021). And, if effective in practice, and widely implemented, this type of training can set the tone for frontline officers' interactions with the public and improve perceptions of the police. Finally, this course provides a template for designing evidence-based cadet interviewing and communication training, helping fill a void in many police academies. Frontline officers trained with a foundation of evidence-based interviewing practices should be equipped to be effective interviewers and build upon these skills throughout their careers.

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Appendix A: Training Outline

Fundamentals of Investigative Interviewing

Course Goal

Students will understand and practice effective evidence-based investigative interviewing skills to use when responding to calls necessitating an interview. The course will include lectures, discussions, learning activities, videos and role play scenarios.

Learning Goals

1. Students will be familiar with factors that might affect impressions in interviews, understand the importance of impression formation and how it can affect rapport building.
2. Students will become familiar with the concept of rapport, and tools to build rapport.
3. Students will understand how to use motivational interviewing, active listening, and relational rapport building tactics to build rapport
4. Students will be familiar with how human memory works and why this knowledge is important to understand as an interviewer.
5. Students will know what are considered “good” productive questions and problematic questions.
6. Students will become familiar with the steps to gather the initial statement for an investigative interview.
7. Students will understand how to identify and mitigate resistance within a rapport-based approach to interviewing.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be familiar with factors that might affect impressions in interviews, understand the importance of impression formation and how it can affect rapport building

    1.1. Students will explore factors that can affect how they are perceived by a subject of an interview, and vice versa

    1.2. Students will learn about the factors that influence first impressions

    1.3. Students will learn about confirmation bias

    1.4. Students will understand the role of stereotypes in impression formation

    1.5. Students will learn about deception, what are and aren’t reliable cues, and issues that might arise when mistaken assumptions are made

    1.6. Students will understand how first impressions set the stage for rapport building

2. Students will be familiar with the concept of rapport, and tools to build rapport.

    2.1. Students will learn the different definitions of rapport

2.2. Students will learn why rapport building is important and how it can benefit an interview

2.3. Students will learn important concepts to consider when building rapport

2.4. Students will learn the process to successfully build rapport

3. Students will understand how to use active listening, motivational interviewing, and relational rapport building tactics

3.1. Students will learn what active listening is and how it helps rapport building

3.2. Students will identify and explore the different components of active listening

3.3. Students will learn how to use active listening in an investigative interview

3.4. Students will learn what motivational interviewing is and how it relates to rapport building

3.5. Students will identify and explore the different components of motivational interviewing

3.6. Students will learn how to use motivational interviewing in an investigative interview

3.7. Students will identify and explore the different components of relational tactics

4. Students will be familiar with how human memory works and why this knowledge is important to understand as an interviewer

4.1. Students will understand how memory plays a role in the investigative interview

4.2. Students will learn about the stages of memory

4.3. Students will learn about external factors that can affect memory

4.4. Students will learn about how the interviewer can affect memory

4.5. Students will understand how they can help mitigate memory errors

5. Students will know how to develop a productive line of questioning

5.1. Students will be familiar with open-ended, appropriate closed, probing questions (i.e., “good” questions)

5.2. Students will be familiar with the funnel structure of questions and understand at what point during the interview to ask these questions

5.3. Students will be familiar with unproductive questions and why they might be problematic

5.4. Students will know what free recall is and how to elicit it

5.5. Students will understand how to incorporate active listening within a line of questioning

5.6. Students will be able to identify what are considered “good” productive questions and problematic questions

6. Students will be familiar with the steps to gather the initial statement for an investigative interview
    - 6.1. Students will understand the goals of the initial statement
    - 6.2. Students will learn how to introduce the interview
    - 6.3. Students will understand how introducing the interview will help build and maintain rapport
    - 6.4. Students will understand how introducing the interview will help prevent memory errors
    - 6.5. Students will know how to proceed after obtaining the initial account

7. Students will understand how to identify and mitigate resistance within a rapport-based approach to interviewing.
    - 7.1. Students will understand the definition of resistance, resistance behaviors, and motivations behind resistance
    - 7.2. Students will explore different resistance behaviors
    - 7.3. Students will learn the different ways to address resistance within a rapport-based model
    - 7.4. Students will understand possible different motivations to resist
    - 7.5. Students will learn how identify motivations to resist within a rapport-based model
    - 7.6. Students will learn the different mitigation techniques they can use within a rapport-based model
    - 7.7. Students will learn what confrontation should look like within a rapport-based model

The Aspirin of Crisis Negotiation: Judging the Use of Active Listening Skills (ALS) by Negotiators

Sergeant Duwayne A. Poorboy, Marcos, Texas Police Department | Elizabeth A. Quinby, M.A., LPCC, Texas State University

ABSTRACT

Research Summary. Crisis negotiation is a demanding communicative event that saves lives. It requires several skills, most critically active listening skills (ALS). Role-playing is the primary method for teaching these essential skills. One southern university hosts an annual competition where crisis negotiation teams resolve a scenario while being judged and scored by experts. Using these judges' feedback, this study examines their perceptions of the negotiators' ALS skills and how frequently each skill is used in a role-playing scenario.

Policy Implications. The results suggest that crisis negotiators should practice ALS during role-play training (RPT) to become more conversational. Although RPT takes more time than classroom training, crisis negotiators must prioritize it. If negotiators do not make ALS a priority and use them to demonstrate empathy, develop rapport, and influence to ultimately attempt to change the subject's behavior, they risk escalating critical incidents. This escalation could lead to injury or even death.

Keywords: crisis negotiation, hostage negotiation, active listening skills (ALS), role-play training (RPT)

Introduction

Law enforcement personnel are increasingly utilizing crisis negotiation as a tool (Van Hasselt et al., 2006). Its widespread use includes hostage situations, attempted suicides, and kidnappings. The value of crisis negotiation has been demonstrated through the successful resolution of tens of thousands of crises worldwide. Crisis negotiation has navigated the resolution of 95% of critical incidents without injury or death, while 78% of forceful assaults by law enforcement have resulted in injuries or deaths in hostage situations (Miller, 2006). Crisis negotiation tactics provide the perpetrator with time to process the situation and rationalize, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be more receptive to a peaceful resolution (Hatcher et al., 1998).

A demanding communicative event, crisis negotiation requires several skills; active listening is the most critical (Braten et al., 2015; Herndon, 2009; Vecchi et al., 2019). Active listening skills (ALS) are among the most efficient and effective tools for law enforcement in saving lives during crisis negotiations (McMains, 2002; Noesner & Webster, 1997). They are among the most cost-effective tools to use and are integral to the negotiation process (McMains, 2002; Noesner & Webster, 1997; Royce, 2005; St. Yves et al., 2022; Van Hasselt et al., 2005, 2006).

Most information on the efficacy of ALS comes from self-reported data on surveys (Grubb et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2018; Poorboy, 2021). However, this data indicates negotiators feel that ALS is an essential part of negotiations (Grubb et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2018; Poorboy, 2021). When studying ALS, Webster (2004) expected it to be used frequently in crisis negotiation; however, he found it was used only occasionally, limiting the opportunities for study. Another limitation of the current literature is that it primarily focuses on the use of ALS by FBI agents. This study examines whether experts believe that law enforcement negotiators are utilizing these essential skills effectively. It expands its examination beyond the FBI population to compare negotiators from local, state, and other federal law enforcement agencies.

To effectively utilize ALS, the negotiator needs to be well-trained and well-practiced. Role-playing, a form of deliberate practice, plays a crucial role in this training. According to a growing body of scientific research, this type of training can elicit significant physiological activation (e.g., increased heart rate and respiratory rate, loss of fine motor skills) in police officers, similar to their responses in real-world situations (Anderson et al., 2019). Role-playing among hostage and crisis negotiation teams has possibly the most extensive history within law enforcement training (Van Hasselt et al., 2008). Role-playing is used to train negotiators by "the vast majority of crisis negotiation training programs and is considered the premier way to assess and train crisis negotiators" (Baruch & Zarse, 2012; Vecchi et al., 2005). It exposes negotiators to the physiological and psychological sensations of negotiations, allowing them to learn adaptive responses and offset negative impacts on performance (Di Notia & Hutha, 2019). Specifically, active listening and other behavioral competencies can be assessed using role-play training (Van Hasselt et al., 2008). As McMains (2002) aptly says, "Like aspirin, active listening skills need to be *used* to be effective." Role-

playing as a practice bridges the gap between instruction and the real world, making it easier for participants to apply what they have learned correctly (Baruch & Zarse, 2012).

ALS

Active listening skills (ALS) are verbal behaviors that contribute to building rapport and are considered powerful tools (Gabbert et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2018). These skills include using minimum encouragers, open-ended questions, reflecting, emotional labeling, paraphrasing, using "I" statements, making effective pauses, and summarizing. ALS are the first step in the Behavioral Change Stairway Model (BCSM), a crisis negotiation model developed and trained by the FBI. As shown in Figure 1, active listening is followed by empathy, which is then used to establish rapport. Empathy, or the understanding of another's feelings, motives, and situations, is created through effective active listening (Poorboy, 2021). ALS enables the negotiator to work collaboratively with the subject, fostering increased trust and mutual affinity to gather more information and gain a deeper understanding of the subject's circumstances while also reducing the subject's emotional distress and promoting rational thinking (Poorboy, 2021; St. Yves et al., 2022). The negotiator can influence the subject only when the subject accepts the negotiator's suggestions and then changes their behavior accordingly (e.g., releasing a hostage or surrendering).

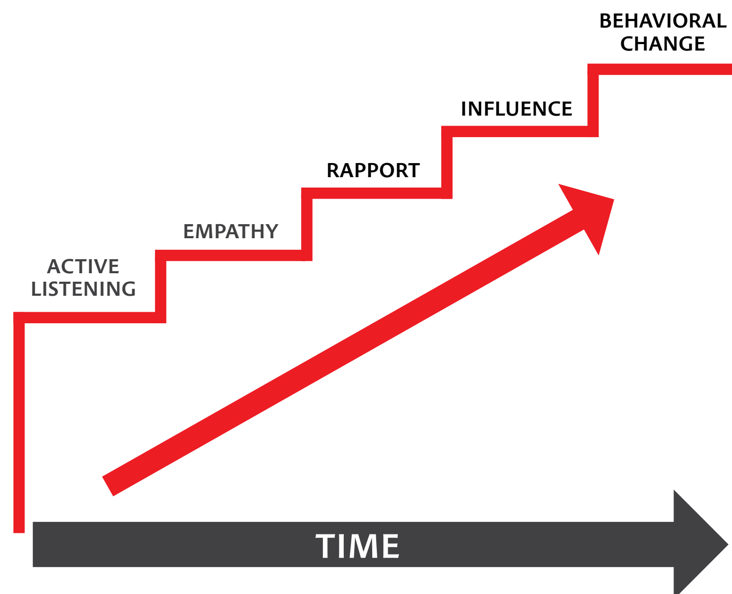

FIGURE 1: Behavioral Change Stairway Model (BCSM) (Bennett, 2016)

Rapport-building skills, including ALS, have also gained much empirical support in investigative interviewing contexts of policing research (Alison et al., 2013; Bull & Milne, 2004; St-Yves & Deslauriers-Varin, 2009; Wachi et al., 2018). Creating rapport in an investigative interview increases the subject's cooperation (Brimbal et al., 2021). Rapport-building skills also

elicit an increase in overall, accurate, and actionable detail when compared with methods that do not emphasize rapport-building (Brimbal et al., 2019; Dianiska et al., 2021). Building rapport is particularly critical in determining whether a suspect confesses to engaging in criminal behavior (Cleary & Bull, 2021). Active listening skills are a form of conversational rapport that enables the interviewee to be actively engaged in the interaction (Brimbal et al., 2021). They actively participate in an interrogation (Yang et al., 2017); therefore, engaging the interviewee with active listening skills enables them to participate more fully in a two-sided conversation and may lead to increased information yield.

Active listening skills advance the conversation by creating a context in which a participant feels comfortable, safe, and willing to talk, allowing the active listener to draw out more of the story (Hutchby, 2005). Active listening has been a key component of crisis negotiation since its inception in 1973 (Noesner, 2024). The untrained often think that crisis negotiators need to be smooth-talking; however, it is active listening that is the "backbone of negotiation" (Call, 2003; Royce, 2005).

Given the emphasis on ALS in the negotiation process, Vecchi et al. (2005) identified three core active listening and four supplemental skills. The core skills are mirroring, paraphrasing, and summarizing; the supplemental skills, which enhance the effectiveness of these core skills, include effective pauses, minimal encouragers, open-ended questions, and I-statements (Vecchi et al., 2005). The skill of mirroring, also known as reflecting, communicates to the subject that the negotiator hears and understands what the subject is saying, as demonstrated by repeating the last word or phrase. The negotiator is paraphrasing when they use their own words to repeat the subject's meaning. During the summarizing step, the negotiator restates the emotion and content of the subject's statement (i.e., "It sounds like you are saying…") (McMains et al., 2021; Vecchi et al., 2005). To emphasize a point, negotiators use effective pauses and minimal encouragers, which are brief, well-timed responses such as "And?" Such responses demonstrate that the negotiator is listening (McMains et al., 2021). Open-ended questions begin with phrases like "Tell me..." "Explain..." or "Describe…." They encourage the subject to respond narratively and tell their story. I-statements are used to develop further rapport or make a personal disclosure when a subject verbally attacks the negotiator (McMains et al., 2021; Vecchi et al., 2005). The FBI developed the acronym MOREPIES as a memory aid for practically applying these skills:

Minimal encouragers

Open-ended questions

Reflecting

Emotional labeling

Paraphrasing

I-statements

Effective pauses

Summary

Numerous studies have identified the importance of ALS (See Grubb et al., 2019, for a complete list of studies). Ireland and Vecchi (2009, p. 216) state, "An effective communicator is an active listener and an effective talker." Negotiators from English police forces identified the use of active listening skills as an essential skill for crisis negotiators (Grubb et al., 2021). In a survey of 188 negotiators, active listening skills were identified as the most frequently cited key to success in a negotiation (Johnson et al., 2018). Poorboy (2021) reported similar findings in an online survey of 115 participants, with 100% of negotiator respondents rating ALS as "extremely" or "very important," and 96% of negotiator respondents reporting that they used ALS "always" or "very often."

Role-Playing in Crisis Negotiation

While it is essential to be able to recite the active listening skills, it is even more crucial to learn how to use them effectively during crisis negotiations. Specifically, "the effective use of ALS and the ability to manage one's emotions despite the intense stress of a critical incident cannot be fully learned or assessed in the classroom" (Baruch & Zarse, 2012, p.46). One effective way to fully develop these skills is through role-playing and role-play tests (RPTs). Law enforcement frequently utilizes scenario-based training to acquire essential skills and facilitate motor learning. This "deliberate practice" training (Ericsson, 1998) allows officers to experience the physiological and psychological sensations triggered by stress and pressure in high-stakes scenarios. Training in this environment enables officers to condition themselves and develop adaptive stress responses. Increased exposure to occupationally relevant stress can also offset negative impacts on performance when a critical incident does occur (Di Noti & Hutha, 2019).

Role-playing facilitates learning by making the student an active participant (Kilgour et al., 2015). Rather than memorizing and recalling facts and figures, it enables a deeper level of learning, allowing students to apply the information in real time, reflect on how they are applying it, and internalize the knowledge. Role-playing is widely used in law enforcement for various types of assessments (Van Hasselt et al., 2005). For example, the FBI has utilized role-playing to assess active listening skills among crisis negotiators (Van Hasselt et al., 2005, 2006). In one study, the FBI evaluated the use of ALS by special agents in 12 scenarios before and after they completed the FBI National Crisis Negotiation Course (NCNC). Comparing pre- and post-course scores revealed improvements in emotional labeling, paraphrasing, and total ALS use. Reflecting and mirroring frequency also increased (Van Hasselt et al., 2006). In another study, the FBI compared the use of ALS between 25 FBI agents with no formal negotiation training and 25 expert FBI negotiators (Van Hasselt et al., 2005). Negotiation experts scored higher in their frequency of paraphrasing, emotional labeling, reflecting and mirroring, and overall active listening skills. Current literature primarily examines FBI personnel's use of ALS in crisis negotiation. Our study extends the studied population to include local and state law enforcement and corrections crisis negotiators' use of ALS during an RPT.

The Current Study

The current study is a summative content analysis. The authors explored existing and emerging themes in RPT judges' perceptions of negotiators' ALS use at a time when they should be displaying their best work, specifically during a competition. By systematically identifying and coding these themes, the authors provide increased knowledge and understanding of the use of ALS in crisis negotiation training (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Specifically, the authors take a summative approach, starting with the keyword MOREPIES and expanding as other themes emerge.

The authors reviewed the feedback of 63 judges for 22 teams at a crisis negotiation competition held at a southern university in January 2023. The judges selected for the competition were subject matter experts. Given that active listening skills are essential to negotiation, we hypothesized that the judges' feedback would focus on the appropriate use of these skills.

Method

The data analysis was a combination of deductive and inductive analysis. The deductive analysis involved reviewing feedback to specifically identify the skills outlined by several researchers as defining ALS (Van Hasselt et al., 2005; Zaisser & Staller, 2015). Inductive analysis was used to explore themes throughout the feedback. The unit of analysis was at the sentence level. To complete the analysis, the authors reviewed each of the judges' feedback forms to saturation over several months. First, they reviewed the forms to familiarize themselves with the content and context. During the subsequent reviews, they identified themes and pertinent notations for analysis, searching for existing and emerging themes.

The authors expected two themes to be present during their review:

Theme 1: Emphasis on the importance of using ALS. Given that research has demonstrated the effectiveness of these skills, judges are expected to document whether ALS skills were utilized during the role-play test and assess the overall quality of skill implementation.

Theme 2: Focus on the use of individual skills. The authors are interested in whether some skills are deemed more important or relevant than others and whether some are more frequently discussed or commented on during the judges' assessments.

Sample

In January 2023, 22 teams competed in a crisis negotiation competition at a southern university. This was a two-day competition in which each crisis team participated in at least one

negotiation scenario involving multiple hostages. The teams came from many areas in the United States. They included local and state law enforcement and corrections agencies, as well as a couple of non-FBI federal government agencies. Each team was given a scenario, and the team lead was briefed at the beginning of the day. Teams were invited to set up a command center in one of the available classrooms or bring their command center and set it up in the parking lot. The teams negotiated primarily with the primary hostage taker; however, they are expected to deal with whatever the situation requires (e.g., talking to another hostage taker or a hostage if one gets on the phone).

Each team was judged by at least two experts in crisis negotiation. These individuals were deemed experts because each had at least 10 years of experience as a crisis negotiator with a local, state, or federal agency. Many of the judges had participated in this competition as judges on several occasions. The Institutional Review Board approved this study (#8093) at the university where the competition occurred. Judges were briefed on the research and then signed an informed consent form.

Instrumentation

As part of the RPT, each judge filled out a form focusing on various aspects of the day's negotiations for each team. These forms were distributed electronically or in paper form, and judges updated them throughout the day. Completed copies of these forms were utilized for this study's analysis. The form instructed judges to complete each item on each team's form at least twice daily, once at the end of the morning session and once at the end of the afternoon session. However, most judges kept a running feedback commentary, recording the time and noting their feedback (e.g., 10:05 - good use of ALS). The judges evaluated participants on active listening skills, the pacing of communication with actors, and many other practices. However, this study focuses specifically on the judge's feedback regarding the use of ALS and the pace of communication.

Specific to the judge's evaluation of ALS skills within each negotiation, each judge assessed emotional labeling, paraphrasing, minimal encouragers, open-ended questions, effective pauses, mirroring, and I-messages. These skills are included in the official acronym MOREPIES (Zaisser & Staller, 2015). Judges were asked to circle each skill used, rate the overall use of ALS on a scale from 1 to 12, and provide specific feedback about these skills.

Coding and Analysis

After reviewing six forms (9.5% of the data) together and verifying interrater reliability, the authors examined the remaining data independently, focusing on the two identified themes and any additional themes that emerged while periodically checking in. It is generally accepted that checking with coding partners to maintain clarity about coding is sufficient for interrater reliability (Patton, 2015). The data were analyzed using NVivo, where each completed form was uploaded. NVivo enables accessible thematic coding and facilitates various analytical graphs and visual representations of analysis.

In coding with NVivo, two separate counts were initially considered for this study. The first was the number of teams in the competition for which the specific feedback was given. The second was the number of times the feedback was provided across all teams. This information assisted with analysis on two levels. It identified the importance of a skill or theme and its presence in the judges' minds, as evidenced by the number of departments that received feedback on a particular skill. It also demonstrated the focus on a skill or theme and whether it was mentioned several times throughout each judge's form.

Results

When searching for our first theme, the emphasis on the importance of using ALS in role-playing tests was mentioned by every judge, generally, and across all teams. General ALS skills were mentioned 45 times, more than any other category coded for this study (see Table 1 for coding related to our two themes). The content of this feedback included references to the success or failure in the overall use of ALS skills. Twenty-one mentions of ALS were positive evaluations of the use of these skills; four were neutral comments, and 20 discussed how to improve the use of ALS skills.

TABLE 1. Coded Themes

SKILL	# OF DEPARTMENTS THAT RECEIVED FEEDBACK	TOTAL NUMBER OF TIMES REFERENCED ACROSS DEPARTMENTS
General ALS	22	45
Minimum Encouragers	4	5
Open-ended Questions	15	27
Reflecting	9	16
Emotional Labeling	17	35
Paraphrasing	7	9
I-Statements	4	4
Effective Pauses	4	5
Summary	9	9

In our second theme, the use of individual skills, the skills coded were included in MOREPIES. There was considerable variation in the frequency with which judges mentioned various skills. Every skill was mentioned at least four times. The most frequently mentioned skill, emotional labeling, was mentioned almost nine times (8.75) more than the least frequently mentioned skill,

I-statements. While none of the MOREPIES skills were mentioned in every department, there was also considerable variability in the number of departments that received feedback on each skill. For instance, 17 teams received feedback on emotional labeling, while only four teams received feedback on minimum encouragers. Only two skills, open-ended questions and emotional labeling, were mentioned in more than half of the departments. Table 1 presents a breakdown of the skills coded, the number of departments that received feedback on each skill, and the total number of references to that skill across all departments.

Five additional categories arose from our analysis: anti-ALS, conversational skills, techniques, tone, and other. Anti-ALS coding related to comments pointing out activities contrary to active listening. Conversational skills coding related to comments specifically regarding a conversation that occurred. Techniques coded were not specifically related to ALS but still referred to the use of techniques, such as rapport building. Tone coding was about the negotiator's tone. The other category included references to skills that are not ALS but were noted in the ALS section, such as minimization, which is an accusatory tactic in investigative interviewing literature.

Table 2 lists these additional categories, the number of departments for which each category was mentioned, and the overall number of times each category was mentioned in feedback. Again, there are differences in the frequency with which various categories were mentioned. Two categories, anti-ALS and conversational skills, were mentioned to each department. However, listening was only mentioned in five departments. Additionally, the most frequently referenced category, anti-ALS, was mentioned eight times. The least frequently referenced category was listening. Except for the anti-ALS and conversational skills categories, only pace was mentioned in over half of the departments; the remaining categories were mentioned in fewer than half of the departments.

TABLE 2. Additional Categories Related to ALS

SKILL	# OF DEPARTMENTS THAT RECEIVED FEEDBACK	TOTAL NUMBER OF TIMES REFERENCED ACROSS DEPARTMENTS
Anti-ALS	22	42
Conversational Skills	22	39
Listening	5	5
Technique	10	14
Tone	9	11
Pace	14	24
Other	7	10

Table 3 lists all coded items in descending order of frequency. Overall, general ALS skills were mentioned most frequently, with 45 references, and anti-ALS skills were referenced next most frequently, at 42 references. Conversational skills (39), emotional labeling (35), open-ended questions (27), and pace (24) are the following most frequent categories. Reflecting (16), summary (16), technique (14), and empathy (12) came next. Tone (9), summary (9), reflecting (9), paraphrasing (7), other (7), listening (7), effective pauses (5), minimum encouragers (5), and I-statements (4) were the least-mentioned skills.

TABLE 3. All Coding, in Order of Most to Least Frequently Referenced

SKILL	# OF DEPARTMENTS THAT RECEIVED FEEDBACK	TOTAL NUMBER OF TIMES REFERENCED
General ALS	22	45
Anti-ALS	22	42
Conversational Skills	22	39
Emotional Labeling	17	35
Open-ended Questions	15	27
Pace	14	24
Reflecting	9	16
Summary	9	16
Technique	10	14
Empathy	7	12
Tone	9	11
Other	7	10
Paraphrasing	7	9
Listening	6	7
Effective Pauses	4	5
Minimum Encouragers	4	5
I-Statements	4	4

Discussion

Previous work has focused on using ALS or crisis negotiation skills within FBI populations. This study extends that work to local and state law enforcement and corrections populations. It provides a unique perspective into the perceptions of crisis negotiation experts regarding ALS use in a role-play competition. Crisis negotiation literature points to active listening skills as an important, if not essential, component of crisis negotiation (McMains, 2002; Noesner & Webster, 1997; Royce, 2005; St. Yves et al., 2022; Van Hasselt et al., 2005; Van Hasselt et al., 2006) and has embedded them into the framework of crisis negotiation since the beginning (Noesner, 2024). The role-play test is the second-best approach to training, outside of direct or natural observation, which is unrealistic given the dangers of real-world crisis negotiations (Van Hasselt et al., 2005). During crisis negotiation, "knowledge of principles of hostage negotiation is critical, but so are active listening skills and the management of personal emotions, such as anxiety and frustration" (Baruch & Zarse, 2012, p. 46).

Whether in RPT or actual crisis negotiations, negotiators recognize the importance of ALS. They should be on their "best behavior" given that they are being observed in a competitive environment or utilizing these skills to solve a real-world crisis. In this competition, experts were tasked with evaluating whether negotiators demonstrated these essential skills. Given the emphasis on ALS in crisis negotiation, we were interested in what this feedback would contain.

Our first anticipated theme, which was that judges would comment on the negotiator's use of ALS skills, was present in our review. Each judge mentioned ALS skills, in general, in their feedback. However, this finding should be viewed cautiously because it suggests that the negotiators used the ALS skills. However, there was no quantitative analysis of the percentage of time ALS was used. Previous research has surmised that the use of ALS skills could be as low as 13% of the time or worse (6%) when minimum encouragers are removed (Webster, 2004).

Judges not only commented on ALS skills but also encouraged improvement and praised teams for utilizing ALS. The frequency and content of feedback on general ALS skills indicate that both negotiators and judges appreciated the importance of ALS skills. One judge said, "Remember, ALS is the foundation of the behavior continuum." Another judge said, "More ALS—you want to 'ALS' the hostage taker to pieces!" Judges also discussed the importance of how the skills are used, with another judge saying, "Use the skills to move you forward, not just check them off the list."

However, the theme of anti-ALS is contrary to sound negotiation tactics. For instance, Johnson et al. (2018) found that behaviors such as arguing, yelling, rushing the process, and being confrontational should be avoided. Webster (2004) found that negotiators often (94% of the time) employed skills such as confronting, suggesting, and offering advice. In this study, judges provided feedback on anti-ALS behavior twice as often as they offered praise for using general ALS. This is troubling and may indicate that negotiators are attempting to solve problems prematurely by acting quickly and with authority in the negotiation process rather than investing the necessary time to

build rapport. A successful negotiation cannot occur if negotiators do not use active listening, build rapport, and fight the urge to act (Van Hasselt et al., 2005; 2006). Judges noticed when ALS was not used appropriately. Their second most common comment was pointing out what behavior was antithetical to building rapport and ensuring the hostage taker felt heard. Such frequency validates the importance of ALS, deliberate practice training, and role-play so that negotiators improve their skills and become more natural at using ALS.

Regarding theme 2, it is undoubtedly the case that some skills were mentioned more frequently than others. Although Vecchi et al. (2005) suggested that core ALS skills, such as reflecting, paraphrasing, and summarizing, should be used more often, this study found that supplemental skills were mentioned much more frequently. Judges made multiple mentions of supplemental skills such as emotional labeling, open-ended questions, and reflecting and summarizing. This may indicate that the judges consider such skills important in building rapport and ensuring the hostage taker understands their purpose and motives. This study's findings on emotional labeling were consistent with those of Van Hasselt et al. (2005) on this skill. They found that expert negotiators recognized the importance of emotional labeling in building relationships and used this skill more frequently than non-expert negotiators. Conversely, the infrequency of mentioning I-statements suggests that judges and negotiators may not consider it an important skill. Most feedback and comments on emotional labeling were neutral, noting that it occurred. However, all four mentions of I-statements included examples of how to improve its use and encouraged doing so in the future. Judges emphasized improving both of these skills, which further provides evidence that a few judges felt that improvement of I-statements was necessary compared to emotional labeling.

Our review of the judges' feedback identified several key themes that were added to the study. Specifically, judges outlined things that were not ALS to note behavior that should be adjusted or changed. Recording specific actions or words may have been the judge's way of helping teams identify areas for improvement in the future. Notations of how negotiators were not engaging in ALS or executing ALS inappropriately provided valuable information. One judge pointed out that a participant "Almost always had a negative response to the demands and nothing to offer as an alternative." While this behavior does not fall in any of the identified MOREPIES categories, it does speak to the level of rapport being built. It defeats the purpose of ALS skills, which is to make the hostage taker feel heard and understood.

Given the importance of ALS in building rapport, the pace, tone, and quality of conversation are essential in executing these skills. As one judge said: "His ability to maintain a good 'conversation' with the [hostage takers] HTs helped keep negotiations continuing smoothly until the change in HT."

Limitations and Future Directions

Although this study is an essential first step in gaining insight into how subject matter experts evaluate ALS skills in negotiators, it has limitations, and there is ample room for future research.

We were able to review the judges' comments and can entertain some thoughts around what it means for them to mention each of these skills and categories in various frequencies. However, we would have found it helpful to receive further input from the judges regarding their thought processes, the percentages of their scores based on the team's use of ALS, and whether they value some skills over others for building rapport. Future research may ask crisis negotiation experts to provide insight into how they view active listening skills overall and what they look for when evaluating a crisis negotiation team. Future research may also conduct a quantitative analysis comparing the use of ALS skills and other tools used throughout the day to gain insight into the proportion of crisis negotiation tactics that include the use of ALS.

Empirical support has established the validity of using rapport and active listening skills in other areas of policing, such as investigative interviews (Alison et al., 2013; Bull & Milne, 2004; St-Yves & Deslauriers-Varin, 2009; Wachi et al., 2018). However, to our knowledge, no empirical research has been conducted on the efficacy of ALS skills in negotiations. As ALS has been part of crisis negotiation since its beginning, research is needed to empirically test the impact of these skills on the crisis negotiation process. Future research could investigate the overall use of ALS and its impact on information yield. Studies could also explore specific skills and their differential impacts on information yield. A quantitative analysis can also determine the importance placed on individual ALS. Such research would benefit negotiators and law enforcement by providing more information about essential training.

Conclusion

Role-playing is frequently used to train officers, particularly for crisis negotiation (Ericcson, 1998; Van Hasselt et al., 2005). It is well established that ALS is critical in building rapport (Alison et al., 2013; Brimbal et al., 2019; Bull & Milne, 2004) and that rapport is essential in crisis negotiations (McMains, 2002; Noesner, 2024; Noesner & Webster, 1997; Royce, 2005; St. Yves et al., 2022; Van Hasselt et al., 2005; Van Hasselt et al., 2006). However, the scholarly record has yet to reflect the importance or contributions of ALS to crisis negotiation outside the FBI. This study is the first step in expanding the literature to local and state law enforcement and corrections populations.

This study provides further insight into the importance of ALS by examining the perception of subject matter experts who assess ALS skills in an environment where crisis negotiators are expected to execute their skills to the best of their ability. Since ALS has been involved in crisis negotiation since its inception, the importance of these skills should be thoroughly studied. ALS

must be trained and then practiced regularly to use these critical skills proficiently in various law enforcement capacities.

Lastly, and most importantly, this study's results suggest that crisis negotiators must practice ALS more to become more proficient in its use and to avoid engaging in behaviors considered anti-ALS. During an RPT or a competition, these behaviors will result in critical feedback or the loss of points. However, there are real-world implications, including injury or the loss of life, if negotiators do not use ALS during critical incidents. Negotiators must prioritize using RPT to practice ALS, ensuring they are prepared to handle any crisis negotiation safely. Remember: Like aspirin, ALS must be used to be effective.

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Criminal Identity and Social Stigma: A Labeling Theory Perspective on Offender Rehabilitation

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. People come to be viewed and labeled as criminals based on a system of societal norms and codified laws. Individuals who violate laws may be labeled as convicts, offenders, deviants, undesirables, criminals, felons, and a host of other terms with inherently negative connotations. It is important to understand that conformance and nonconformance to laws are based on internal and external factors, and much of the criminal population is not composed of the hardened, irredeemable deviants often portrayed in media and politics. The offender population has criminogenic needs that, with proper treatment, can be helped. If an individual's thoughts can be altered, then their behavioral outcomes will change. Through the labeling perspective, individuals caught and convicted of criminal acts, particularly felony acts, will begin to transform their identity to match their perceived criminality. The belief that crime is not something you did but who you are inhibits one's ability to desist from further criminality upon release.

Policy Implications. A key policy recommendation is to reduce reliance on incarceration for nonviolent offenders and instead use community-based programs. These programs allow offenders to maintain family ties, access treatment, and build pro-social networks, all of which reduce their chances of reoffending. Community-based approaches may be better options for nonviolent offenders as well as reducing the overall prison population.

Keywords: offender, labeling theory, clean slate

Labeling Theory and the Need to Reconsider Offender Status

The last few years have demonstrated the impact of labels in shaping societal perceptions. Terms such as vaccinated, unvaccinated, Republican, Democrat, illegal alien, criminal, and convicted felon are often used to categorize individuals, influencing how they are viewed based on the values and beliefs of those applying the labels. Classifying individuals through labels can be harmful, particularly within the criminal justice system, where labels can influence personal treatment, future opportunities, and public perception. Social Learning Theory suggests that behavior is learned from the environment through observation, imitation, and modeling. According to Gruman et al. (2017), criminal behavior develops through a person's interactions and experiences within their social environment. For example, individuals who grow up in communities with high crime rates may adopt criminal behaviors by observing and imitating peers or family members engaged in illegal activities. Similarly, those repeatedly labeled as criminals may internalize these identities, reinforcing the behaviors associated with such labels. Just as society's use of political and social labels influences public discourse, the criminal justice system's reliance on categorization shapes individuals' futures, often perpetuating cycles of crime and recidivism.

The criminal justice system's approach to labeling individuals as offenders perpetuates cycles of recidivism (Warren, 2023), hinders successful reintegration into society, and disproportionately impacts marginalized communities. Labels stigmatize individuals and strip them of opportunities to lead productive lives after serving their sentences. Reconsidering this approach aligns with social justice principles by providing individuals with the opportunity for redemption and a meaningful second chance—and could promote public safety.

Crime is a social construct. There is evidence of this throughout American history in prohibition of alcohol and certain drugs and same-sex relationships and marriage. Whether an individual is labeled as a criminal relies on a system of societal norms and codified laws. Individuals who violate laws may be labeled as convicts, offenders, deviants, undesirables, criminals, felons and a host of other terms that carry inherently negative connotations. However, laws are simply a formal code of conduct for a given society. Recognition that adherence to or deviation from the law is shaped by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social influence is important. Criminal behavior is not an inherent trait but rather the result of various internal and external influences. Internal factors such as trauma, mental health challenges, and cognitive distortions interact with external elements like poverty, negative peer associations, and systemic inequality to shape an individual's likelihood of engaging in crime. Contrary to media and political portrayals of offenders as irredeemable, much of the criminal population consists of individuals with criminogenic needs, dynamic risk factors that, when properly addressed, can reduce recidivism (Andrews & Bonta, 2010; Zoukis, 2024). These needs include a history of antisocial behavior, personality traits, distorted thinking, association with criminal peers, family or marital strain, educational and

employment struggles, lack of prosocial recreational activities, and substance abuse (Van Deinse et al., 2021). Recognizing that crime is a social construct shaped by evolving societal norms enables a more informed and adaptive approach to justice.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theories consider how laws are created, how labels influence behavior and societal reaction to crime, and how labels are applied through the criminal justice system (Heidt & Wheeldon, 2015). Heidt and Wheeldon (2015) assert that we see ourselves based upon how others view us and react to us. Labeling theory examines how the application of offender-associated labels in the criminal justice system can shape an individual's self-identity and future behavior. The theory highlights how the criminal justice system not only enforces laws but also perpetuates stigmas that can lead to further criminal behavior.

The theory of legal positivism recognizes a law's legitimacy due to that law's enactment by a proper authority within the legal system. The law's validity does not depend on whether it is morally good, just, or fair (Green & Adams, 2019). On the other hand, ethical and moral assessments of existing laws can lead to a subjective determination that a law can be violated if necessary. For example, exceeding the speed limit when late for work might be morally justifiable, but the same individual may have moral reservations about speeding while intoxicated (whether late or not). The separation between legal validity and moral value leads people to make their own judgments about certain laws. Individuals may decide that some laws do not align with their personal sense of justice or ethics, which can lead to the belief that it is acceptable to violate those laws under requisite circumstances. Individuals engaging in some behavior that society views as nonconforming and unacceptable may be labeled as criminals.

Legislative bodies propose and vote on laws meant to embody society's values and standards. However, external influences, particularly lobbying groups, can play a powerful role in constructing legislation. Political approaches can prioritize appearance over effectiveness, focusing on punishment rather than addressing underlying causes of crime or evaluating the impacts of legal policies on communities. For this reason, some laws target certain segments of society more than others. Three strike laws and the War on Drugs have exponentially increased incarceration in the United States, particularly among minority groups (Moore & Elkavich, 2008; Blumstein, 2011). "War on Drugs" policies have destroyed individuals, families, and communities while not creating an appreciable reduction in drug use or recidivism (Lattimore, 2022). Moore and Elkavich (2008) note that nonviolent drug convictions often impact an individual's ability to return to a meaningful life. Many individuals who have been sentenced for nonviolent drug offenses are left with few options but to recidivate and return to a life of crime.

Becker (1963), as cited in Heidt and Wheeldon (2015), states that, "people often jump to conclusions if they find out someone is a convict. They may assume the person is morally bankrupt or untrustworthy, even if the crime is unrelated to such characteristics" (p. 158). This is especially

true when an individual is labeled as a felon. A felony offense is often a more severe form of a lesser offense and carries defined sentencing terms, such as more than one year in prison or significant financial penalties. According to Bryant (2021), using terms such as "felon" defines individuals by past actions, stripping them of their humanity and potential for change. Such dehumanizing terms perpetuate harmful stereotypes and instill fear, further stigmatizing individuals and creating barriers to their reintegration and ability to thrive in society.

Felony status can restrict one's ability to vote, acquire gainful employment, and possess firearms even when the felony is unrelated to violent offenses. Some researchers suggest that felon disenfranchisement is close to 10% of the population in several states, having a real impact on election outcomes (Dawson-Edwards & Higgins, 2013; Manza & Uggen, 2006). The practice of felon disenfranchisement also disproportionately affects minority groups. Along with voting restrictions, people who have been convicted of a felony struggle to fight the perception that they are inherently bad people. Lutman et al. (2015) note this is especially true among drug offenders and that, "the application of the label of felon creates what some call a hidden barrier … and impedes the mobility and life opportunities of those labeled through the life cycle" (p. 59). Restoring rights such as voting to convicted persons helps their re-entry into society.

Kieso (2005) states that criminals are often seen as evil. The criminal is "overly or incorrectly stigmatized" (p. 23). This pattern of thinking means individuals may have difficulty reintegrating after a criminal conviction. Societal subgroups such as disadvantaged, poor, and minorities, are potentially more susceptible to the effects of labeling because of the compounding factors such as race and socioeconomic status. Referring to "concentrated disadvantage" (p. 552), Chiricos et al. (2007) expound on the difficulties of reintegration in certain social environments and suggest that communities and environments have significant impacts on an individual's likelihood to recidivate. Communities with a substantial population below the poverty line offer few legitimate employment opportunities, high ratios of single-parent households, and reduced social service and community resources; they tend to have increased levels of crime (Hipp, 2007; Sampson, 2012). These communities often have a high police presence ("hot spot policing") which increases the potential for individuals to be caught and labeled (Sackett, 2016). If the cycle continues without successful intervention, crime and the associated labeling will continue to disrupt already disadvantaged segments of the population and disproportionately impact minority communities (Sackett, 2016). The criminal justice system should provide effective, evidence-based treatment for offenders and equip returnees with skills to avoid engaging in criminal conduct.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

In the last few decades, mass incarceration has become an American epidemic (Kahn, 2024). The need for rehabilitation was replaced by the punishment model of sentencing in the 1970s and into the 1980s (Andrews, 2011). Despite falling crime rates, the United States has continued to imprison offenders at historically high levels (Moore & Elkavich, 2008; American Psychological

Association, 2014; National Research Council, 2014; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015; Wagner and Bertram, 2020; and Gramlich, 2021). However, incarceration alone will not stop crime. Practitioners and stakeholders increasingly recognze the need for effective rehabilitation strategies, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), that address the contextual factors in individuals' lives. Lattimore (2022) posits that punitive policies applied during the War on Drugs and War on Crime have shifted to reform strategies designed to reduce the negative impacts of policing and address racial and socioeconomic disparities. Evidence-based practices that focus on individual change, such as CBT, have demonstrated notable effects in systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Aos et al., 2006; Bitney et al., 2017; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007; MacKenzie, 2006; Wanner, 2018).

The basic tenet of CBT is that thought affects behavior. If an individual's thoughts can be altered, then their behavioral outcomes will change. Through the labeling perspective, individuals convicted of criminal acts, particularly felony acts, will transform their identity to match their criminality (Besemer et al., 2017). The belief that crime is not something you did but who you are can inhibit one's ability to desist from further criminality upon release. According to Kavish (2017), "contemporary labeling theory research has found that formal labels significantly amplify subsequent involvement in delinquency and criminal behavior" (p. 46; see also Pratt et al., 2016). CBT approaches can address maladaptive thoughts that lead to antisocial behaviors. For example, CBTcan reduce the impact of criminal labeling and has been effectively implemented with a variety of special offender populations (Clark, 2010; Feucht & Holt, 2016).

The risk-needs-responsivity (RNR) principles of CBT involve assessing offenders for their risk of recidivism, identifying and addressing their criminogenic needs, and tailoring interventions to match the learning styles and capacities of each offender to maximize effectiveness. Offenders with the highest risk of recidivating should be targeted for CBT intervention, while low risk offenders are often not recommended for treatment (Andrews, 2011; Marlowe, 2018).

A core benefit of CBT is the capacity to reduce the effects of criminal labeling. Offenders often internalize the stigma associated with being labeled a criminal, which can reinforce antisocial behaviors (Besemer et al., 2017; Kavish, 2017). CBT can help disrupt this cycle of thinking by encouraging offenders to see themselves as capable of change. By shifting their self-perception from "criminal" to "individual in recovery," offenders can develop a more positive identity and a sense of agency over their actions. A cognitive behavioral approach can demonstrate to the offender that they have the capacity to return to the community and build the skills necessary to remain there as a contributing member.

Clean Slates

While the previous discussion focused on psychological approaches to reducing criminal behavior, it is also important to consider how legal and systemic measures can mitigate the effects of labeling. Interventions for offenders in corrections can prevent self-labeling from impacting a successful return to the community. Upon release, these offenders need cognitive skills to desist

from a return to a life of crime. This process is hardest for those with felony convictions. Convicted felons are tagged with a strong societal stigma and are denied opportunities that many other released offenders can access and participate in. Even when a felony offender can successfully complete CBT group therapy and secure release from an institution, the felony label continues to inhibit their transition to a new beginning. (Uggen et al., 2006).

Heidt and Wheeldon (2015) offer several recommended revisions to policy and practice that mitigate labeling's effect on offenders. Among these recommendations are decriminalization, deinstitutionalization, and diversion.

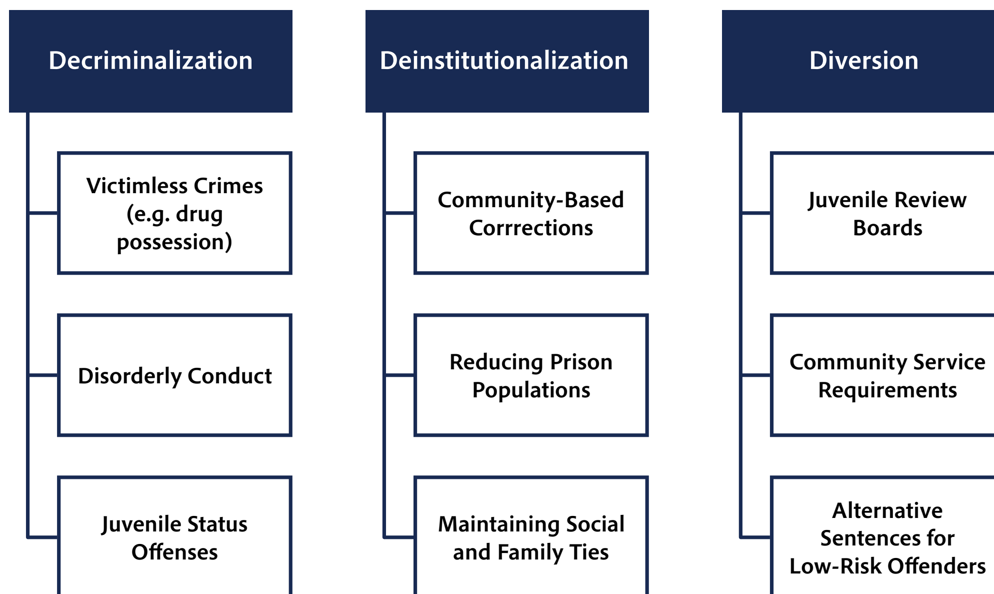

FIGURE 1. Heidt and Wheeldon Recommendations

Victimless crimes such as simple drug possession and disorderly conduct should be decriminalized. Juvenile status offenses should also be decriminalized, and juveniles should be protected from criminal justice involvement to the extent possible. A family history of antisocial behavior contributes to future recidivism, and the earlier youth are given a criminal label, the greater the possibility of continued criminality (Besemer et al., 2017). Decriminalization keeps individuals accountable in their communities where they can maintain ties with family and other social support structures while avoiding the need for institutional interventions.

Decriminalization also prevents individuals who are not dangerous or have not committed serious offenses from building lengthy criminal histories and strengthening the criminal label. Deinstitutionalization, along with decriminalization, keeps individuals in the community. This allows community-based approaches that may be more effective for nonviolent offenders (Hansen, 2008), and reduces the overall prison population. Programs like Thinking for a Change (T4C), Criminal

Conduct and Substance Abuse Treatment (SSC), and Interactive Journaling are specific examples that focus on cognitive restructuring, social skills development, and problem-solving to address criminogenic needs and antisocial behaviors. Additionally, relapse prevention therapy (RPT) supports offenders in managing high-risk situations and preventing relapses into criminal behavior.

Diversion programs are useful for low-risk offenders who may not require CBT. Juveniles may benefit from diversionary programs such as juvenile review boards and community service requirements. However, one concern is "net widening," a phenomenon where diversionary programs, designed to redirect individuals away from traditional criminal justice processes (like incarceration), end up increasing the number of people under some form of supervision. Heidt and Wheeldon (2015) caution that net widening (p. 161) was responsible for increasing individuals in the criminal justice system via the use of diversionary programs.

According to Chiricos et al. (2007), Florida offers individuals convicted of certain felony offenses the ability to withhold adjudication (§ 775.08435). This practice allows offenders to avoid conviction, potentially reducing the stigma and legal consequences associated with a criminal record. A report by The Sentencing Project (2020) notes that 40% of people on probation in Florida are under this "adjudication withheld" status, although only about 50% of probationers in Florida successfully complete their probation terms. This means that many individuals, despite being given the opportunity to avoid the "felon" label, struggle to meet the conditions required to maintain that status. As a result, they ultimately fail to comply with their probation terms, leading to formal conviction and the same legal and social consequences as those who were adjudicated from the start.

Another option available to convicted individuals and felons is a request for a pardon. A presidential pardon is an act of executive clemency granted solely by the President under Article II, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. It forgives a federal offense by removing legal penalties but does not erase the conviction or imply innocence. Eligibility typically requires a five-year waiting period after completion of the sentence. The Department of Justice's Office of the Pardon Attorney investigates applications and makes confidential recommendations to the President. A pardon may relieve certain legal disabilities but does not prevent consequences based on the underlying conduct.

State pardons are acts of clemency granted by governors or designated state boards, depending on state law. Like federal pardons, they forgive the legal consequences of a conviction but do not erase the conviction itself unless accompanied by expungement. Each state sets its own rules on eligibility, application procedures, and the effect of a pardon. Some states require a waiting period after sentence completion, while others may consider applications earlier. In certain states, a pardon may restore civil rights, such as voting or firearm ownership, and relieve some barriers to employment or licensing. However, like federal pardons, they do not guarantee protection from consequences based on the conduct itself.

In the State of Connecticut (n.d.), individuals with criminal records may seek to have

their records erased through processes such as absolute pardons and the Clean Slate initiative. An absolute pardon results in the complete erasure of an individual's criminal record and can be acquired by criteria related to the conviction. For misdemeanors (sentences of less than one year), at least three years must have passed since the disposition of the most recent misdemeanor conviction. For felonies (sentences of more than one year), at least five years must have passed since the disposition of the most recent felony conviction. Individuals must also not be on parole or probation and can have no pending charges in any jurisdiction.

Clean Slate laws, aimed at automating the expungement or sealing of eligible criminal records for individuals who remain conviction-free for a set period, have gained momentum across several U.S. states. Pennsylvania is credited as an originator of this initiative in 2018 with a law that seals specific non-violent misdemeanor convictions after 10 years without further offenses. Utah followed in 2019, enacting automatic expungement for eligible misdemeanors after a designated conviction-free period. That same year, New Jersey established an expungement process while excluding individuals convicted of serious crimes such as murder, robbery, and aggravated sexual assault. Michigan's Clean Slate law, effective in 2021 and implemented in April 2023, provides for automatic expungement of misdemeanors after seven years and certain felonies after ten years, provided there are no subsequent convictions. Connecticut's law, which took effect in January 2023, focuses on erasing certain offenses, but faced technical delays as of November 2024. Though not an exhaustive list, collectively these laws illustrate a policy movement across the country aimed at simplifying criminal record relief and reducing barriers to reintegration through automation.

Options such as withholding adjudication and absolute pardons offer good alternatives to punitive sentencing and eliminating the harmful felony offender label. However, to meet the needs of those who would benefit from these options, adjudication and pardons must be accessible to everyone.

Conclusion

The use of labels in the criminal justice system produces consequences extending beyond the courtroom, perpetuating cycles of recidivism and deepening social inequalities. Labels such as "convict" or "felon" not only stigmatize individuals but also serve as barriers to reintegration, restricting access to housing, employment, and civic participation. As this paper has explained, crime is not a reflection of inherent character flaws but often the product of social constructs, circumstances, and unmet needs. Addressing offending's root causes through evidence-based interventions, like cognitive behavioral therapy, and adopting policies focused on rehabilitation rather than punishment can help reduce the negative effects of criminal labeling. By reconsidering punitive, dehumanizing labels and providing pathways for redemption, society can move toward a more equitable and effective justice system that recognizes the potential for individual change. This shift is essential not only for the individuals affected but also for fostering safer, more resilient communities.

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Meeting Their Needs: Evaluating Agency-Specific Workplace Factors to Enhance Officer Retention Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. Sworn officers remain the most critical and costly asset of any police agency. Due to complexities surrounding factors such as job motivation, organizational commitment, and agency structure, law enforcement organizations that want to understand officer retention require unique strategies. This study's purpose is to develop a comprehensive evaluation report of retention factors, utilizing a case study of a mid-size municipal police department. Participants were identified as sworn officers within the agency up to the rank of sergeant (N =367). Using the Likert scale and open-ended survey responses, we evaluated perceptions of workplace factors (External Job Opportunities, Compensation, Personal Characteristics, Organizational Issues, and Employee Needs) against officer retention decisions. Ordinary least squares regression found officers who indicated higher agreement with *Employee Needs* ($\beta = 0.262$, s.e. $= 0.69$, $p < 0.001$) were significantly more likely to report intention to remain with the agency. Open-ended responses provided practical direction for the implementation of findings into agency practices.

Policy Implications. Policy implications include integrating these findings into organizational procedures and supporting action research components. The research design strengthened the agency's capacity to evaluate officers' needs, while findings targeted areas for strategy development. These components combine to create an agency-specific mechanism that complements police retention assessments. This framework reinforces the importance of officers' voices in staffing evaluations; officers provide a needed viewpoint to ensure that lived experiences align with agency objectives.

Keywords: officer retention, turnover intention, staffing, action research

Introduction

For law enforcement agencies, determining where to focus staffing efforts without analysis to inform direction can be like receiving a service call with no geographical location. Without precise direction an agency can waste precious time navigating areas that may not be relevant. Given an ever-expanding list of motivation and commitment factors, individuals tasked with developing appropriate action plans can quickly become overwhelmed or misguided by best practices and recommendations if they do not have critical assessment of the agency.

Professional organizations have labeled personnel staffing challenges as a "crisis," leading to heightened attention for police recruitment and retention across the United States (Police Executive Research Forum [PERF], 2019; 2021; International Association of Chief's of Police [IACP], 2020). This has launched multiple efforts to clarify noted complexities of commitment and motivation using a modern lens (Morrow, et al., 2021; Copeland, et al., 2022; Wojslawowicz, et al., 2023). However, while the "crisis" label has bolstered empirical research, lingering impacts have led others to question whether the reported phenomenon is appropriately named (Wilson & Grammich, 2024). A staffing crisis suggests a period of increased challenges with the hope of returning to the status quo; whereas a pragmatic approach would view these conditions as a new normal (De Smet, et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). As a result, a shift in how staffing should be evaluated prompts police to prioritize individualized methods of assessment against a more generalized backdrop of police staffing nation-wide.

Pressures surrounding modern staffing challenges stem from increased retirements, reduced applicants, and heightened voluntary turnover (PERF, 2019; 2021; IACP, 2020. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 sought to increase sworn officers by awarding grant funds (U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 2000). Thirty years later, officers hired during this boom are eligible for retirement. Advances in policing professionalism, changes in public perception, and the availability of alternative careers have challenged traditional hiring practices; what worked in the past may no longer be effective (Wojslawowicz, 2021; Wojslawowicz, et al., 2024). This paper will specifically examine heightened voluntary turnover through an action-research lens. Agencies must deconstruct and evaluate this perfect storm of widespread impacts to determine appropriate mitigation responses.

Financial costs are perhaps the most universal method for agencies to demonstrate the negative effects of police turnover. The cost of officer attrition can ultimately impact public safety through increased response times and affect budgets through greater costs for onboarding processes, new equipment, and training (Mourtgos, et al., 2022; Hilal & Litsey, 2020). Replacing an officer, even one with less than three years of experience, can cost a department from one to five times the officer's salary (Orrick, 2002; 2008). In 2009, Copeland (as cited in Wilson, 2010) estimated the average cost to select, hire, and train a new officer was $58,000. Rough inflation estimates for 2025 now place this figure at approximately $87,000. Given the accompanying loss of knowledge and skills, all agencies should strengthen staffing strategies regardless of perceived need.

Considering the varying nuances in agency structures, each organization seeking to obtain an accurate understanding of officer retention should adopt strategies calibrated to itself. Noting the gap in available models for staffing development planning, this study supports the construction of a comprehensive evaluation of retention factors within a single mid-size municipal police department. Further, this study adopts an action research approach, ensuring agency involvement throughout the research design process to prioritize implementation.

Literature Review

Staffing assessments must navigate both recruitment and retention. In many aspects, these fields should not be separated, as challenges felt by officer retention are exacerbated by declining application pools (Skaggs & Montgomery, 2022). Yet, one can argue a focus on retention, rather than recruitment, provides a more efficient pathway for agencies to direct efforts (Wilson, et al., 2023). When trying to understand an organization's retention character, Tyson & Charman (2023) call for a people-centered approach that pays attention to the organization and focuses on the officers. As a result, law enforcement benefits from a highly focused problem-solving strategy tailored to each agency (Wojslawowicz, et al., 2024).

As previously noted, literature about officer staffing proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguably due to attention from professional law enforcement organizations (PERF, 2021; 2023; IACP, 2020). However, concerns over police staffing are not new. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that between 1997 and 2016, local officer rates per 1,000 residents increased nationwide by only 11%, despite a 21% increase in population (Hyland & Davis, 2019). Modern literature examining police turnover intentions is relatively scarce. Works that fit these parameters have found that law enforcement career motivations and turnover results are multifaceted (Matz et al., 2014; Nyunt, 2022; Wojslawowicz, 2021).

"Turnover intention" is the deliberate willingness to leave an organization, often measured across specific intervals (Matz et al., 2014). Contributors to turnover intention are well-established and persistent, including concerns of legitimacy, generational shifts, and management challenges (Todak, 2017; Wilson & Miles-Johnson, 2024). Turnover intention is not the same as turnover rate, which has been examined in studies such as Wareham, et al. (2015), the use of Bureau of Justice Statistics Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS) and Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies (CSLLEA) surveys. Wareham, et al. (2015) provided a nation-wide view of turnover rates, defined as the number of full-time sworn personnel who separated from responding agencies and sub-categorized. However, more recent publications of the CSLLEA survey have not included employee separation figures. Thus, turnover intention has largely remained examined at the organizational level within the United States.

The work by Wareham, et al. (2015) demonstrated turnover rates are contextual, varying by geographic location and police organization. A recent study examining officer resignations and

retirements in the post-George Floyd timeframe found most participating agencies experienced an increase in turnover; however, a select few did not (Adams et al., 2023). Those outliers were described as, "smaller suburban agencies, or in one case, a sheriff's department" (Adams, et al., 2023, p.23). This suggests that turnover effects are felt differently even following a widespread event.

Just as retention rates are contextual, turnover intentions are individualized. In a meta-analysis of turnover intent, factors such as job satisfaction, other career opportunities, and psychological distress were individual predictors (Matz, et al., 2014). When asked, officers reported that job demand stressors, psychological distress, commitments (organizational and occupational), and burnout all played a role in turnover intentions (Drew, et al., 2024; Charman & Bennett, 2022). The unique nature of turnover intentions underscores the need for personalized retention strategies that consider the individual experiences and challenges officers face. Puhakka, et al., (2021) argued turnover intentions can also be examined from an assessment of what is external to the self through workplace environmental factors. Therefore, turnover intentions can be viewed as both unique to each person and a shared experience. This combination of individual and organizational is also characteristic of police career motivations (Foley, et al., 2008; White, et al., 2010). Therefore, organizations should base retention efforts both on known factors identified in industry literature and characteristics that are unique to the agency.

Workplace Factors and Action Research

As stated, turnover intention can be examined from both individual (basic psychological need) and organizational approaches (Puhakka et al., 2021). When researchers examine workplace factors resulting from the organization's environment, they seek to isolate components the agency might address through department practices (Wilson et al., 2010). Lynch & Tuckey's (2004) model of workplace factors that may affect officer turnover intention includes (1) the impact of other opportunities; (2) actual and potential compensation; (3) personal characteristics and demographic factors; (4) organizational health, policy, and culture; and (5) employee needs. Subsequently, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) and RAND's Center on Quality Policing provided a report on Lynch & Tuckey's model, emphasizing practical considerations for law enforcement (Wilson et al., 2010). Workplace factors have been categorized as subsets of the Lynch & Tuckey (2004) model, such as management/leadership styles, work-life balance, recruitment practices and training, and officer expectations (Davies et al., 2024).

Notably, the Lynch & Tuckey model and discussion of workplace factors find many parallels with general concepts presented in organizational justice literature. The framework of organizational justice is centered on an employee's perception of fair treatment by leadership (Wolfe & Piquero, 2011). Variations of organizational justice, or how fair treatment can be perceived by an employee, include the examination of fair distribution of resources (distributive justice), involvement in decision-making processes (procedural justice), and interpersonal treatment (interactional justice, also called informational and interpersonal justice) (see Wolfe & Lawson, 2020). Wolfe &

Lawson's (2020) meta-analysis emphasizes organizational justice as a significant predictor of work outcomes and notes connections between fair treatment and increased commitment among justice system employees. Significantly, how fairness is perceived and leadership's role in forming these perceptions influences officer motivation, trust, and commitment to the agency (Bradford et al., 2014; Donner et al., 2017; Wolfe & Nix, 2017).

Within the purview of turnover intentions, analysis of organizational justice factors have found a reduction in adverse effects for criminal justice employees (Byrne, 2005; Lambert & Hogan, 2009; Lambert et al., 2010). Further, Lynch & Tuckey's (2004) work on voluntary turnover include model factors such as employee needs (i.e., fair treatment, agency support) and organizational health/culture (i.e., leadership behavior), that fall within the purview of organizational justice as well as the paradigm of workplace factor influence. Nevertheless, a significant component in using workplace factors to evaluate retention is the organization's ability to adjust factors and make changes based on findings.

At its center, the action research framework intends to produce change and improvement within the context in which it is performed (Susaman & Evered, 2023). Action research is a method of study that engages active partnerships between practitioner and researcher, where focus is given to a specific problem to understand and help implement solutions (National Institute of Justice, 2024). More specifically, practical action research models concern themselves equally with both process and result, finding strength in the capacity to identify issues or problems within professional contexts (Leith & Day, 2000; National Institute of Justice, 2024). Applied to law enforcement agencies, action research invests time and effort into building capacity for problem-solving through constant input and evaluation. Recommendations that reflect action research in police staffing include constructing human resource strategies to fit a specific agency and investing in continuous feedback systems, such as surveying personnel to ensure their needs are met and procedures are communicated accurately (Sun et al., 2022). This study's research design seeks not only to demonstrate an archetype for building a sustainable research approach within an organization, but it also tries to inspire continuous improvement and incorporate relevant factors (Wilson & Miles-Johnson, 2024).

Identifying relevant factors for staffing assessments is a cost-effective way for agencies to quickly identify their strengths and needs (Quick & Wolff, 2024; O'Guinn et al., 2024; Wojslawowicz et al., 2024). Quick & Wolff (2024) utilize a cross-sectional method to assess the relationships between workplace factor components and turnover intention at the New York Police Department. Regression models found job satisfaction, financial factors, and job fulfillment to predict lower levels of turnover intention (i.e., increased commitment to the agency), whereas individuals who reported intention to separate were more likely to report issues with work-life balance and environmental factors (Quick & Wolff, 2024). Importantly, these findings translated into relatively inexpensive environmental solutions that the agency could directly control to address turnover concerns—such as maintaining a clean workplace and good condition of equipment.

O'Guinn et al. (2024) also demonstrate the benefit of department-specific retention evaluations. Their study examined agency hiring and employment data for voluntary separations—with specific attention to an officer's tenure with the agency. Findings were agency specific. For example, the short average tenure of those with prior military experience provided insight for department strategies for that group (O'Guinn et al., 2024). Relevant to the current study's design, researchers argued for "more research…to determine why officers decided to stay or leave their agency" (O'Guinn et al., 2024, p. 8). Therefore, this study seeks to evaluate the impact of workplace factors on retention decisions through an active research lens, supporting the development of a comprehensive retention assessment with the organization's participation.

Methodology

The study adopted a participatory action research design, a subgroup of action research that emphasizes the collaborative effort of problem solving, improvement of practices, and refining actions based on impacts discovered (Leith & Day, 2000; Leykum, et al., 2009). The primary goal was supporting the development of a comprehensive retention report to contextualize system processes and integrate acquired knowledge into agency-specific responses for future evaluation. The study was led by the primary research question (RQ1): What is the relationship between workplace factor variables and officer retention decisions within the participating agency (Wilson et al., 2010)? This exploration of workplace factors on employee retention decisions centered on a framework of variables provided by Wilson et al. (2010) and adapted into survey items with organizational input; a critical element of the study was future strategy development and adaptation from outputs. A secondary research question (RQ2) was: Why do officers plan to stay or leave the agency (Snipe, 2021; O'Guinn et al., 2024)? This question was intended to provide additional insight into directing agency implementation.

Setting and Participants

The study occurred within a mid-size southeastern municipal U.S. law enforcement agency. The study's population consisted of sworn officers employed by the agency—all holding the rank of sergeant or below (N=367). The agency population included those identified as being on active military leave or Family and Medical Leave (FMLA). Participants were asked to attend one of three master roll call sessions, during which they were provided with an overview of the study, given the opportunity to ask questions, and provided with informed consent. Participants were advised that involvement in the study was completely voluntary and confidential; no identifying information would be shared outside of the primary investigator. The survey instrument was accessed via an anonymous QR code through Qualtrics™. Of the 367 officers, 219 attended one of three roll call sessions, and of those, 207 participated in the survey. Upon review of submitted responses, seven were incomplete and thus removed from the data set. A 91.3% participation rate was recorded for those who attended roll call sessions. Using Cochran's formula, a sample size of 188 (C.I. 95%, 5%

M.E.) was calculated for responses to reflect the target population. Therefore, it was affirmed that the sample collected (n = 200) represented the intended population. Demographic information is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Sample Population Demographics

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLE	FREQUENCY RESPONSE	
	n	%
Age		
21-25	33	16.5
26-30	56	28.0
31-35	39	19.5
36-40	32	16.0
41-45	21	10.5
46-50	10	5.0
51-55	7	3.5
56-60	1	0.5
61+	1	0.5
Gender		
Male	164	82.0
Female	34	17.0
Other	1	0.5
Prefer Not to Answer	1	0.5
Race		
White/Caucasian	166	83.0
Black/African American	21	10.5
Hispanic/Latinx	8	4.0
American Indian/Native American	0	0.0
Pacific Islander/Hawaiian	0	0.0
Asian	0	0.0
Other	5	2.5
Education		
High School/GED	13	6.5
Associates	11	5.5
Bachelor's	134	67
Master's	40	20.0
Doctorate/Juris Doctorate	2	1.0
Assignment		
Community Oriented Policing	9	4.5
Investigations/Forensic Services	36	18.0
Patrol/Team Investigations	132	66
Professional Standards	2	1.0
Special Operations	21	10.5

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLE	FREQUENCY RESPONSE	
	n	%
Years of Service		
< 4	80	40.0
5-9	67	33.5
10-14	24	12.0
15-19	18	9.0
20-24	9	4.5

Note. N = 200.

Instrument Development

Instrument development underwent a multi-step validity process, including a pilot study involving officers of a similar rank from a nearby agency. Feedback on the instrument was gathered from the pilot study, followed by Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency of combined rating scales. Each construct reached acceptable to high levels of internal consistency, provided in Table 2. As previously noted, factor scales were designed based on literature review and input from the agency.

TABLE 2. Construct Reliability Analysis

CONSTRUCT	ITEM SCALE	CRONBACH'S ALPHA	COMBINED SCORE
		a	*a*
Workplace Factors			*0.882*
Compensation	8	*0.719*	
Employee Needs	7	*0.852*	
Job Opportunities*	2	-	
Personal Characteristics	5	*0.710*	
Organizational Issues	10	*0.884*	

* Job Opportunities responses were divided into two categories: consideration of leaving law enforcement and consideration of a different police agency.

Retention was defined by the agency as an intention to remain with the organization (i.e., turnover intention) and measured on a five-point scale (Snipe, 2021; Matz et al., 2014). Participants were asked to indicate their intention to remain with the agency within the following categories: 1= As long as I am able, 2= Until I reach retirement, 3= Undecided, 4= Until I find a more desirable job opportunity, 5= I plan to leave the agency as soon as possible. Workplace factors were Compensation, Employee Needs, Personal Characteristics, Job Opportunities, and Organizational Issues (see Figure 1) (Lynch & Tuckey, 2004; Wilson et al., 2010). Participants were also presented with an open-ended prompt after the survey that asked them to indicate whether they intended

to remain or separate from the agency (yes/no) and provide vital insight to direct agency focus (Snipe, 2021; Singer & Couper, 2017). Responses underwent thematic analysis coding of reoccurring themes. Codes and coding were peer-reviewed for validity purposes. A member of the agency reviewed by for appropriateness.

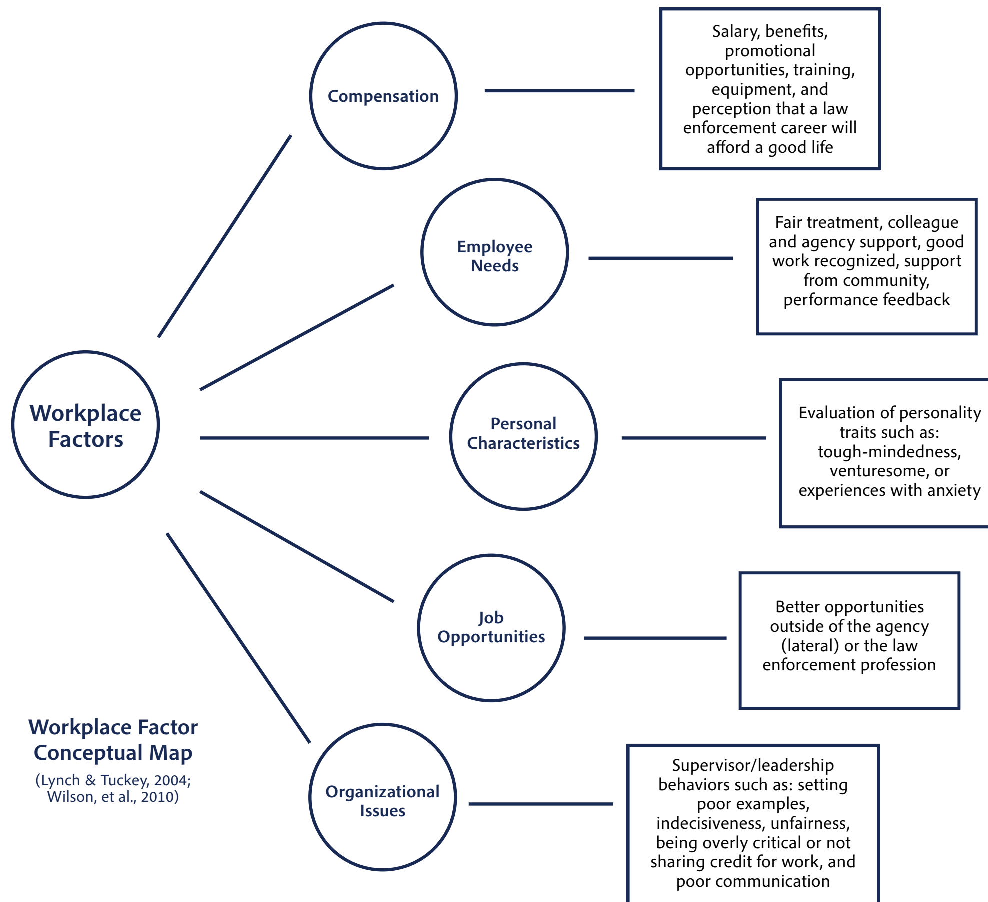

FIGURE 1. Workplace Factor Conceptual Map

Results

The analytical plan sought to examine the primary research question (RQ1): What is the relationship between workplace factor variables and officer retention decisions within the participating agency? SPSS™ v29 was utilized for statistical analysis, and NVIVO™ v11 for coding of open responses. Descriptive statistics of *Workplace* and *Retention* variable responses were provided to the agency for individual factor review, including a cross-tabulation of *Retention* response groupings by control variables (i.e., Age, Assignment, Division Assignment, Education, Gender, Race, Years of Service). Cross tabulations were utilized to review group differences and identify potential target areas for the agency.

Bivariate correlation analysis produced moderate to low significant relationships, as viewed in the correlation matrix in Table 3. While negative correlations were viewed between *Job Opportunities* (External) (r = -0.398, p < 0.01) and *Job Opportunities* (Other Agency) (r = -0.385, p < 0.01) on retention responses, positive correlations were recorded between *Compensation, Organizational Issues* and *Employee Needs* (Respectively: r = 0.435, r = 0.390, r = 0.447, p < 0.01). Meaning, when participants reported a higher agreement to *Job Opportunities*, lower intentions to remain with the agency were noted. Whereas higher agreement to *Compensation, Organizational Issues*, and *Employee Needs* factors saw a higher reported intention to remain with the agency. Of additional interest was the strong positive correlation between *Organizational Issues* and *Employee Needs* (r= 0.813, p < 0.01). This indicates a relationship where the two factors change together at a constant rate, implying higher agreements to one variable also saw a higher responses to the other—but does not imply cause and effect. Retention responses were also examined against control variables (i.e. *Age, Gender, Race, Education, Assignment*, and *Years of Service*) with no notable correlations noted, suggesting these factors had no significant impact to retention decisions.

TABLE 3. Correlations of Workplace Factors and Retention Variables

VARIABLE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Retention	—						
2. Job Opportunities (External)	–.385**	—					
3. Job Opportunities (Other Agency)	–.398**	.300**	—				
4. Compensation	.435**	–.237**	–.373**	—			
5. Personal Characteristics	–.141*	-.046	.032	-.088	—		
6. Organizational Issues	.390**	–.348**	–.277**	.574*	.081	—	
7. Employee Needs	.447**	–.364**	–.344**	.591**	.066	.813**	—

Note. ** p < 0.01, * p <0.05.

Next, to evaluate whether agency retention decisions may be impacted by workplace factors, ordinary least squares regression (OLS) was performed with required assumptions met. Workplace factors were measured against the binary planning to stay/leave survey prompt. The coefficients represented comparisons between intention to remain with the agency (coded 0) and intentions to separate (coded as 1). Binary logistic regression was also performed, and similar direction and significance logit specifications were found in the main OLS specification (see Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Cunningham, 2021 – output provided in Appendix B). The model accounted for

a moderate proportion (28.6%) of variance in decisions R2 = 0.286, *F* (5,193) = 15.43, p<0.001. *Employee Needs* (β = 0.262, s.e. = 0.69, p < 0.001) and *Job Opportunities* (Other Agencies) (β = -0.066, s.e. = 0.023, p = 0.005) were significant contributors to the model. Notably, *Employee Needs* maintained the largest influence. For every unit of increase in *Employee Needs*, intention to remain with the agency increased by 26.2%, holding other variables constant. In other words, officers who indicated higher agreement with *Employee Needs* were significantly more likely to report intention to remain with the agency.

TABLE 4. OLS Regression Table – Planning to Stay/Leave

EFFECTS	ESTIMATES	SE	β	95% CI		t	p
				LL	UL		
(Constant)	.923	.205	.149	.519	1.327	4.509	<.001
Compensation	.104	.056	-.091	-.006	.215	1.865	.064
Personal Characteristics	-.081	.055	-.122	-.189	.028	-1.462	.145
Organizational Issues	-.078	.069	.417	-.213	.058	-1.127	.261
Employee Needs	.262	.069	-.189	.126	.398	3.793	<.001
Job Opportunities (Other Agencies)	-.066	.023	.149	-.112	-.020	-2.840	.005

Note. N=199. Adjusted R Square = .267, CI = Confidence Interval, LL= Lower Level, UL= Upper Limit. Variable *Job Opportunities (External)* was not included in the model due to multicollinearity presumptions between the constant.

Open-ended responses following the binary planning to stay/leave prompt were used to provide context for reported factors. Participants indicating their intention to remain with the agency referenced pay and benefits (*Compensation*), the opportunity to advance their career (*Career Development*), and *Job Satisfaction* most frequently (see Figure 2). Respondents expressing their intention to separate identified the same top factors as those who intended to stay, albeit with negative sentiments. A review of codes and full quotes (redacted of identifying comments) was provided to the agency for examples of direct focus areas to support action planning. Due to the amount of detail provided, many of the responses were categorized under multiple codes.

Discussion

The officers' perspective on workplace factors influencing their retention decisions is a crucial element in the formulation of a police agency's staffing plan. While agencies should employ

additional analytical strategies, such as examining hiring factors or staffing allocation (O'Guinn, et al., 2024; Wilson & Grammich, 2024), capturing the officer's voice is a potent method for gauging how current policies and procedures impact the staff (Sun, et al., 2022).

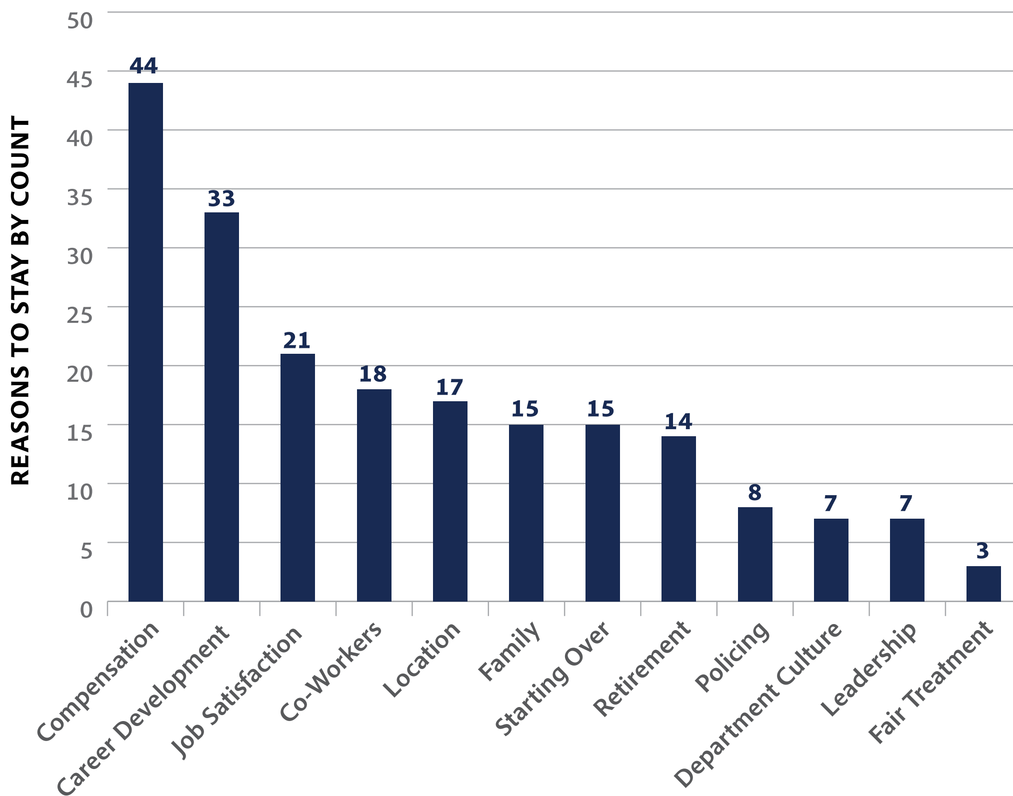

FIGURE 2. Reasons to Stay - Responses by Count

This study sought to identify how workplace factors impacted a specific police organization, allowing it to isolate focal points for strategy development. As *Employee Needs* was a significant factor in influencing retention decisions, that component was individually reviewed for procedure recommendations. Specifically, the study found evidence for strengthening organizational components, such as ensuring employees are recognized and appreciated for good work; providing feedback on work performance; garnering support for officers from the agency, community, and colleagues; treating employees fairly; and fostering strong working relationships among coworkers. The study's design and findings suggest the value for organizations in conducting regular employee surveys to better understand current needs, give staff members a voice, and help mitigate turnover intentions (Wilson et al., 2010; Tyson & Charman, 2023).

These findings are consistent with prior work that recommends creating environments where employees feel valued and that advocate improvements to culture and workplace (organizational justice) factors (Drew et al., 2024; Hernandez-Orella, 2024; Wolfe & Lawson, 2020). Changes take shape at a relational level. Direct supervisors and leadership play a significant role

as the conduits between functionality of the agency and officer motivation and trust (Bradford et al., 2014; Donner et al., 2017; Wolfe & Nix, 2017). These efforts go beyond identifying a need to providing a visible response and establishing internal support systems for the officers (Wilson et al., 2010).

However, the statistical significance of one factor should not lead to neglect of others. Our findings indicate which factors were most influential for the participating agency at the time of analysis. Literature demonstrates that career motivations and turnover intentions are complex (Matz et al., 2014; Nyunt, 2022; Wojslawowicz, 2021). For example, this study found that *Compensation*, *Organizational Issues*, and *Employee Needs* positively correlate with retention responses. Nevertheless, in open-ended responses, participants mentioned *Compensation* most frequently as a reason to remain or separate.

Further, the top responses (*Compensation* and *Career Development*) were the same for both stay and leave categories. This provides an interesting paradigm to consider for changed motivations and unmet expectations (White et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2024). Prior research has identified both financial compensation and barriers to career development as associated with officer retention (Davies et al., 2024; Tyson & Charman, 2023). However, having identical factors on opposing sides of an employee's employment decision has yet to be examined within law enforcement. This dichotomy has received some attention in the business sector (see Flowers & Hughes, 1973). Ultimately, the examination of open-ended responses was not intended to provide over-generalized concepts for organizations to assimilate into their retention practices but rather to identify critical components for review in light of a comprehensive assessment. In other words, such responses gave the agency critical insight into how measured variables translated to current procedures and produced more accurate and valuable data (Singer & Couper, 2017), addressing an essential role in agency implementation and a known limitation to strictly quantitative assessments.

Limitations

Limitations for this study include using cross-sectional data; such findings only reflect officer perceptions at the time of collection. However, this research strategy, combined with additional factor review, helped develop a robust staffing report tailored to the agency itself. Second, this study focused specifically on sworn officers up to the rank of sergeant. Many essential nonsworn agency staff and leadership were absent from this population. Including all groups would have increased understanding of the organization's retention responses and allowed comparisons among groups.

Further, since this study was intended to advance understanding of one agency's staffing components, findings are only generalizable within the studied population. The inherent complexities surrounding police labor issues make it difficult to encapsulate retention decisions. However, the action research framework empowers agencies to take ownership of research (from design to implementation) and incorporate the officer's voice, ultimately leading to understanding of their ecosystem's retention.

Policy Implications

Action research intends to produce change and improvement within its deployed context (Susaman & Evered, 2023). Thus, we would like to highlight policy and procedure implications stemming from this research through the recommendation of similar techniques for future researcher-practitioner collaborations. First, we developed the research design and survey instrument with input from the participating agency. This included a collaborative effort on research question development, literature review, identifying and defining workplace factors of interest, data collection, and codebook review. Factors were selected from literature with the organization's input. Specifically, factors were prioritized based upon direct relevance to a standing practice or procedure, which in turn provided direction in the interpretation and implementation of potential findings.

As part of the distribution plan, findings were presented to department command staff to solicit initial feedback and next steps. As a result, a diverse group of officers (e.g., SMART team) was selected to review the findings and suggest areas for action. Not only did this strategy help create an avenue for rapid officer feedback, but it also improved leadership's ability to demonstrate responsiveness (organizational justice) in both short-term and long-term needs that may impact retention decisions (Wolfe & Lawson, 2020). SMART team input was received for areas such as promotional procedure (increasing transparency of the promotional process), internal communication practices (information sharing between leadership and supervisors), leadership development (opportunities for training), and needs identification (formalized processes for officer input to be received). This process identified components of the *Employee Needs* factor to incorporate into written procedure. Ultimately, study findings and SMART team feedback were incorporated with additional internal evaluations to develop a retention strategic plan.

From a broader perspective, the partnering agency's input and feedback, incorporated from the study's onset, have created a baseline for future measurement. It is recommended the organization distribute a secondary survey to observe perceived improvements and monitor new factors of interest outside the study's original framework. While the officer perspective is just one of many factors to be considered in evaluating a police agency's staffing needs (Wilson & Grammich, 2024), the organization's participation throughout the research effort helped solidify its commitment to evidence-based evaluation of policy and practice, underscoring its crucial role in staffing research.

Summary

This study aimed to analyze officer turnover intentions and perceptions of workplace factors to help build one agency's comprehensive organization retention strategy. Given the approximate 26% increase observed in intention to remain with the agency for officers who reported their needs being met by the agency, meaningful integration of those needs served as the agency's foundation

in retention planning development. Combined with additional areas of analysis, this study's officer perspective provides a necessary element in staffing assessments for police agencies to evaluate how policy and procedure affect staff (Sun et al., 2022). This study incorporated agency input from the beginning—from research question and instrument development to implementation of findings. It was explicitly tailored to the agency's interest and, as a result, produced insights that were directly relevant to the organization's needs.

Police agencies preparing to undergo similar efforts must ensure that the officers' voice is captured in the staffing assessment process; the lived experience behind the data is critical to achieving relevant and sustainable staffing goals. Ultimately, the importance of an organization effectively supporting its employees is just one finding that demonstrates how police departments can gain specific insight into addressing officer retention's complex challenges.

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Appendix

TABLE 5. Binary Logistic Regression – Planning to Stay/Leave

FACTORS	B	SE	WALD	SIG.	EXP(B)
Constant	− 3.619	1.419	6.503	.011	.027
Compensation	.666	.372	3.208	.073	1.947
Personal Characteristics	−.327	.370	.782	.377	.721
Organizational Issues	−.478	.456	1.099	.295	.620
Employee Needs	1.547	.485	10.192	.001	4.697
Job Opportunity (Other Agency)	−.424	.156	7.410	.006	.655

Note. Variable *Job Opportunities (External)* was not included in the model due to multicollinearity presumptions between the constant. *Employee Needs* 'Exp (B)' indicated for every one unit increase in agreement, the odds of a person indicating that they planned to remain with the agency changed by a factor of 4.70.

The Long Game: Examining the Relationship between Recruit Characteristics and Early Attrition

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. In recent years, police agencies throughout the United States have been exploring ways to respond to the field's recruitment and retention crisis. However, very little is known about how to solve these problems and even less research has been conducted to understand how successful retention can be pinpointed as early as the recruit level. Drawing on 20 years of administrative data from one mid-sized midwestern agency, the current study explores the relationships among recruit characteristics, including professional history and demographics, and the likelihood of attrition.

Policy Implications. The study found that a recruit's age, educational level, and background all play a role in their success—as does departmental culture. These findings suggest that departments should focus on creating inclusive environments that better support recruits who are at risk of early attrition.

Keywords: policing, recruitment, attrition, HR, hiring

Introduction

Police agencies across the United States are facing a recruitment and retention crisis characterized by an increase in officer retirements and resignations (Adams et al., 2023; Mourtgos et al., O'Guinn et al., 2024). The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), a nonprofit organization that focuses on research and policy in policing, wrote that "police agencies face no greater challenge today than recruiting and retaining enough qualified officers" (PERF, 2023, p. 1). PERF has surveyed its membership on the topic since 2018 and recently received responses from 266 agencies in 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada. PERF observed a more than 60% increase in resignations and retirements during the 2020-2022 period while applications for open positions also decreased by 65%. Staffing levels decreased 4.8% between January 2020 and January 2023 (PERF, 2023). Given these challenges, police agencies seek innovative ways to make their staffing processes more efficient and retain quality officers (Wilson & Grammich, 2024).

Although various studies have examined police recruitment, research is mixed regarding which key characteristics lead to success or failure in the law enforcement profession. This paper uses 20 years of administrative recruitment data from a mid-sized midwestern agency and uncovers the main determinants associated with retention. Research shows evidence of declining interest in the job market (PERF, 2023) and the need for new hiring practices "for the new millennium" (Wilson et al., 2010). For the purposes of this study, the authors define success as the candidate's ability to maintain employment long enough to provide the police department with a return on their investment (ROI), essentially when the officer's pay breaks even with the cost of recruitment and training recruits. Measuring the success of an officer's contribution to a department is typically defined by traditional metrics such as tenure, performance evaluations, and community impact. However, this paper introduces a novel framework for evaluating officer success through the lens of "breaking even" on recruitment costs. Specifically, the concept of a "break-even point" refers to the moment when the cost of an officer's training, recruitment, and associated investments is offset by their productivity and contributions to the department. By calculating this point, we can assess when the resources invested in an officer's hiring and training realize value for the department.

This approach is not a common method for evaluating recruitment success, making it an innovative addition to the field. The rationale is grounded in the practical realities faced by police departments, where recruitment and training costs represent significant investments. Understanding when these investments start to yield returns is crucial for optimizing resource allocation, improving hiring practices, and enhancing departmental efficiency. Knowing ROI also offers a quantifiable measure of officer success, one that balances both the economic and operational aspects of policing (Orrick, 2002).

Notably, this approach may differ from conventional methods of assessing success, but by focusing on the "break-even" point, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of the long-term financial and operational value of each recruit. This is an important perspective because it offers a clear framework for departments to evaluate the efficiency and sustainability of their

recruitment investments, allowing more informed decision making in law enforcement hiring practices.

This paper answers the following question: What recruit characteristics determine recruit attrition in an agency? We will start by reviewing literature on the recruitment and retention crisis, followed by a review of research on how individual characteristics influence early attrition and the costs of recruitment. Then we will outline the study's data before presenting the findings from the binary logistic regression we used to answer the research question. Finally, the study outlines its contributions to the scholarly discussion on police recruitment and provides policy recommendations and suggestions for future research.

Recruitment and Retention in 21st Century Policing

To provide a foundation for this study, the first section presents a review of the existing literature on police recruitment and retention. By examining prior research, the review highlights key trends, challenges, and factors influencing workforce dynamics in law enforcement.

Systemic and Organizational Challenges

Police agencies' current staffing challenges affect law enforcement services, such as response times, and thus pose a public safety concern (Adam et al., 2023; Mourtgos et al., 2022b). Various factors may contribute to officer attrition, such as stress and inadequate compensation (Wilson et al., 2023). However, recent research has focused on systemic issues in the policing profession. For example, experts often cite the negative opinions about the police following the murder of George Floyd, which led to public calls for accountability measures and a growing awareness of racially biased policing practices (Adams et al., 2023; Mourtgos, 2022a). Another factor is growing concerns over officer health and well being; the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 likely contributed to a high level of officer attrition due to quarantines, illnesses, and general strain caused by public health protocols (Adams et al., 2023; Farshbafnadi et al., 2021, McLean et al., 2023; Mourtgos et al., 2022a). Studies have shown that such systemic factors contribute to levels of attrition.

Recent research on retention has also highlighted the importance of organizational factors (Linos & Riesch, 2020; Monk-Turner). In their research, Monk-Turner et al. (2010) found that officers viewed the job's "spirit of teamwork" as a positive quality (Monk-Turner, O'Leary, & Sumter, 2010). However, researchers also found concerns about organizational infrastructure and supervisory support (Monk-Turner et al., 2010). By examining telephone interviews with 143 candidates who withdrew from the hiring process at a large Northeastern U.S. agency, Gibbs (2020) suggested that agencies need to shorten their hiring processes, continuously hire strong applicants from other agencies, and provide better support to candidates throughout the hiring process. Scheer et al. (2024) looked at why officers might leave one law enforcement agency for another and suggested that recruits felt a need to find their organizational fit. Those who felt aligned with the

agency mostly referenced feeling valued by leadership, receiving positive messaging about what the organization values, being managed by well-trained supervisors, and receiving transparent feedback regarding promotions.

Individual Characteristics

Despite the importance of understanding the systemic and organizational factors that influence retention, it is also important to understand it at the individual level by reviewing which recruit characteristics, such as gender, age and race, are related to retention. Thus, this section reviews how individual officer traits are associated with success.

A comprehensive study on the determinants of retention was conducted by White et al. (2010), who surveyed NYPD police recruits prior to academy entrance and then again up to six years after graduation. They were particularly interested in seeing if recruits' motivations for becoming police officers would change over time. Their findings confirmed prior studies showing that individuals with low levels of commitment when they began their career expressed less satisfaction in future years. The study also found that recruits who enter the field with more education can more easily switch jobs if they choose to leave policing, The authors specifically site individuals leaving for better paying jobs or jobs with less stressors. Wilson et al. (2023) performed a meta-analysis reviewing 82 journal articles published since 1973 on the issue of retention at U.S. police departments. They found the following positive associations with attrition: conflict and stressors, family stressors (particularly for parents and more acutely for female officers), and rotating shifts or inflexibility in their work shift. Wilson et al. (2023) further suggested that law enforcement should better quantify the resources used to hire, select, and train staff. They suggested that this would help guide decision making, establish benchmarks, and determine resource allocation in the future. They suggested "examining historical administrative data to identify patterns in applicant backgrounds" to forecast which candidates would choose to stay or leave departments (Wilson et al., 2023).

Gender and Police Retention

The findings on the role of gender in influencing officer retention are limited. However, researchers found that women face unique barriers to staying in the force, including family role expectations, the male-oriented police physical standards, and other forms of gender discrimination (Charman & Bennett, 2022; Kelesha, 2019; Rossler et al., 2020). Haarr (2005) explored the attrition of 113 officers from a group of 446 police recruits and found no statistically significant gender differences in the rates of attrition. During the qualitative follow-up interviews, however, she found gender discrimination factored into female recruits' resignations. Some authors found that both male and female officers saw co-workers' bias and harassment as sources of stress for female officers, and it influenced job satisfaction and decisions to resign (Brough & Frame, 2004; Morash et al., 2006). These researchers recommended that agencies better train supervisors to recognize and challenge implicit biases present that may affect female officers. Also, Charman and Bennett (2022)

also found that women were more likely to cite work hours and changes in their personal life as being central to their decision to leave.

Henson et al. (2010) compared officers' characteristics with successful police academy completion and performance on the street. They noted that gender did not predict success or failure in the academy. However, when officers received annual on-the-street evaluations, female officers received lower scores compared to their male counterparts. Henson et al. stated, "it appears the evaluation process may be biased against women" (Henson et al., 2010). Similarly, Kelesha (2019) looked at aspects of police recruits that predicted successful completion or failure at a police academy. A greater chance of success corresponded to high test scores on a civil service test, being sponsored by a law enforcement agency prior to joining the academy, and being male.

The issue of gendered stressors in policing requires further research; however, Morash et al. (2006) also suggested examining caretaking as a variable contributing to officer strain. For example, Tyson and Charman (2023) found that caregivers and officers returning from maternity leave were resigning due to the compounding incongruities with their identities as both caregivers and police officers. The authors suggest that policing organizations need to better care for the wellbeing of their officers, especially those with marginalized identities such as women. The authors suggest that policing organizations should better support officers by addressing work-related stressors, recognizing gender-specific challenges, and promoting a healthier balance between professional and personal life.

Race and Police Retention

Similar to gender, research about race as a determinant of retention is also scant. However, a study by Haarr (2005) showed significant differences among racial groups, finding that Native Americans dropped out of the police academy at a rate of 91.6%, while Hispanics dropped out at a rate of 38% and White recruits at 22%. Haar found that minority officers often experienced tokenism within their departments, meaning they were treated as symbolic representatives of their racial or ethnic group rather than as individuals. This tokenization led to several challenges. For example, Black and Hispanic officers were often expected to act as cultural liaisons between law enforcement and communities overrepresented by their racial group, even if they had no formal training or interest in that role. This placed additional, sometimes unfair, burdens on them.

Further, Henson et al. (2010) examined the relationship between officers' characteristics, successful police academy completion, and later field performance. They found that White recruits received the best scores and highest ratings from supervisors. However, the studies did not contextualize the reasons for these differences, which could be attributed to the structural and systemic racial barriers disadvantaging racial minority students and implicit biases in educational settings. These factors have been identified by education scholars (Campbell & Campbell, 2007; McClain & Perry, 2017; Settles et al., 2021), and police academies are not exempt from such realities. Further, Rossler et al. (2018) found that Black recruits saw their community as less likely to approve

of policing as a career than their White peers, and they were more likely to think the police engage in negative practices. The authors suggest high-quality mentorship programs for Black recruits and advised agencies to dedicate resources towards improving race-based policing practices and enhancing the Black community's view of the institution.

Age and Police Retention

As a recruit characteristic, age influences retention in various ways. Nevers (2019) found that older recruit candidates experienced higher failure rates. Similarly, Bloodgood, et al. (2021) found that older recruits tended to perform more poorly in physical fitness testing. They recommended individualized fitness preparation for older candidates, allowing them to develop the needed physical skills. However, despite additional physical barriers, older candidates tend to bring more mature perspectives. Meier et al. (2018) found that younger recruits were most often identified as needing cognitive skill improvement. Relatedly, Williams and Sondhi (2022) found that having supportive supervisors and mentors influenced the development and success of younger officers.

Recruitment Costs

Retention is important to mitigate public safety concerns but also because recruiting officers is a costly, lengthy, and labor-intensive process for both recruits and police departments (Aldarmaki & Kasim, 2019; Wright et al., 2011). The failure to choose the right candidates through poor recruitment practices has both social and economic costs (Sanders, 2007). One officer's misbehavior or abuse of authority could not only cost an agency millions of dollars in lawsuits but can also significantly erode community trust in the police. Turnover not only has negative effects on public safety and department finances, but it also affects organizational culture and negatively influences morale and thus retention (Harris & Baldwin, 1999; Saari et al., 2020). Thus, researchers and practitioners are seeking innovative ways to both recruit and retain officers.

Current Study

As demonstrated in the prior section, many studies argue that retention is influenced by social identities, although the influence happens in conflicting directions (Batton & Wright, 2019; Kochel, 2020; Morash et al., 2006). However, in their recent study on recruitment and retention, O'Guinn et al. (2024) found that officer demographics were not related to retention. The mixed results make it evident that further research is necessary. Thus, this study tests whether retention is affected by gender, race, and age.

Although researchers understand that there is a financial cost to recruitment, no studies have systematically evaluated the implications of those costs, particularly in terms of ROI, a key indicator of success in any organizational framework. This current study aims to correct this omission.

The current study adds to the literature by evaluating whether recruits' individual

characteristics (specifically gender, race, and age) relate to the likelihood of attrition and using a novel calculation for ROI for each officer to determine success. Study results could potentially help agencies improve on their ROI and better shape their recruitment strategies to facilitate retention.

The study gathered two decades of administrative recruitment data from a mid-sized Midwestern agency to examine whether recruitment classes' characteristics affect whether an officer remains in the agency until their break-even point.

Methods

Study Site

The department is in the Midwest, serving a city of 270,000 people. The population is highly educated, making the city a hub for political and social change. The police department tries to stay on the cutting edge of policing techniques, especially because the public regularly demands evidence of innovation. The department employs 492 commissioned personnel and 119 professional staff across the city. The department has a modern training center and a multitude of specialized positions. It has one of the largest populations of female officers in the country, averaging 25% when the national average of 12%.

Data

For data, this study used recruit biography sheets collected from 2002-2022 as well as information about when officers resigned. The biography template sheet was created by an administrative staff member at the agency. The form covered information about recruits' hometown, age, race, gender, educational background, and previous employment. The initial dataset contained 517 officers, and 439 observations were included in the final analysis.[1]

Measures

Dependent Variable

Quitting before the breakeven point (attrition) represents the outcome variable of this study. We used the organization's recruitment costs per-recruit in the year 2022 and the officers' salaries to calculate the time in which the agency would receive their ROI. Table 1 demonstrates the calculations performed by the practitioner partner and agency staff to find the total investment—$136,084.47—for each of the 38 recruits who attended the 2022 full academy. The total

1 The database had a total of 517 officer recruits, but the observations with missing data were dropped. Multiple Imputation methodology was conducted to mitigate the bias due to missingness; however, the issue of perfect prediction during imputation was encountered, which often leads to numerical instability and biased results due to the discrete nature of categorical data. Following (White et al. 2020), the decision was made to omit the variables rather than augmenting them and further manipulating the data.

cost of the 2022 full academy was $5,171,210.04. Both numbers were comprised of data presented in Table 1.

We divided the cost per candidate by the bi-weekly wages and benefits of the salary schedule to determine the number of weeks before the candidate earned the cost of their training:

> *$136,084.47/(2529.70*1.3932) = 38.61 bi-weekly periods*
>
> *38.61 bi-weekly periods*2 = 77.22 weeks*

This puts the break-even point at slightly more than two years (2 years, 1 month and 27 days) from their start date (May 31, 2022) to their break-even date (July 27, 2024).[2] In our analysis, the outcome was coded as a binary variable to reflect whether the officer quit before the two-year break-even point (Yes = 1) and (No = 0).

TABLE 1. Return on Investment Calculations (2022)[3]

LINE ITEMS	TOTAL COST
Initial issue of equipment (excluding firearms)	$ 147,200.00
Pay and benefits for training officers to teach at the academy	$ 1,167,137.23
Pay and benefits for field training officers	$ 1,044,450.90
Ammunition for training	$ 34,500.00
Pay and benefits for officer while being trained	$2,717,303.06
Recruitment costs (travel, materials, staff time)	$ 22,250.00
Backgrounding costs (travel, staff time)	$ 70,902.66
Opportunity cost of hosting academy at the training center[4]	$ 40,212.50
Total offsite fuel costs	$ 1,692.52

2 This is done with the understanding that salaries and costs change overtime, thus the measure is an estimate. The authors considered using inflation as a factor over the time period studied, but found it problematic given varying academy lengths during that time and class sizes adding too much variability when considering the years since the "modern" academy length was put into place. As the authors further examined even this smaller group of academy classes the variability in weeks to ROI points varied greatly between 59.89 (2020) to 183.41 (2016), and the average was 2 years 7 months from the date of hire. However, this variability in class-size and the changes in academy training over time overall led us to be dubious of the value of these averages. Extrapolating the one year we are certain of the actual costs and inputs feels better than guessing with a smaller group.

3 The year 2022 had 38 recruits.

4 The rental value reflects the cost assigned to each room used during the academy, based on the rates charged to outside agencies. This total is calculated by multiplying the rental rate of each room by the number of days it was used for training a class of officers.

LINE ITEMS	TOTAL COST
Wear and tear on vehicles	$ 28,144.06
Field trips/travel costs and site rental fees	$ 6,758.00
HR onboarding per candidate (staff time, materials)	$ 1,441.65
State reimbursement amount if they graduate	$ (190,000.00)
Staff time spent scheduling the field training process	$ 79,217.46
Grand Total	$ 5,171,210.04
Cost per recruit making it to field training	**$ 136,084.47**

[a] While most departments cover the cost of purchasing firearms, this agency does not.

[b] This is an example for one year, note that the authors used values considering inflation using May 2022 inflation CPI and class size in the final break even figure.

Independent Variables

The independent social identity variables that our model tested include two binary variables: **gender** (Male = 0) and (Female = 1), **race** (White = 1) and (Non-White =0), and one continuous variable—**age**. Table 2 shows that the recruits were predominantly White (76.94%) and male (70.79%).

Education was another variable. We coded education in two ways. The first follows convention by capturing **level of education** (High School = 0, Some College[5] = 1, College Degree[6]=2, and Graduate Degree[7] = 3), and the other highlights their major in college (Criminal Justice Major = 1) and (Non-Criminal Justice Major = 0). We studied these variables for two main reasons. First, this is a highly educated department; more than 80% of the recruits had an undergraduate degree, and some had graduate degrees. Second, the department's leadership had recruited outside of criminal justice majors, anecdotally providing more support to those individuals when they joined the department.

Similarly, the department had pushed to diversify their applicants, resulting in a wide array of employment backgrounds, including, but not limited to, people from educational, business, and social services backgrounds. To reflect the department's variety of previous occupations, this study assigned **previous employment** to eight different categories: Military (1), Law Enforcement (2), Education (3), Social Services (4), Customer Service (5), Fitness (6), Criminal Justice (7), and Other (8). In the analysis, previous military employment was used as the reference category.

5 Those who have completed some college credits or earned a 2-year associates degree.

6 Those who have earned a 4-year bachelor's degree.

7 Those who have completed a higher-level degree than a Bachelors (mainly Masters level studies or Law School).

Finally, we asked about recruit hometown location, measured using a variable called **long distance**. Following Carter and Swisher's (2020) model, we measured the distance from the recruit's hometown to the hiring agency. The variable was coded as follows (300 miles or more = 1) and (299 miles or less = 0).

Analytical Strategy

Due to the binary nature of the outcome, a logistic regression was conducted to analyze the administrative data (see, O'Guinn et al., 2024; Weisburd and Brit, 2014), which included their demographic characteristics, geographical information at time of hire, and previous educational and employment backgrounds. Recruits who remained for two years and above were successful, and those who did not make it to two years were found unsuccessful. When evaluating the relationship between recruit characteristics and lack of success (early attrition), various diagnostic tests were conducted on the logistic model and the bivariate correlation matrix, and variance inflation factors (VIF mean = 6.77) showed no serious signs of multicollinearity in the model.[8]

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics

VARIABLES	OBS	MEAN	STD. DEV.	MIN	MAX	%
Dependent variable						
Quit before breakeven (Attrition)	517	0.091	0.288	0	1	9.09
Independent variables						
White recruit	515	0.769	0.422	0	1	76.94
Female recruit	517	0.292	0.455	0	1	29.21
Age	500	27.322	5.631	20	57	
Control Variables						
Education level						
Highschool	517	0.004	0.062	0	3	0.39
Some College	517	0.161	0.367	0	3	16.05
College Degree	517	0.735	0.442	0	3	73.50

8 Variables for Age (VIF=29.74) and College Degree (30.50) had high levels for their VIF, however when the correlation matrix was conducted to further investigate correlations amongst variables-in the data, there were no abnormally high correlations found. The highest was between college degree and age at 34%. However, the overall VIF for the model was reasonable to continue with the analysis (Vittinghoff et al., 2005). Further, since these two variables are theoretically related and thus reasonably expected to be correlated, the high VIFs do not necessarily invalidate the model (John Fox, 2015).

VARIABLES	OBS	MEAN	STD. DEV.	MIN	MAX	%
Graduate Degree	517	0.101	0.301	0	3	10.06
Criminal Justice Major	506	0.443	0.497	0	1	44.27
Long Distance recruit	467	0.111	0.315	0	1	11.13
Previous Employment	510	4.506	2.236	1	8	
Military	510	0.071	0.256	0	1	7.06
Law Enforcement	510	0.214	0.41	0	1	21.37
Education	510	0.063	0.243	0	1	6.27
Social Services	510	0.096	0.295	0	1	9.61
Customer Service	510	0.318	0.466	0	1	31.76
Fitness	510	0.008	0.088	0	1	0.78
Criminal Justice	510	0.051	0.22	0	1	5.10
Other	510	0.18	0.385	0	1	18.04

TABLE 3. Logistic regression results of determinants of recruits **leaving** before the breakeven point

VARIABLES	COEF. (SE)	OR	ME
Long Distance recruit	-0.743 (0.686)	0.476 (0.327)	-0.051 (0.037)
White recruit	-0.471 (0.3866)	0.624 (0.241)	-0.043 (0.0)
Female recruit	0.280 (0.370)	1.322 (0.490)	0.0243 (0.033)
Age	0.071*** (0.031)	1.081*** (0.034)	0.007*** (0.003)
Criminal Justice Major	0.854** (0.3914)	2.351** (0.919)	0.073** (0.034)
Education Level			
Some College	-2.761* (1.548)	0.063* (0.098)	-0.509* (0.318)

VARIABLES	COEF. (SE)	OR	ME
College Degree	-3.260** (1.499)	0.038** (0.058)	-0.550* (0.315)
Graduate Degree	-1.601 (1.526)	0.202 (0.308)	-0.346 (0.323)
Previous employment			
Law Enforcement	-0.561 (0 .660)	0.570 (0.377)	-0.051 (0.066)
Education	-0.887 (0.943)	0.412 (0.388)	-0.074 (0.0664)
Social Services	-1.070 (0.854)	0.343 (0.293)	-0.084 (0.070)
Customer Service	-0.364 (0.633)	0.694 (0.440)	-0.036 (0.066)
Fitness	0.037 (1.380)	1.038 (1.432)	0.004 (0.153)
Criminal Justice	-0.603 (0.963)	0.547 (0.527)	-0.055 (0.084)
Other	0.363 (0.759)	1.438 (1.0911)	0.044 (0.091)
Constant	-1.15 (1.901)	0.317 (0.603)	- -
Pseudo R^2	0.1082		
Observations	439	439	439

[a] Military is the reference category for Previous Employment
[b] OR = Odds Ratios
[c] SE = Standard Errors
*** p<0.01
** p<0.05
* p<0.1

Results

Table 3 demonstrates the results from a binary logistic regression that tested the relationship between officer characteristics and their break-even retention at the agency. The findings reflect that older officers are approximately 0.7 percentage points more likely to leave before the break-even point (b= 0.078; OR= 1.081; ME= 0.007; P <0.01).

Also, the study found an effect regarding educational background—those who earned a

criminal justice degree or had completed criminal justice coursework[9] were 7.3% more likely to leave early (b= 0.854; OR = 2.351; P<0.05) (ME=0.073; P<0.05). This is to be expected given the department's history of prioritizing and investing in those with non-criminal justice backgrounds in an effort to diversify recruitment cohorts. Perhaps this leads to those with traditional criminal justice educations to perceive lower levels of support. The relationship between education level and recruit attrition was significant. Those with a college degree were 55% less likely to leave early when compared to those with only a high school education (b = -3.260; OR= 0.038; P < 0.05), (ME = 0.540; P<0.1)10[10]. This was also true with recruits with some college (those who have taken some college level credits, but not completed their bachelor's degree), who were 50.9% percentage points less likely to leave early than those with a high-school education (b = -2.761; OR= 0.063; P < 0.1), (ME = 0.509; P<0.1).

Finally, results did not demonstrate that race, gender, or previous employment (previous military as a reference category) influenced officer retention.

Discussion

The current retention crisis in police departments has caught the attention of scholars due to the pressing public need for efficient and effective law enforcement agencies. This study examines how recruits' characteristics can influence their success in the early stages of their career, especially if they remain on the force until the agency breaks even on its investments. We recognize that "success" in law enforcement can be understood in a myriad of ways, but agencies should understand the financial costs associated with early attrition.

Despite the continued debate on the role of gender and race in retention, this study's results are in line with O'Guinn et al. (2024), who found that officer demographics such as gender and race did not influence attrition. In their study, they suggested that future research should be conducted in agencies with more minority and female officers. The agency in our study had a higher percentage of women than most agencies in the United States, and gender did not play a statistically significant role in attrition. Notwithstanding these findings, previous research has demonstrated through interviews that unique strains face women in the policing profession (Haarr, 2005).

Consistent with previous studies (Meier et al., 2018; Nevers, 2019), this study showed that older recruits were more likely to leave before two years. This may be due to the physical demands of policing, which can be more challenging for older individuals. Additionally, younger recruits may be more open to the evolving social and cultural expectations of modern policing, making them more adaptable to changes in law enforcement practices (McLean et al., 2023).

9 This includes recruits who indicated studying criminal justice related topics as a major focus in their coursework.

10 The Marginal Effects were only significant at a 0.1 significance threshold.

Further, the study found that hometown was a not statistically significant factor. Carter & Swisher (2020) studied hometown distance in relation to military duty stations and found that soldiers stationed within 300 miles of their home were 4 percent more likely to leave the Army, thus leading to less re-enlistment by those who had hometowns closer to the base. Conversely,they also theorized that soldiers who were stationed further from home formed stronger relationships within the organization due to the longer distance from their hometown, due to a relational vacuum felt by being far from social safety nets (Carter & Swisher, 2020). Although not statistically significant in this study, the authors suggest that more policing studies should incorporate this variable to further explore its effects.

Additionally, the results indicated that educational attainment played a significant role in the retention of police officers, which is in line with several studies on the topic. Specifically, individuals with some college credits or those who earned college degrees were less likely to leave their positions compared to those who completed high school. This trend may be attributed to the greater level of career contemplation and commitment that college-educated individuals typically engage in prior to entering the workforce and the potential for promotion and advancement in the agency. In contrast, those who enter the police force straight out of high school may be in the early stages of career exploration and could use the initial onboarding period to evaluate their fit within the profession. However, we should note that the results did not show that a graduate level education had a statistically significant effect on attrition.

Interestingly, the type of coursework completed during a degree program also appears to influence retention rates. Officers in the sample who studied criminal justice tended to leave their positions earlier than those with other educational backgrounds. This observation underscores the significance of department culture as a factor in officer retention (Quick & Wolff, 2024; Rief & Clinkinbeard, 2021). Anecdotal evidence suggested that there were department efforts to diversify their applicant pool by actively recruiting individuals without criminal justice degrees. While this initiative aimed to bring in fresh perspectives, it may have inadvertently created an environment where officers with traditional criminal justice backgrounds felt less supported. Such dynamics can significantly impact the department's overall culture and, in turn, affect retention rates (Debbaut & De Kimpe. 2023).

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, a design was used where causation cannot be ascertained despite association found. Further, the ROI calculations were done for one recruitment year, while the analysis included recruits from previous years. Therefore, the outcome is an estimated figure that could change slightly over time. Also, there are limitations of the generalizability of the study results. The study site is a unique agency comprised of highly educated officers and a higher female population than most agencies, thus making it difficult to apply findings to dissimilar agencies. Additionally, we used non-White and White as the categories

for race. Although this is a common practice to ensure statistical power and to protect the privacy of minority groups in small samples, it can obscure important differences between specific racial or ethnic groups. Further, the sample size is relatively small for statistical purposes. Relatedly, the study suffered from missing data, which impacts the validity and reliability of the findings by introducing biases that can distort results. The absent data points may mean the sample inaccurately represented the population, thus affecting the generalizability of the results. The authors considered imputation techniques to mitigate this risk; however, deletion was selected since the assumptions for the imputation process were not met, thus potentially further skewing outcomes if used. The ability to generalize the findings is also influenced by the fact that the relationship between education and attrition is significant for this particular agency but may not extend to others. The agency's emphasis on hiring non-criminal justice majors could lead to distinct dynamics that are not reflective of other departments. The absent data points may mean the sample inaccurately represented the population, thus affecting the generalizability of the results. Finally, although the study results provided attrition trends, we do not know why they are happening. Conducting interviews would be a valuable next step in addressing this gap.

Implications

These results suggest that ROI calculations should be systematically calculated and recorded by law enforcement agencies, especially as the workforce continues to evolve and departments work on transforming their recruitment and retention models (Wilson et al., 2010). Departments could conceivably require that officers reimburse the money invested in recruitment and training if they leave before the break-even point; however, this could cause problems with debt and resentment for those who leave. It could also represent a barrier to entry for those who may wish to apply. Rather, departments' goal should be providing better support officers who are more susceptible to leaving. Departments should review the cost and benefits of introducing new policies for recruitment, which at times can hurt retention efforts This is demonstrated by the success of the police department studied in recruiting non-criminal justice majors, however later losing those who were criminal justice majors. Leaders should understand the potential impacts of innovate strategies.

Williams and Sondhi (2022) found that supervisors played a major role in recruiting success; departments should dedicate training for first-line and second-line supervisors to teach them how to encourage the development of departmental bonds. Supportive supervisors can identify when their officers are facing challenges and respond by directing them to the right resources, encouraging them to stay in the agency.

Agencies should collect all recruitment data in standardized ways to conduct studies like this nationally. Also, more data about recruits could help researchers better understand the characteristics that drive retention (while taking care to avoid discrimination). Finally, agencies should invest in personnel who analyze department data. ROI calculations and merging records cannot be easily done without the institutional understanding and internal support of department

personnel. This kind of data analytics is well modeled by the college admissions industry, which leverages data not only for recruitment strategies but also to ensure students remain enrolled (Fullfabric, 2024).

Departments should provide strategic support for new older officers who may find it more difficult to be onboarded and recruits who have not yet completed their college education, who may need more advising early in their career. Using data, agencies can evaluate characteristics of recruits who are more vulnerable to attrition and create a more supportive environment to retain them. Further, the results suggest that departmental culture did play a role in attrition; however, understanding how culture affected officers would require officer reflections. Therefore, we suggest that departments make exit interviews a standard part of their process when officers choose to leave. This could help agencies assess if department culture is potentially leading to attrition.

Finally, this study shows the importance of research-practitioner partnerships. The institutional knowledge of a department practitioner partner led to the addition of college degree type as a potential variable. Researchers working with administrative data should actively communicate with police departments to understand what could be of importance.

Conclusions

Police agencies must find ways to minimize their losses by developing strong recruitment strategies and better supporting their officers. Each agency is unique, but the department studied does point to the benefits of collecting detailed information on recruits and of calculating ROI. This study focused on ROI to measure success rather than more common ways of analyzing success based on years in service and commendations or promotions, and this offers a novel way to look at recruit success, focusing on officers' early career decisions.

The results of this study suggest that age and education contribute to attrition. Additional research should be conducted about which educational backgrounds are more successful in the profession and how to better support those who come from less traditionally successful educational backgrounds. Relatedly, more research on police culture and its influence on officer attrition should also be conducted. Researchers should also study police academies to understand the learning environment and improve recruits' experiences.

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From Academia to Action: How Police Leaders Translate Evidence on the Ground

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ABSTRACT

Research Summary. In response to a significant increase in violent crime and concurrent personnel shortages, the Salt Lake City Police Department (SLCPD) implemented an evidence-based crime reduction program beginning in 2022. This initiative, executed over two years, focused on expanding the department's analytical capabilities through strategic civilian hires, conducting in-depth analyses of high-crime areas, and developing a robust managerial system for crime reduction that emphasized accountability at all levels. After collaborating with academic criminologists and developing appropriate programs, SLCPD experienced substantial crime reduction. In 2023, the city recorded the lowest crime levels in 15 years. This research brief provides a summary of the program's partnerships, successes, and challenges—and highlights lessons learned for other police managers.

Policy Implications. The SLCPD's experience underscores several policy implications for law enforcement agencies facing similar challenges. First, investing in civilian staff to enhance data collection, analysis, and dissemination capabilities is critical. Second, the program's success relies heavily on the consistent advocacy of a high-ranking "champion" and the establishment of systematic processes that become integral to daily operations. Third, consistent leadership and accountability mechanisms are essential but require significant effort over an extended period. Fourth, forming partnerships with academic researchers for training and assistance further strengthens implementation efforts. Finally, succession planning and maintaining a sustained focus amidst competing municipal priorities ensure the longevity and success of crime reduction programs, particularly under staffing constraints.

Introduction

Calls for evidence-based strategies in policing are not new. Efforts to promote the use of data to make decisions within U.S. law enforcement agencies began almost 40 years ago (Alpert, 1988). Although numerous evaluations have demonstrated that evidence-based policing can positively modify police tactics and strategies as well as impact crime and victimization (Abt, 2019; Braga et al., 2019; Haberman & O'Guinn, 2023), the widespread implementation of these strategies across the United States' 18,000 police agencies has been slow and inconsistent (Del Pozo et al., 2024).

Why has this been the case? Explanations are varied and nearly endless, with some scholars arguing that police organizations are resistant to change due to local or state political dynamics (Adams et al., 2024; Farris & Holman, 2017), the influence of police unions (Juris & Feuille, 1974; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2022), or policy construction and centralization that hampers local reform (Eagly & Schwartz, 2022). However, from another perspective, police organizations, while not typically considered centers of progressive reform, have demonstrated a capacity for change and have evolved significantly over the past century. As Adams and colleagues highlight (2024), 20th-century police reforms have often been spearheaded by police executives, who have proven more successful in effecting change within policing than Progressive-era reformers (Uchida, 2020).

This case study focuses on one agency's successful—but not flawless—implementation of an evidence-based crime reduction system. Building on Santos and Santos (2012), we contend that while partnerships with criminologists and investments in civilian staff to enhance data collection, analysis, and dissemination capabilities are necessary, these efforts alone are insufficient for success. Instead, the presence of a "champion"—a high-level agency executive, supported by the command staff, who provides direct, active, focused, and consistent leadership—ultimately determines whether an evidence-based program is successfully implemented. Where leadership is lacking, even a program with a strong empirical foundation risks becoming yet another well-intentioned initiative that fails to achieve its goals.

Leadership and Implementation

While no single factor fully explains success in the complex environment of policing, strong leadership at the top level is a critical element in implementing any successful evidence-based program, as it influences the organizational changes needed for effective implementation at all levels.

Although police leadership is understudied, growing research highlights that police executives are pivotal in implementing reform (Adams et al., 2024; Mourtgos, Adams, McCrain, et al., 2024). We agree with Filstad et al. (2024) that research should prioritize leadership activities within specific contexts rather than focusing solely on leadership style. Understanding the collective practice of police leadership comes from examining actions taken over time (Karp, 2022).

This article focuses on providing police managers with lessons learned regarding what worked—and what did not—when implementing a comprehensive evidence-based proactive crime reduction strategy. A more technical assessment of the Salt Lake City Police Department's (SLCPD) implementation outcomes is forthcoming. However, for the purposes of this article, we rely primarily on descriptive statistics to illustrate the program's effectiveness, as this approach aligns with the goal of making the findings practitioner-friendly and accessible.

We begin by outlining the context SLCPD faced when implementing the strategy, followed by describing the step-by-step process over two years, emphasizing leadership actions. We then present descriptive statistics on crime trends and conclude with leadership lessons that offer insights for future initiatives. We note that leadership, while central to the implementation of evidence-based strategies, is challenging to quantify using traditional metrics. In this case study, rather than measuring leadership through survey-based scales or experimental variation (an approach not easily suited to studying leadership), we adopted a process-tracing approach focused on the *actions* taken by the executive team—especially the designated "champion"—during implementation. We endeavor to provide descriptive clarity and detailed documentation of practices to offer a model for replication in other jurisdictions, tying the implementation of evidence-based policing not to an abstract notion of "leadership," but to specific, documented, and replicable *leadership behaviors* that can serve as a roadmap for others.

The Context

On May 25, 2020, the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked nationwide protests. In Salt Lake City, a large protest on May 30 escalated when a crowd forced an officer to abandon a police vehicle, which was then overturned and set on fire. The situation devolved into a riot involving looting and extensive property damage, including vandalism to the police department's public safety building. Multiple officers were injured, and law enforcement across the state provided assistance to regain control. The National Guard was deployed for several weeks as unrest continued. Between late May and November 2020, nearly 300 protests occurred, many specifically targeting the police.

Tensions particularly escalated in June when body-worn camera footage from a separate officer-involved shooting was released, sparking strong public reaction. Before the investigation concluded, a city council member called the incident unlawful. However, additional surveillance footage later showed the individual had pointed a firearm at officers, leading the district attorney to rule the shooting legally justified. Despite this, public unrest reignited, resulting in more violent demonstrations and additional officer injuries.

At the same time, the SLCPD faced severe staffing challenges. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with stay-at-home orders and social distancing mandates, led to significant absenteeism. The department implemented remote work, staggered shifts, and a quarantine protocol; up to 100 officers were quarantined each month until February 2021 when a vaccination program was

introduced (Mourtgos & Adams, 2021, 2023). Following the protests and the resulting political response, SLCPD also saw a wave of resignations, losing approximately one-fifth of its sworn staff (Adams et al., 2023; Mourtgos, Adams, & Nix, 2024). This combination of socio-political upheaval and staffing shortages led to a predictable rise in crime.

As illustrated in Figure 1, property crime in 2020 increased by 27.4% compared to 2019, while violent crime rose by 22.8%. Although property crime began to decline in 2021, it remained higher than pre-2020 levels. Violent crime increased by another 5.5% in 2022.

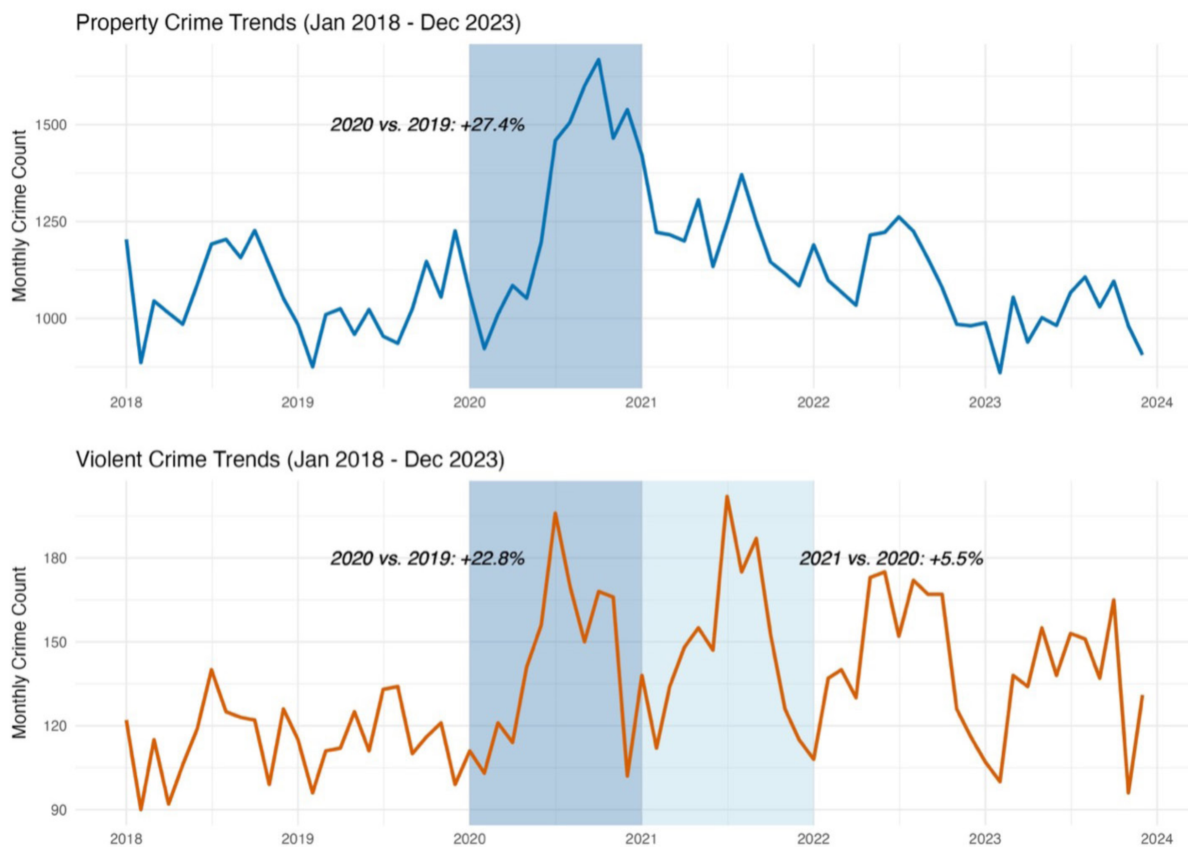

FIGURE 1. Substantial Crime Increase Beginning in 2020

Implementation

In early 2022, this study's first author began overseeing SLCPD's patrol functions as deputy chief. Shortly thereafter, the chief of police tasked him with implementing a comprehensive crime reduction plan.

The department implemented two primary strategies: stratified policing, a systems-based approach, and a hotspot policing strategy aimed at violent street crime. Stratified policing began in

late July 2022, and the hotspot strategy followed in September 2022. Both strategies remain active at the time of writing. Implementation details are provided below. Committed to evidence-based policing, the first author believed this approach would maximize the likelihood of success.

Stratified Policing

The first author prioritized a systems-based approach to crime reduction by integrating evidence-based strategies within a management and accountability framework to ensure agency-wide adoption and avoid program isolation (Ratcliffe, 2018).

After thorough research, stratified policing was chosen as the framework for a systems-based approach (*Stratified Policing*, n.d.). Developed by Rachel and Roberto Santos at Radford University, this approach integrates evidence-based practices into daily operations for every employee, from frontline officers to command staff, and emphasizes the role of crime analysts in optimizing resource allocation by identifying high-crime areas and individuals (Santos & Santos, 2020).

Initially, the first author attempted a pilot program but quickly recognized the need for expert support. Though SLCPD had employed analysts for years, data integration remained a challenge. Therefore, the first author hired a data scientist to automate regular updates. He also secured funding for training and technical support from Rachel and Roberto Santos.

Stratified policing leverages the law of crime concentration, directing resources toward areas with disproportionately high crime rates. Within the stratified policing framework, there are several levels of focus for addressing crime concentration. Given staffing and morale challenges, the first author initially chose to focus on two key concerns: problem areas and crime patterns.

Problem areas are high-crime geographic locations identified through systematic crime analysis and prioritized for targeted interventions. Responses to these areas involve short- and long-term strategies like enhanced patrols, community engagement, environmental modifications, and problem-solving initiatives aimed at addressing underlying causes (Santos & Santos, 2020).

SLCPD crime analysts received training to identify problem areas, and patrol captains were tasked with planning and executing responses, including targeted enforcement, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) interventions, community engagement, and public messaging.

Crime patterns are clusters of similar incidents based on characteristics like location and timing (Santos & Santos, 2020). For instance, Central Division analysts frequently identified vehicle burglary clusters within a 0.10-mile radius downtown. Once a pattern is identified, a watch commander (patrol lieutenant) is assigned based on the alignment of their schedule with

the pattern's active times.[1] The objective is to "resolve" the pattern by achieving a 14-day period with no incidents. If a crime occurs during that period, the countdown restarts, and the watch commander provides regular updates on interventions until a 14-day crime-free period is achieved.

Hotspot Policing

During the stratified policing implementation, the chief of police highlighted the success of other agencies in reducing violent street crime through collaborations with Professors Mike Smith, Rob Tillyer, and Brandon Tregle from the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). The first author was directed to partner with these criminologists to design a violent crime reduction plan based on their proven approach.

UTSA's team assessed SLCPD's violent street crime and devised a three-stage reduction strategy (Smith et al., 2022), starting with hotspot policing in September 2022. UTSA reviewed and adjusted hotspot locations every 60-90 days. Table 1 shows each iteration's time frame, treated locations, and additional dispatches generated.

TABLE 1

HOTSPOT ITERATION PERIOD	# OF TREATED LOCATIONS	# OF ADDITIONAL WEEKDAY DISPATCHES PER DAY (M-R)	# OF ADDITIONAL WEEKEND DISPATCH-ES PER DAY (F-S)
9/11/22 – 11/30/22	14	42	31
12/1/22 – 1/31/23	10	43	39
2/1/23 – 3/31/23	12	41	34
4/1/23 – 5/31/23	15	52	44
6/1/23 – 7/31/23	20	78	61
8/1/23 – 9/30/23	19	78	64
10/1/23 – 11/30/23	18	65	57
12/1/23 – 1/31/23	12	63	46

1 While different approaches may better serve other agencies, in the case of SLCPD, the first author, in consultation with patrol captains, discussed and agreed that having the crime analyst supervisor make this assignment based on the analysis and notify the affected watch commander was the appropriate approach. This streamlined the timeline between pattern identification and assignment, avoiding delays caused by bureaucratic approval processes. Moreover, when an assignment was made via email, all patrol watch commanders, patrol captains, and the first author were included in the notification to ensure everyone was aware of current patterns and their respective assignments. Finally, the identification and assignment criteria were transparent and thoroughly explained to patrol watch commanders before the process began, eliminating ambiguity about how a pattern was identified, why it was assigned, and who was responsible.

To ensure reliable deployment, hotspot assignments were integrated into the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system at set times and prioritized as level 2 calls, preventing officer breaks if hotspot calls were pending.

Because of concerns that staffing shortages coupled with that high call volume could frustrate officers and reduce the strategy's impact, the first author closely monitored staffing levels, response times, and officer workloads, adjusting the strategy (with input from the UTSA team) as needed to balance effectiveness and operational feasibility.

Observed Trends and Key Insights

While a rigorous evaluation is underway to measure the specific impacts of the SLCPD's crime reduction strategies across time and place, descriptive statistics give context to the crime patterns following the SLCPD's implementation of evidence-based strategies.[2] This section summarizes the observed outcomes and lessons learned, offering insights for other agencies.

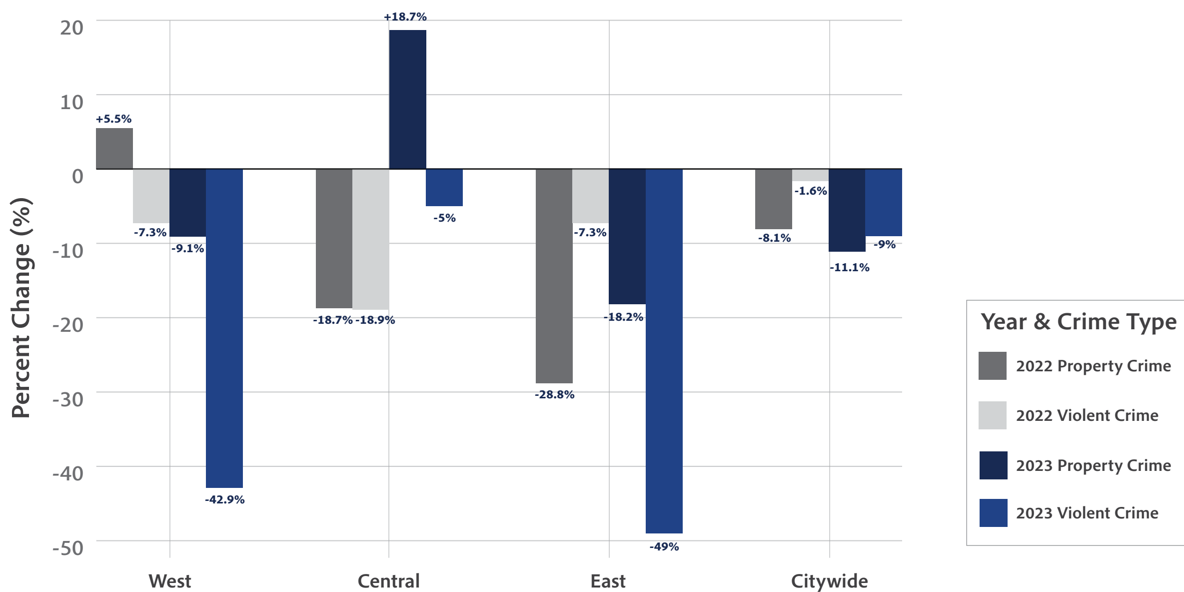

FIGURE 2. Year-over-Year Percentage Change in Crime (2022 and 2023) — Property vs. Violent Crime across Divisions and Citywide

2 We appreciate a reviewer's observation that other cities experienced crime reductions in 2023, correctly noting that descriptive statistics cannot imply causality. However, it may be prudent to exercise caution in interpreting these reductions as part of a broader trend due to the complexities of crime data reporting in the United States. For example, previously reported violent crime reductions for 2022 were later revised to reflect increases after the FBI updated its 2022 statistics in September 2024. It remains to be seen if upcoming updates—which are routine—will similarly affect 2023 crime data.

Crime Trends Post Implementation

As shown in Figure 2, reductions in crime were recorded in both problem areas and citywide. In 2023, violent crime decreased by over 40% in the West and East District Problem Areas, with a nearly 10% drop citywide. The Central Division Problem Area saw a 5% reduction following an 18.9% drop in 2022. Exceptions included a 5.5% rise in property crime in the West Division Problem Area in 2022 and an 18.7% increase in property crime in the Central District Problem Area in 2023, offsetting the prior year's decline.

Community, business, and public leaders reported marked improvements in livability, safety, and quality of life, with reduced crime and disorder across these areas (Noriega & Dujanovic, 2024).

The successful implementation of evidence-based strategies was associated with substantial improvements, despite SLCPD operating at 20% below its approved staffing levels (Mourtgos, Adams, & Nix, 2024; Mourtgos et al., 2022). These results underscore the potential for evidence-based approaches to achieve meaningful outcomes, even with constrained resources.

Lessons Learned

Key insights emerged during implementation that may aid other police managers in adopting similar programs. These lessons are organized below.

Balancing Staffing Challenges with Effective Time Management

Staffing remains a persistent challenge for police managers (Wilson, 2012). This is understandable as the demand for police services often exceeds the available personnel resources (Mourtgos et al., 2021; Mourtgos & Adams, 2023). It is not our intent to diminish the significance of these concerns. Indeed, our own research has demonstrated how adequate staffing levels can positively influence outcomes, such as call response times, that are important to both agencies and the communities they serve (Mourtgos, Adams, & Nix, 2024). Despite reduced personnel, efficient time management offers room for improvement (Santos & Santos, 2020).

Policing practice includes informal behaviors that can impact efficiency. For example, officers may linger on calls to socialize, multiple officers may stay when one can complete the report, they may run personal errands between calls, or they may have delayed availability post line-ups and early line-downs. While not all officers engage in this behavior, they indicate that time management, rather than just staffing, can influence capacity. We are not alone in making this observation; Santos and Santos (2020) also argue that officers have available time to engage in proactive policing activities—if they are required or encouraged to do so, as they were in the implementation of stratified policing and hot-spots policing interventions discussed in this paper.

SLCPD's experience supports this view. Despite resistance to added responsibilities, officers consistently found time to respond to hotspot calls, with an approximate 90+% compliance rate tracked by UTSA researchers. Officers also engaged proactively in problem areas and with crime patterns, monitored through an intranet system.

Acknowledging workload concerns is important, as every agency has unique limits. To ease strain and demonstrate commitment, the command staff, including the first author, initially handled hotspot calls themselves. This approach lightened the load on patrol officers and showed leadership's support for the program.

When concerns about time constraints inevitably arise, leaders should acknowledge these concerns while reinforcing expectations for efficient time use. By engaging officers individually and in groups, leaders can demonstrate that officers have sufficient time if it is managed effectively, encouraging a balanced approach to both agency demands and operational feasibility.

Turning "Impossible" into Attainable Goals: Overcoming Resistance in Leadership

Resistance to new strategies often extends to leadership, sometimes from the implementation manager's close colleagues. While input from operational leaders is invaluable, implementers should differentiate between legitimate concerns and resistance rooted in discomfort with change. Managers must avoid accepting claims like "this isn't possible" which are based on resistance rather than actual constraints.

For instance, resolving a crime pattern under the stratified policing approach required that no similar incidents occur within a targeted area for 14 consecutive days. Patrol lieutenants initially pushed back, asserting that achieving such outcomes was "impossible," particularly in areas with persistent issues, such as one downtown area known for vehicle burglaries. Despite repeated instructions, patrol lieutenants failed to adequately address these patterns.

The first author met with the lieutenant in charge of one area and explained evidence-based strategies that had been successful in similar contexts (e.g., Santos & Santos, 2015a, 2015b, 2021). When the lieutenant described his own interventions, it revealed a gap between the program's directives and the officers' execution.

The first author offered practical steps for strategy compliance, clarified the lieutenant's authority to involve property crime detectives, and reinforced the full support of the Office of the Chief. The pattern was resolved shortly after. Within months, other "impossible" patterns were similarly mitigated. The divisions became adept at resolving crime flare-ups, reducing the need for formal interventions.

While it is natural to empathize with skeptical colleagues (Filstad, 2024), evidence-based strategies help managers remain resolute in guiding teams toward seemingly unattainable outcomes. These strategies are crucial to building strong relationships between police agencies and the public.

Maximizing Impact through Effective Sergeant Accountability

First-line supervisors ensure the consistent and effective implementation of any strategy (Cronin et al., 2017). Recognizing this, SLCPD gave all sergeants dedicated training on the new

strategies, helping them understand the initiatives' rationale and evidence-based logic.

The sergeants' reactions varied. Some were high performers who championed the new efforts, others followed the prevailing direction, and some were disengaged unless explicitly required to act. A core component of stratified policing is consistent engagement in problem areas; an intranet system tracked these activities. Initially, a motivated minority of officers was active while the majority lagged behind.

To address this lag, the first author tasked analysts with compiling daily officer engagement statistics, aggregated at the squad level for each sergeant. Certain sergeants had higher engagements, indicating that the issue was supervisory rather than individual. New analytics at monthly meetings highlighted sergeants' underperformance. The first author required captains to develop action plans to improve squad engagement for the bottom 25% of sergeants.

Within months, sergeant accountability increased, and overall engagement in crime reduction activities improved, demonstrating the sergeants' role in success. Not only should they be held accountable for their squad's actions, but accountability should be implemented early to avoid delays in achieving outcomes.

Building Analytical Capacity

Crime analysts are vital for the successful implementation of evidence-based crime reduction strategies (Piza & Feng, 2017; Santos, 2018; Santos & Santos, 2020). They help agencies accurately identify problems, understand when and where these issues occur, and justify resource allocation. Analysts provide evidence to support decisions, preventing agencies from being pulled in conflicting directions by various stakeholders.

Analysts also offer critical feedback on the effectiveness of strategies, allowing for timely corrections when necessary. Having skilled analysts enables the agency to address setbacks and optimize implementation.

Finally, as with any specialized position, the right people must be in the right roles. The first author was fortunate to secure support from both the chief of police and the city government to invest in an experienced, highly qualified data scientist from the private sector. This required a commitment to offer competitive compensation comparable to private-sector positions. While many data scientists may be drawn to unique and impactful police work, government salaries often fall short of private-sector offerings. This consideration is equally relevant for non-management positions. To address this challenge, the first author collaborated with human resources to bring the existing analysts' salaries up to market standards—which had not happened in years. This adjustment facilitated the promotion of a promising analyst to a supervisory role and enabled the agency to attract new talent with the advanced software and coding skills necessary for integrating multiple agency systems.

This investment in data and analytical personnel enhanced the agency's efficiency, automating processes to save time and costs. It also enabled daily statistical updates and the

development of internal and external dashboards, improving communication both within the department and with the public.

Strengthening Strategies Through Academic Partnerships

The first author initially attempted to implement the stratified policing approach independently. Although he was well-versed in the literature and had experience with process management, he now advises against this approach. Implementing evidence-based practices, particularly comprehensive ones like stratified policing, is complex and often presents unforeseen challenges. Collaborating with experienced criminologists is essential to successfully navigate these complexities and achieve optimal outcomes (Rojek et al., 2014).[3]

Without external expert support, it is unlikely that a new initiative will be as effective, potentially leading to suboptimal short-term results and eroding confidence in the strategy. The initial implementation was less effective than hoped for, but fortunately it did not damage long-term perceptions of the program before technical partners were brought in.

Collaborating with criminologists allows for stronger assessments of strategy effectiveness and reduces the agency's operational burden. External researchers can assist with tasks like analyzing hotspot locations and adjusting strategies, making the process more manageable for busy executives. Additionally, external experts lend legitimacy to the initiative, increasing its credibility with politicians, community leaders, the media, and the public even if internal skepticism exists (Hansen et al., 2014).

Executive Demands

Implementation success relies heavily on an executive who consistently champions the initiative, navigates challenges, and maintains accountability. Executives are critical in ensuring that complex projects like this proceed effectively, despite the inherent difficulty of managing relationships with long-time colleagues.

A committed command staff that supports the executive's vision is also essential (Santos & Santos, 2012). The initiative would have faced significant hurdles without captains who were fully engaged in the plan and led their divisions accordingly. Their support helped avoid delays and ensured smoother implementation.

Additionally, the department learned a lesson from the decision to implement two substantial strategies simultaneously. The stratified policing model was in early stages when the chief directed collaboration with UTSA criminologists on a violent street crime reduction strategy. The UTSA team's expertise greatly contributed to the positive outcomes, but implementing both strategies at once created agency-wide confusion about each plan's distinct goals. Moreover, the

3 Agencies have several options for collaborating with criminologists, including contract services, grant funding, and cooperative agreements. The SLCPD opted for contract services in both programs discussed here due to the time delays often associated with grant funding and the need for quicker implementation.

added burden to the first author ultimately delayed the medium- and long-term phases of the UTSA plan and accompanying crime reduction.

Police managers may want to consider implementing one major initiative at a time, allowing thorough integration before introducing new strategies. Strategic prioritization should consider local context and agency-specific needs. In this case, the decision to launch stratified policing first was driven by timing.

Succession Planning: Protecting Gains Amid Competing Priorities

Finally, sustaining long-term success depends on early succession planning. The system established by the first author is designed to remain functional as long as an executive continues to support it. However, the author's departure (without a robust succession plan) may lead to a diminished focus on data-driven proactive crime reduction, as shifting political priorities divert attention to other issues. Without sustained support, the programs' gains are at risk, highlighting the importance of succession planning to maintain momentum. This is even more crucial amid competing demands on police resources (Crank, 2003; Crank & Langworthy, 1992; Matusiak, 2016; Matusiak et al., 2017), for which there may not be a straightforward solution. The inability to maintain a sustained focus amidst competing municipal priorities—particularly when an agency is under-resourced—jeopardizes the long-term success of any implementation effort.

Conclusion

The Salt Lake City Police Department's crime reduction program offers a compelling demonstration of how targeted, evidence-based investments in analytical capabilities and leadership can successfully reduce crime, even under resource constraints. SLCPD's strategic civilian hires and structured management systems were pivotal in translating analytical insights into actionable, effective crime reduction strategies. The evidence suggests that institutional reform—anchored in consistent leadership, accountability, and data-driven strategies—can lead to substantial, measurable outcomes in public safety.

The implications of this case study extend beyond policing into broader public sector governance. The critical role of civilian analytical talent, effective data integration, and unwavering executive leadership underscores the necessity of well-designed managerial frameworks to address complex social problems. Sustained improvement requires leadership that not only champions reforms but also invests in their operational success through careful succession planning and accountability mechanisms.

The SLCPD case also highlights a persistent theme in public administration: the gap between knowledge creation and effective implementation. While evidence-based practices are well-documented, their translation into operational success remains contingent on local leadership, alignment of incentives, and responsiveness to community and political environments (del Pozo et al., 2024). This research underscores how the potential of evidence-based strategies hinges not

merely on adopting best practices but also on embedding these strategies within a sustained, adaptive, and resilient institutional culture. The lesson is clear: successful crime reduction is not simply about knowledge; it is about leadership that transforms knowledge into systematic action.

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From Research to Reality: Leveraging Implementation Science to Advance Evidence-Based Policing

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ABSTRACT

The National Institute of Justice's "Evidence to Action" initiative seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice. Supporting this mission, this paper calls attention to a growing scientific field that helps to translate evidence into action—implementation science. The paper provides a brief introduction to implementation science and its tools used to facilitate the adoption of evidence-based practices. It introduces a blueprint based on five core principles—commitment, concordance, co-production, capacity, and culture—to guide police leaders engaged in "first-line research" and help them sustain effective interventions. Drawing from the LEADS scholars' studies presented in this volume, this paper demonstrates how applying these principles offers a practical approach to guiding successful interventions and achieving lasting improvements in policing outcomes.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, scientific research has garnered valuable insights into which policing strategies are most effective in reducing crime, improving police practices, enhancing officer safety and wellness, and increasing community trust and well-being. However, while evidence-based approaches—such as problem-solving, focused deterrence, and the practices highlighted by studies in this volume—can substantially improve policing outcomes, a clear gap persists between the knowledge generated by researchers and its routine adoption by frontline personnel and high-level decision-makers. This disconnect can stem from agency inertia—including distrust in and resistance to new information, resource constraints, and a lack of systematic processes for learning about and translating research findings into practice. Consequently, even well-documented successes in policing research risk remaining underutilized or poorly implemented, hindering broader benefits for police and public safety.

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ or the Institute), the research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, has generated a great deal of knowledge about what works (and what doesn't) in policing. As noted in Director La Vigne's opening chapter, NIJ endeavors to translate and disseminate research findings to people who can implement real-world changes. In pursuit of this mission, Director La Vigne launched NIJ's "Evidence to Action" (E2A) initiative in 2022 to further narrow the gap between research findings and practical applications in the justice field. The E2A initiative has expanded and enhanced existing NIJ programs that promote police research partnerships—including the Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) program (see La Vigne, this volume)—while also elevating the role of *implementation science*, drawing greater attention to this emerging multidisciplinary field and its findings, which can help to translate research into concrete, transformative practices across the justice system.

This paper aims to equip police leaders, both practitioners and scholars, with a general understanding of implementation science and its potential to transform evidence into actionable strategies that drive meaningful improvements in policing. The first section explains implementation science and how it builds upon but differs from closely related scientific fields. Drawing on examples of NIJ's LEADS scholars program activities, it explores these distinctions, as well as the tools used in implementation science that set it apart from other types of research. This section shows how implementation science tools can be used to develop different research questions, including those from the LEADS studies featured in this volume.

The paper's second section proposes a blueprint for advancing the use of police research. Grounded in core implementation science principles, the blueprint offers practical guidance for police practitioners looking to engage in research and enhance policing practices by building a more robust evidence base. Examples show how the studies presented in this volume exemplify the blueprint's five components, which serve as guideposts for fostering stronger police research partnerships and generating more impactful, actionable, and compelling findings for police practitioners.

What Is Implementation Science?

Implementation science is a growing field that focuses on ensuring research findings are effectively applied in real-world settings, including police work. Its main goal is to identify the factors that facilitate or obstruct the adoption, execution, and lasting success of evidence-based programs and interventions (Bauer et al., 2015). By bridging the gap between research and practice, implementation science helps police departments integrate proven strategies into their daily operations, adapt these strategies to fit local needs, and monitor their proper application over time.

Implementation science builds upon the fields of *knowledge utilization* and *research on research use*. All three aim to maximize the impact of evidence, but they approach it differently.[1] *Knowledge utilization* looks at how information and research findings are integrated into decisions, policies, and daily practices within police departments (Blake & Ottoson, 2009). *Research on research* use examines if, why, and how decision-makers choose to use certain types of evidence (Supplee et al., 2003). *Implementation science* takes this further by developing strategies to effectively deliver and apply research-based interventions in policing, ensuring these practices are not only adopted but also successfully integrated into operations and maintained (del Pozo et al., 2024).

To grasp how these fields promote evidence to action, consider the three levels of knowledge sharing: diffusion, dissemination, and implementation (see Figure 1 and Nilsen, 2015). Each level uses different methods and degrees of involvement to ensure that research findings effectively reach and are used by police practitioners.

1. ***Diffusion or "Letting it happen":*** Information spreads naturally through existing networks without targeted efforts. Knowledge utilization researchers often highlight the importance of knowledge diffusion within social networks because they enable trust-building, peer-to-peer exchange, and iterative feedback loops—factors that make it easier for people to learn about, understand, and apply new information (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). For example, in line with these principles, the LEADS program forges strong connections between police practitioners and academics, creating a collaborative network that promotes the natural diffusion of new ideas and research findings among LEADS scholars.

1 All three fields have contributed to the understanding of research use across a wide range of disciplines, including healthcare, agriculture, social services, education, information science, public policy, and criminal justice. While they share overlapping methods and goals, they are sometimes conceptualized as distinct fields based on their primary emphasis. Intentionally broad and commonly used definitions of these fields are presented here to help readers distinguish implementation science from other disciplines and to explain why NIJ's E2A initiative has specifically highlighted the field of implementation science.

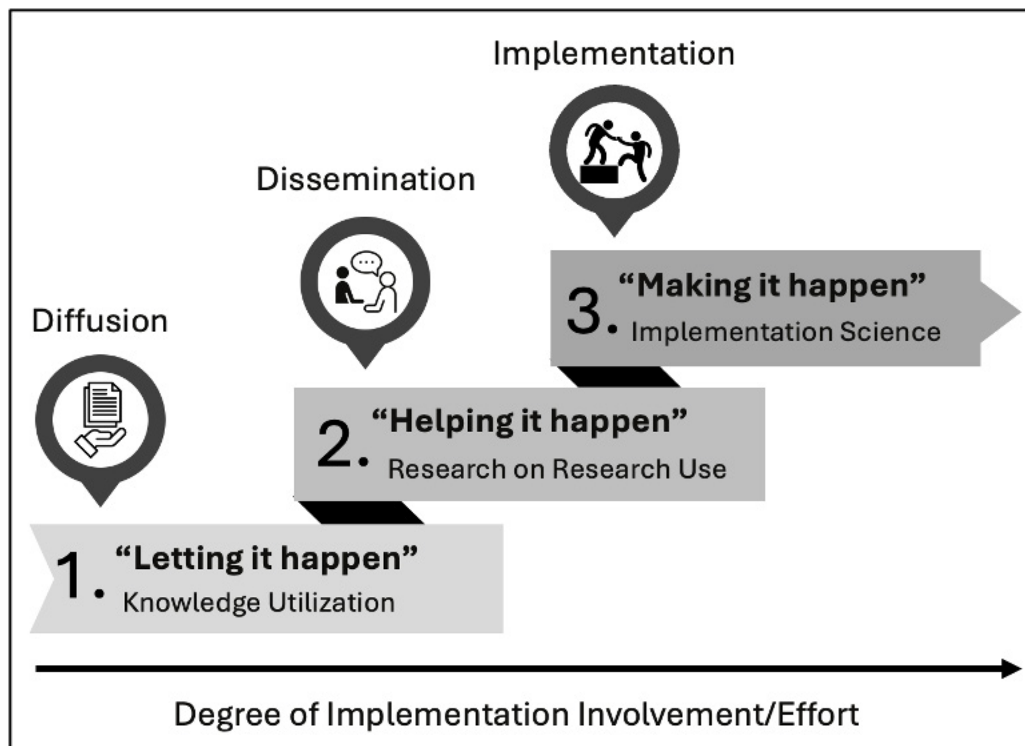

FIGURE 1. Knowledge transfer continuum and related disciplines

2. ***Dissemination or "Helping it happen":*** Information is actively shared through specific channels like training sessions, workshops, podcasts, or webinars to reach intended audiences.[2] Researchers who focus on "research on research use" emphasize that actively involving practitioners in dissemination makes evidence more accessible, credible, and actionable. In keeping with this approach, LEADS scholars are actively engaged in dissemination. They receive funding to attend research trainings and workshops, where they learn about new evidence-based tools and techniques. They share their knowledge and research through presentations at major conferences—such as the International Association of Chiefs of Police annual conference. They participate in media interviews and podcasts, and they publish in practitioner-focused outlets, including NIJ publications (like this volume) and policing trade journals, fostering greater access to research among frontline personnel and decision-makers.

3. ***Implementation or "Making it happen":*** Hands-on strategies and guidelines are used to integrate and sustain evidence-based practices within police operations.

2 NIJ's Justice Today Podcast, sponsored research articles, the NIJ Journal, CrimeSolutions database emailed updates, and the NIJ "Five Things" Series are examples of active dissemination efforts.

> Implementation science emerged from the recognition that proven interventions often fail to be widely or effectively adopted despite extensive diffusion and dissemination efforts. Implementation is more than just sharing information; it requires deliberate and tailored actions to ensure new programs work effectively within specific police departments (Albers et al., 2020). For instance, within the context of daily police activities, diffusion might involve hearing about a new vehicle pursuit tactic from colleagues, while dissemination would entail describing it in a training bulletin. Implementation, on the other hand, involves changing policies or procedures, among other activities, to embed the new tactic into everyday operations.

Implementation goes beyond diffusion and dissemination. It calls for involving key partners, training officers, and regularly assessing progress to ensure the programs are followed correctly. As described by Mourtgos and Adams (this volume), the Salt Lake City Police Department's successful adoption of an evidence-based crime reduction program required a strategic and multi-faceted approach to address various organizational and operational implementation barriers. Police leaders achieved success by investing in civilian staff to enhance data collection and analysis, providing consistent advocacy from a high-ranking champion, establishing systematic processes to change daily operations, creating consistent leadership and accountability mechanisms, engaging researchers for training, and focusing on succession planning and sustainability.

Implementation science offers various tools—*theories*, *models*, and *frameworks* (TMFs)—to help police departments effectively apply and conduct research (Damschroder, 2020). Here's how each works. *Theories* explain the fundamental reasons why certain implementation strategies succeed or fail. For example, a theory might identify how police attitudes impact the adoption of a new policing tactic. *Models* provide step-by-step plans for implementing new practices. A model might outline the stages or steps a police department should follow to introduce and sustain a new crime prevention program. *Frameworks* organize various factors that affect implementation, helping identify potential challenges and supports. For instance, a framework could list internal factors like staff training and external factors like community engagement that influence the success of a new intervention.

Table 1 provides examples of TMFs along with their purpose and the types of research questions each tool can address. The last row shows how implementation science aligns with the LEADS research topics explored in this volume and can be used to shape future inquiries. By applying implementation science TMFs to guide policing research and implementation efforts, scholars and practitioners can better tackle real-world policing challenges. Using TMFs increases the likelihood that evidence-based strategies are not only introduced but also effectively integrated, sustained, and scaled across diverse settings.

TABLE 1. Theories, models, and frameworks (TMFs) examples and explanations

TMF TYPE	NAME	PRIMARY PURPOSE	EXAMPLE OF RELATED RESEARCH QUESTION	IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR CURRENT VOLUME TOPICS
Theory	General Theory of Implemen-tation (May & Finch, 2009)	Broadly explain what factors determine whether a new practice becomes embedded and sustained in routine police work	To what extent do people's attitudes and beliefs about an intervention predict their adherence to it in practice?	Do changes in officers' attitudes after training predict their use of evidence-based interviewing techniques in the field? (See Brimbal et al., this volume)
Model	Stages of Implementation Completion (Chamberlain et al., 2011)	Provide a sequential, milestone-based roadmap to guide agencies through each phase of adopting and integrating an intervention	Which stage in the implementation process most commonly leads to project delays or the end of intervention efforts?	At what project stage should leadership roles and responsibilities be reviewed to keep a crime reduction program working effectively? (See Mourtgos & Adams, this volume)
Framework	Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (Damschroder et al., 2009)	Categorize and organize the factors that influence whether an evidence-based practice is successfully implemented in different locations and agencies	Which internal agency factors are most likely to hinder or help intervention adoption?	Are there specific employee needs that influence a police agency's ability to successfully implement new evidence-based crime interventions? (See Wojslawowicz, this volume)

While implementation science offers a powerful approach to evidence-based policing, effectively applying its tools requires specialized knowledge. Implementation science experts can guide the selection and application of appropriate tools, such as specific TMFs, to achieve police leaders' research goals and operational needs. By partnering with implementation scientists, police leaders can ensure that the entire process, from initial research design to the evaluation and translation of findings, is grounded in evidence-based practices and creates lasting improvements in their departments.

Implementation Science Principles: A Blueprint for Advancing Police Research

Five key principles extracted from the implementation science literature offer essential guidance for police leaders seeking to engage in research and adopt evidence-based policing practices. Using these principles as "guideposts" can both strengthen policing's evidence base and improve operational effectiveness. Adhering to these principles as part of "**first-line research**"—

projects in which police initiate and coordinate research to determine what works—naturally fosters "**justice from the ground up**." Rather than adopting "off-the-shelf" evidence-based practices and driving implementation from the top down, leaders can empower their personnel and research partners "on the ground" to adapt evidence-based solutions to local contexts and evaluate their impact. This approach helps to ensure greater relevance, acceptance, and sustainability of new practices while preventing the unintended consequences that often emerge from poorly implemented strategies. Five principles—commitment, concordance, co-production, capacity, and culture—presented in Figure 2 and described in the section that follows, offer a blueprint for police leaders who seek to engage in first-line research.

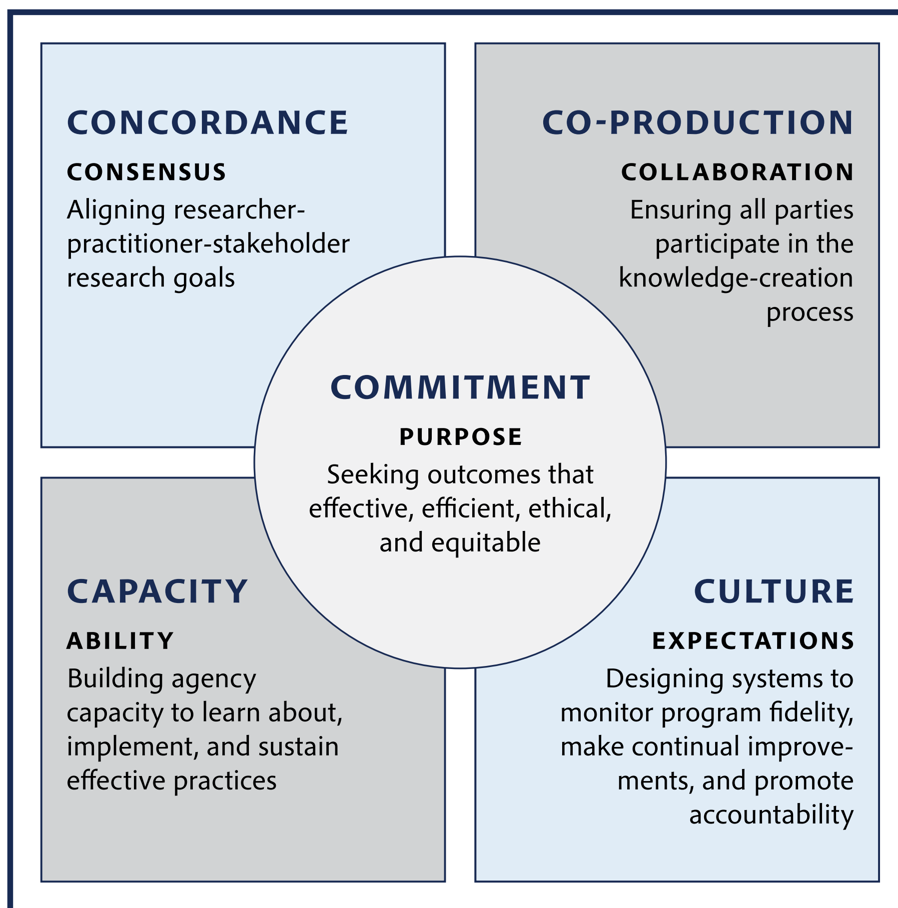

FIGURE 2. An Implementation Science Blueprint to Advance Policing Research

Commitment means ensuring that programs are evaluated in ways that align with the values that police leaders should seek to uphold. For example, it is not enough to find out whether a new practice effectively reduces crime. It is also essential to ensure that strategies do not unintentionally harm people or communities in other ways. For instance, while heavy patrol activities are likely to prevent crime, if not conducted in a manner that is efficient, ethical, and equitable, they can also

waste scarce resources, damage police-community relationships, and increase distrust in the police among populations disproportionately impacted by crime.

Police leaders play a crucial role in upholding the principle of commitment by embedding its four values—effectiveness, efficiency, ethics, and equity—into their department's vision, mission, and research activities. Leaders must demand comprehensive program evaluations that measure outcomes associated with commitment's four values. For example, as Phiri and Alan (this volume) illustrate, successful police recruitment strategies do not simply attract large numbers of new officers. Effective recruitment efforts can become costly and inefficient if they fail to prioritize officer retention. By committing to the value of efficiency, a successful recruitment strategy is redefined as one that will also preserve agency training investments by attracting officers likely to stay once employed. A successful recruitment strategy should also be ethical (e.g., promote transparency by involving the community in the candidate selection process) and equitable (e.g., intentionally addressing entry barriers for underrepresented groups). When conducting research, police must evaluate both the effectiveness of an intervention (did it produce its intended outcome?) and also its broader impact on resources, police personnel, and communities, ensuring that outcomes are genuinely improved for all stakeholders involved.

Concordance refers to achieving consensus around research goals. Those involved in or affected by police research activities can have conflicting agendas. For example, a police leader might be attempting to resolve political pressures, while a research partner is pursuing access to publishable data, and a community member is seeking relief from persistent crime problems. For police departments engaged in research, concordance helps to prevent conflict, which hinders the implementation of research findings and ultimately undermines a project's success. When all parties agree upon common objectives, research projects are more likely to address the genuine needs and concerns of those most impacted by existing problems (Sullivan et al., 2013).

Police leaders can foster concordance by establishing clear objectives from the outset, promoting open communication, and involving all stakeholders early in the research process. Miner (this volume) demonstrates the importance of concordance by describing how redefining our goal—from incarcerating those who commit crimes to preventing future criminality—can generate understanding and support for non-traditional approaches. Working under this objective, police practitioners and the larger population are better positioned to support evidence-based cognitive-behavioral approaches rather than less effective incarceration sentences for arrested nonviolent offenders. By aligning research activities with mutually shared priorities, research findings become more relevant to those who will implement the new practices. Consequently, research findings that arise from concordance are more likely to be widely accepted, effectively implemented, and sustained over the long term, leading to meaningful improvements in policing outcomes.

Co-production means ensuring that researchers, police officers, community members, and other stakeholders work together as equal partners throughout the entire research and intervention process. The principle of co-production enhances research by fostering collaboration where

everyone contributes their knowledge and perspectives from project planning to execution and evaluation, helping partners recognize and address real-world complexities (La Vigne, 2025). This approach enhances the rigor and comprehensiveness of research designs and makes it more likely that research findings will be used to develop practical solutions. Moreover, co-production sidesteps common research pitfalls, including inaccurate or misleading conclusions drawn by researchers who simply analyze data and lack a thorough understanding of why data was first gathered, who collected it, how it was collected, or the context in which it was recorded.

Police leaders can promote the principle of co-production by acting as "boundary spanners" —individuals who bridge the gap between different groups, organizations, or sources of knowledge by facilitating communication and collaboration (Neal et al., 2022).[3] Boundary spanners operate by building relationships and sharing information between various stakeholders, including researchers, police personnel, community organizations, and other relevant groups. Police leaders should emphasize the value of diverse perspectives, encouraging officers and community members to share their lived experiences and practical knowledge. As Kilmer and colleagues (this volume) found, incorporating officer input and perspectives throughout an entire peer support program evaluation process generated useful insights and new lessons learned. To ensure meaningful engagement, police leaders may need to address and overcome skepticism or negative perceptions stemming from prior encounters with research partners who were less collaborative or disengaged. By cultivating trust and emphasizing the value of all stakeholder input, police leaders can build stronger partnerships that drive innovation and produce more valid and useful research findings.

Capacity refers to the skills, resources, and systems necessary to engage in research and sustain new practices (Brownson et al., 2024). For police departments involved in research, those with robust capacity are better positioned to embrace innovation, minimize resistance, and manage the complexities of implementing new initiatives. Strong capacity allows organizations to be adaptive and tailor the core elements of evidence-based practices to fit their unique settings, thus avoiding implementation failures.

Police leaders can support capacity-building activities by strategically allocating resources, fostering professional development, and creating processes and infrastructures to support evidence-based practices. This may include training officers in new tactics or strategies, improving data management systems, or developing leadership skills within the department. As an example, Hall and Hoard (this volume) determined that critical incident training should be supplemented by additional capacity building. Specifically, agencies must also build leadership and post-threat management skills among personnel tasked with critical incident response. By investing in capacity building, police practitioners are better equipped to implement and assess evidence-based practices, adapt to evolving challenges, and improve overall effectiveness.

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3 The term "boundary spanner" is used to describe various roles in the implementation science literature. Police leaders familiar with evidence-based policing, implementation science, police operations, and stakeholder needs are best positioned to serve in this capacity and build effective implementation and evaluation teams.

Culture, in the context of implementation science and policing, refers to the conditions that shape how officers and other police personnel think, interact, and make decisions. Culture influences everything from daily routines to long-term goals. As an implementation science principle, culture refers to behavioral expectations established by a police agency's processes for monitoring performance, providing and responding to feedback, and holding people accountable for aligning their actions with organizational values, policies, and objectives.

To create a culture conducive to research and the adoption of evidence-based practices, police leaders must focus on shaping the organizational environment to support continuous improvement and learning. Poorboy and Quinby (this volume) found that active listening skills among hostage negotiators can only be fully developed if frequently practiced while receiving expert assessment and feedback. Police leaders must recognize and reward behaviors that align with research-informed practices, foster a mindset of curiosity and adaptability, and create safe spaces for innovation and experimentation. Leaders should actively promote transparency by sharing both successes and lessons learned from research and implementation efforts, demonstrating that setbacks are opportunities for growth rather than failures. By normalizing research-driven approaches and creating a culture where learning is celebrated, police leaders can pave the way for sustained progress and improved outcomes.

Conclusion

Bridging the gap between research and practice in policing is no longer an aspirational goal—it is an urgent necessity. As highlighted at the outset, the knowledge generated by scientific research offers transformative potential for police operations, crime reduction, officer safety and wellness, and community trust and well-being. Yet, without effective mechanisms to translate these insights into actionable practices, their impact remains limited.

Implementation science offers proven tools for overcoming agency inertia, fostering meaningful collaboration, and embedding evidence-based practices into daily police operations. The mission of NIJ's E2A initiative is exemplified by the LEADS studies presented in this volume, which offer concrete examples of how implementation science principles can be applied to address pressing policing challenges. By embracing the principles of commitment, concordance, co-production, capacity, and culture, police leaders can partner with implementation science experts and drive the policing profession beyond isolated successes toward systemic and sustained change.

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