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De-escalation training: An evidence-based practice to reduce force and increase legitimacy

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Abstract

Police officers must approach volatile situations that may escalate on a frequent basis. As first responders, they often do not have the luxury of ignoring conflict in public and must work to resolve the situation. However, officers' presence may inadvertently escalate situations, leading to coercive responses, injury, or worse. The National De-Escalation Training Center (NDTC) has received $4.75 million dollars to provide de-escalation training that incorporates rapid personality assessment, mental health issue recognition, and situational awareness built on a procedural justice foundation. Using data from the first year of trainings conducted across the U.S., we have found that NDTC training dramatically improves officers' ability to recognize levels of escalation, tailor their response to the individuals' personality types, and respond effectively. Consequently, trainees are better equipped to avoid turning volatile situations into tragedies and exacerbating the existing cynicism towards law enforcement.

Literature Review

Issue of Police Use of Force

- The improper use and overuse of force has been a consistent issue in policing for decades (McCoy, 1986; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993; Nix, Campbell, Byers, & Alpert, 2017)
- This has led to an unprecedented crisis relating to citizen perceptions of police's legitimacy as authority figures, largely due to their use of force (Nix et al., 2017; Schwartz & Jahn, 2020).
- Law enforcement face increasing pressure to resolve situations without using force (Engel, McManus, Isaza, 2020; Steele, Lynn, & Guarnieri, 2022).

Calls for Reform

- Stoughton (2016) argues that police must shift to a "guardian mindset", from the current "warrior ethos" to improve perceptions of the police and reduce unnecessary uses of force.

De-Escalation Training

- De-escalation is often based on a procedural justice framework (Steele et al., 2022), through a common approach.
- Officers often lack training to de-escalate effectively (Engel, McManus, & Herold, 2020), despite its effectiveness (Goh, 2021; Engel, Corsaro, Isaza, & McManus, 2022).
- These skills are often not reinforced by supervisors after training (Engel, Isaza, Motz, & Corsaro, 2021), leading to atrophy and poor use in the field.
- More advanced forms of de-escalation training build on the procedural justice foundation by incorporating elements of crisis intervention training and a proprietary rapid personality assessment technique (Steele et al., 2022).

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Method

Hypotheses

- $H_{(0)}$: The NDTC De-Escalation Training will have no impact on officers' practical skills.
- $H_{(1)}$: The NDTC De-Escalation Training will have increase officers' practical skills.

Sample

Data for 336 officers was collected by NDTC personnel over the past year.
- Over 50% worked for police agencies (n=180), with 20% in Sheriff's Depts., and the remaining 25% in other agencies
- Trainees were primarily male (79.2%) and Caucasian (91.7%), with 10.5% identifying as Hispanic/Latino
- Only 37.2% reported having a college degree (Associates or above)

Data Collection

NDTC provides advanced Level-3 de-escalation to law enforcement officers and other criminal justice system personnel. This training provides a rapid personality assessment tool, along with specific techniques, to de-escalate individuals based on their personality. Trainers observed law enforcement officers attempt to de-escalate a standardized situation at the start and close of the training. The trainers then rated the officers' performance via a structured observation form in Qualtrics.

Measures

- Recognition of Active State: Does the officer recognize which individual must be de-escalated first?
- Appropriate Intervention: Does the officer utilize the appropriate interventions for the two subjects' personalities?
- Effective Intervention: How effective is the officer's attempt at de-escalating both individuals involved in the training scenario?

Results

- **Recognition of Active State:** Nearly 90% of trainees were able to appropriately prioritize their interactions at the start of training, compared to less than 40% at the start. Improvement was statistically significant at the 0.00001 level.

- **Appropriate Intervention**: Over 75% of trainees were able to use the appropriate technique for the subjects' personalities, compared to 11% at the start. Improvement was statistically significant at the 0.00001 level.

- **Effective Intervention**: Over 85% of trainees implemented very to extremely effective interventions to de-escalate the test situation, compared to seven percent at the start. The overall difference was statistically significant at the 0.00001 level, with the individual improvement also statistically significant (p < 0.00001).

Results (Continued)

Practical Assessment Data

	Pre-Test Data		Post-Test Data		Chi Square
	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	X^2 (p)
Recognition of Active State	195 (60.7)	126 (39.3)	33 (11.4)	257 (88.6)	158.75 (0.00001)

	Inappropriate	Partial	Correct	Inappropriate	Partial	Correct	Chi Square
Appropriate Intervention	101 (31.7)	184 (57.7)	34 (10.7)	5 (1.7)	66 (22.4)	223 (75.9)	281.08 (0.00001)

	Not effective at all	Slightly effective	Moderately effective	Very Effective	Extremely Effective	Not effective at all	Slightly effective	Moderately effective	Very Effective	Extremely Effective	Chi Square
Effective Intervention	45 (13.7)	148 (45.1)	112 (34.1)	23 (7.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)	7 (2.3)	35 (11.7)	143 (47.8)	113 (37.8)	406.96 (0.0001)

	Mean Improvement (S.D.)	T-Test (p)
Individual Improvement	1.91 (0.95)	34.66 (p <0.001)

Discussion

NDTC's first year of data clearly demonstrates that the De-escalation: Principles & Practice course is effective for helping officers to recognize individuals who represent an active three; approach subjects according to the personality style being presented; and intervening in a situation in a manner that leads to effective de-escalation. These results are important for situating NDTC training as an evidence-based practice. As more officers are trained, unnecessary instances of force will decrease as officers utilize rapid personality identification and provide time, space, and understanding to those who are escalated.

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