Effectiveness of Police Training

POLICY ASSESSMENT MARCH 2021

Police training, particularly that which is delivered to recruits, is designed to impart the knowledge and skills officers require to adhere to departmental procedures, policies, and practices. As such, basic training is a fundamental component of efforts to reduce excessive use of force and racially biased policing, ensure respectful and constitutional behaviors on the part of officers, and build community trust and police legitimacy. Yet far too often decisions about whether and when to invest in certain trainings are guided by the latest trends and premised on assumptions that training will be effective. It is crucial that research on the content, duration, and modality of both basic and in-service trainings guides police departments' decisions about their allocation of scarce training resources.

SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

+   Police officer training in the U.S. varies significantly across departments, is relatively limited in duration, and is not well-aligned with what's known about effective training principles from other professions and countries.

+   U.S. police officer training curricula should dedicate more time to acquiring communication skills, learning de-escalation tactics and principles of procedural justice, and handling scenarios that officers are most likely to encounter.

+   Police training should comport with a resiliency-based approach, which teaches officers to recognize stress and regulate their responses to it, rather than the more typical "stress-oriented" military training approach, which involves intensive physical demands and psychological pressure.

+   Officers should be subjected to periodic recertification that includes not just firearms training, but also other core topics.

+   National standards on training and certification would ensure that all officers, regardless of jurisdiction and agency size or location, receive a sufficient level of exposure to key concepts, skills, and tactics. Federal leadership could promote and incentivize learning hubs and innovations in training delivery.

Current Practice and Research

Despite the critical importance of police officer training to the onboarding of new recruits, there is very little evidence about its effectiveness. The scant research that does exist is not promising, with studies finding that any improvements gained from training are not sustained over time (O'Neill et al., 2018), do not consistently increase self-reported police integrity (Blumberg et al., 2016), and may even reinforce racial and gender stereotyping, potentially discouraging women and people of color from entering the field (Bykov, 2014; Haarr, 2005; Semuels, 2020). The decentralized nature of policing in the U.S. may contribute to these sobering findings, owing to the notable variation that exists in the duration, content, and delivery of police officer training.

TRAINING DURATION

According to a 2013 census of law enforcement training academies nationwide, the average number of hours for basic training of entry-level recruits in municipal police departments is 936 hours, or about six months (Reaves, 2016).[1] This average masks considerable variation by state. While all states have their own police training standards and certification requirements (Semuels, 2020), typically governed by a Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) board or similar entity, basic training requirements range from 404 hours in Georgia to slightly more than 1,000 in Hawaii (Follett et al., 2020). Moreover, each POST organization can determine its own guidelines, leading to differences in the processes used to review training curricula and award educational credits (COPS, 2020).

For field training, which involves patrol or other community-based policing in partnership with a more senior officer, the average number of hours is 630 (Reaves, 2016). Officers also take in-service trainings periodically, with the average number of in-service training hours at 21 hours per year, ranging from no hours at all to 40 hours per year depending on the agency (The Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform, n.d.).

Police officer basic training in the U.S. is of limited duration compared to other developed countries. For example, basic training duration lasts about 18 months in Estonia and Croatia, and up to 30 months in Germany (Dekanoidze and Khelashvili, 2018). Officers in Finland and Norway are required to attend three-year police universities (Kates, 2020). In these and other countries, prospective officers may be required to pay for their own academy training while in the U.S. the training is free to those individuals who are accepted into the academy. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the number of hours a U.S. recruit is required to train prior to being sworn in is so much lower than that mandated in other comparable countries.

Also striking is that within the U.S., the number of hours associated with police certification pales in comparison to minimal training requirements for other professions. For example, all 50 states plus the District of Columbia require licensing for barbers and cosmetologists, pest control applicators, and water well drillers, with an average of one year of combined training and apprenticeship for each of these professions (Carpenter et al., 2017). Plumbers must complete an apprenticeship that can take up to five years before becoming fully licensed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

While there is little evidence that longer police training translates into greater benefits, research from other fields finds that longer trainings are more likely to yield their intended impacts. For example, a meta-analysis of diversity training found positive outcomes as a result of longer-duration trainings (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Similarly, research on continuing education training for healthcare workers supports the hypothesis that communication skills improve with additional training hours (Bluestone et al., 2013).

However, a study of in-service procedural justice training of police officers that varied training duration yielded mixed findings; one outcome improved more after a six-month training while another was more favorable with a three-month training duration (Wolf et al., 2019; McLean, 2020). The extent to which longer-duration training

requirements would improve policing outcomes remains an open research question, and duration effects likely interact with the content of the training.
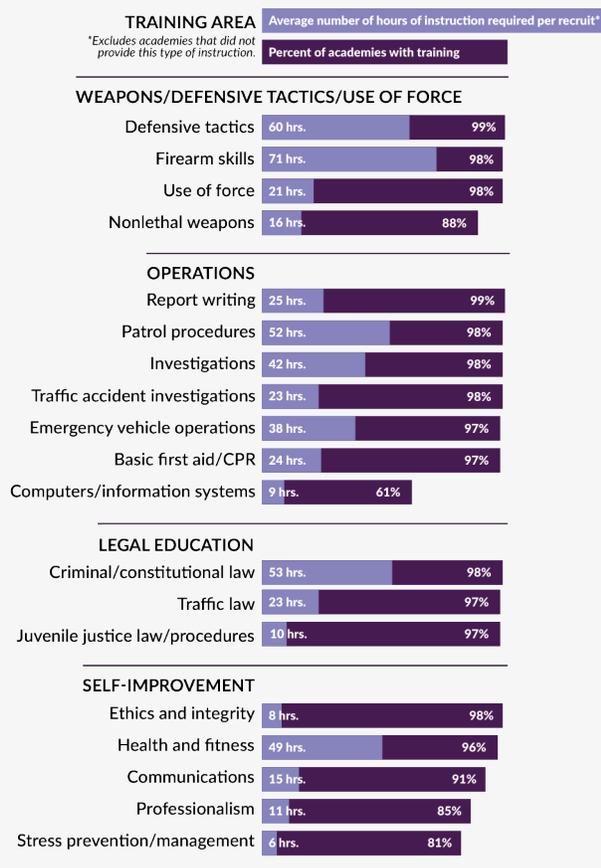
TRAINING CONTENT

An examination of the content of police training in the U.S. illustrates a greater focus on physical and technical skills than on human interaction skills, such as verbal communication, de-escalation, and crisis intervention (Reaves, 2016). A Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) member survey from 2015 found that the average[2] academy provides ten hours of training on communication skills, eight hours on de-escalation, and eight hours on crisis intervention, compared to 80 hours on weapons training and 49 hours on defensive tactics training. As illustrated in Figure 1, the 2013 census of law enforcement training academies found that the average academy offered 71 hours of firearms skills, 24 hours of basic first aid, eight hours on ethics and integrity, and six hours on stress prevention and management (Reaves, 2016).[3]

As with training hours, the U.S. differs from other countries in terms of basic training curricula; in other nations, there is relatively less content focused on weapons training (as well as significantly lower rates of gun ownership and community gun violence). For example, in Norway, the first full year of training is dedicated to the social role of police and their ethical obligations (Kates, 2020). In Germany, firearms training focuses on avoiding use (Cheatham and Maizland, 2020), and in Spain, police are trained to "provide verbal cautions and warning shots before resorting to deadly force" (Serhan, 2020). In Japan, police are discouraged from using firearms and trained to employ martial arts as an alternative (Berger and Noack, 2020).

The focus of U.S. police training content on weapons usage is reinforced through a "stress-oriented" military training approach that involves intensive physical demands and psychological pressure. According to the 2013 census of all police academies, about half of police recruits were trained with a stress-oriented approach, while about one in five (18%) were trained in academies with "non-stress" models, which permitted a more relaxed relationship between instructors and recruits. The remainder were trained under a hybrid approach (Reaves, 2016).[4] The stress-based model is in stark contrast to the messages delivered through de-escalation, procedural justice, and mental-health trainings and can result in officers adopting maladaptive coping mechanisms to deal with stress (Violanti, 1993).

Conversely, research has found that resiliency-based training, which teaches officers to recognize stress and regulate their responses to it, results in officers reporting lower stress, fewer negative emotions, and less depression (McCraty and Atkinson, 2012). Relatedly, some experts recommend that training content should

Figure 1: Major subject areas included in basic training programs in state and local law enforcement training academies, 2013

TRAINING AREA *Excludes academies that did not provide this type of instruction.*	Average number of hours of instruction required per recruit* / Percent of academies with training
WEAPONS/DEFENSIVE TACTICS/USE OF FORCE	
Defensive tactics	60 hrs. — 99%
Firearm skills	71 hrs. — 98%
Use of force	21 hrs. — 98%
Nonlethal weapons	16 hrs. — 88%
OPERATIONS	
Report writing	25 hrs. — 99%
Patrol procedures	52 hrs. — 98%
Investigations	42 hrs. — 98%
Traffic accident investigations	23 hrs. — 98%
Emergency vehicle operations	38 hrs. — 97%
Basic first aid/CPR	24 hrs. — 97%
Computers/information systems	9 hrs. — 61%
LEGAL EDUCATION	
Criminal/constitutional law	53 hrs. — 98%
Traffic law	23 hrs. — 97%
Juvenile justice law/procedures	10 hrs. — 97%
SELF-IMPROVEMENT	
Ethics and integrity	8 hrs. — 98%
Health and fitness	49 hrs. — 96%
Communications	15 hrs. — 91%
Professionalism	11 hrs. — 85%
Stress prevention/management	6 hrs. — 81%

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Census of Law Enforcement Training Academies, 2013

focus on strengthening officers' critical thinking, communication, and emotional intelligence skills (Blumberg et al., 2019). These skills are arguably more aligned with the typical scenarios that officers are most likely to encounter on their beats. While there is no rigorous evidence that examines the current composition of policing training content in the U.S. compared to potential alternatives, there is some evidence that training that enhances human interaction skills may improve officer-civilian interactions and reduce use of force.

TRAINING DELIVERY

Variations in training among U.S. police departments also apply to how training is conducted and who delivers the instruction. A comprehensive review of the police training literature found very little rigorous evidence on particular training modalities in policing contexts (Lum et al., 2016). Rather, research to date has been largely qualitative, with a focus on whether "best practices" in theories of learning are employed. For example, some experts have promoted the concept of "cognitive load theory," which purports that people can only absorb so much information at any given time and therefore it is best to deliver content through repeated exposure (Bennell et al., 2007; Mugford et al., 2013). While no evaluative literature exists on the value of repeated exposure in the policing context, cognitive psychologists have produced a large body of research demonstrating that such spaced repetition is effective for knowledge retention (Kang, 2016). Similarly, two studies of booster training conclude that they may be effective in promoting better content retention (O'Neill et al., 2018; Wolfe et al., 2019), although neither study rigorously evaluated the independent impact of such refresher trainings. Social psychological research on implicit bias training in general (not specific to policing) suggests that longer-duration and more intensive interventions, including those that focus on repeated practice, may prove more effective (Devine et al., 2012).

In terms of training modalities, education research emphasizes the value of autonomous learning activities rather than lecture-based approaches (Knowles, 1980). Some researchers believe that such practical application and problem-based interactive teaching could be effective in policing (Mugford et al, 2013; Blumberg, 2019). In addition, continuity between what is learned in the academy and in field training has been cited as important in connecting classroom instruction to real-world application (Blumberg, 2019), and supervisors in particular are believed to play a key role in making this connection (Dulin et al., 2020; Belur et al., 2019). One of the few studies of the efficacy of different training modalities in a policing context examined whether trainees responded differently to a problem-solving approach versus a lecture-based approach (Vander Kooi and Palmer, 2014). Researchers found some indication that self-reported critical thinking skills may respond more favorably to a problem-solving approach. However, officers were not randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions, rendering these findings less definitive.

In terms of who should deliver police training, some research has found that it is critical to select trainers from within agencies who have considerable tenure and standing within the agency. Such "credible messengers" are particularly useful in delivering "charged material," such as implicit bias training and curricula designed to increase officer awareness of historic and present-day racial biases in policing practices (Jannetta et al., 2019). In addition, there is some evidence that supervisory coaching can be an effective strategy for officer learning. Owens et al. (2018) assessed a Seattle Police Department intervention for which supervisors reviewed high-priority encounters involving officers who had been identified through an early intervention system as being at high risk for future adverse events. The intervention involved the supervisor meeting with the officer to discuss a recent high-priority event in a respectful manner that invited personal reflection. Researchers found positive impacts in reducing the number of arrests per incident as well as in reducing the volume of use-of-force incidents, although these impacts diminished somewhat over time.

CERTIFICATION AND NATIONAL TRAINING STANDARDS

Certification is a relevant but distinct part of the process an individual must complete to become a sworn police officer. At the state level, the POST or a similar state entity certifies prospective officers and deems them eligible to serve based on their meeting certain training and/or educational standards. National standards for

police certification and associated training requirements do not exist and, as a result, certification requirements vary widely across states. Certification entities may mandate education requirements, background checks, and in some instances a psychological evaluation. The International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST) recommends a set of minimum certification standards that include a state and national criminal background check, a General Education Development (GED) certificate, human relations courses, and training on the "ethical use of discretion" (Follett et al., 2020). A similar proposal came from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which recommended federal support for "training innovation hubs" to promote consistent standards for high-quality training and innovation in training content and delivery.

Critical Policy Elements

+ Police academies should dedicate the majority of training hours to teaching officers how to respond to the scenarios they are most likely to encounter. To achieve this, academies should reduce (if necessary) training hours on content related to rare events and topics that could be taught in less time without significantly compromising officer performance or safety. They should place a much greater focus on communications skills.

+ The Department of Justice should develop national police training standards and create incentives for agencies to comply with such standards. Training on critical elements such as constitutional policing and de-escalation should be consistent across departments nationwide. However, communities should retain discretion to decide some types of training content in accordance with their size, composition, needs, and resources.

+ Based on research on adult learning, police training content should be delivered through a mix of lectures, videos of real-world examples, scenario-based role playing, and group discussions.

+ Training on issues of race and reconciliation for past harms should be delivered by veteran officers in partnership with residents from Black communities and other marginalized populations (e.g., the LGBTQIA community).

+ First-line supervisors can play an important role in training officers by modeling good policing practices and holding officers accountable. However, in order to serve effectively in a training or coaching role, supervisors must be trained and supported by leadership. More research is needed to identify the content of such supervisor training and coaching.

+ Train-the-trainer models can be an important component of effective training, making it crucial that standards for trainers be rigorous. However, smaller agencies with fewer personnel and financial constraints may have limited options in terms of who conducts training and the extent to which they themselves are formally trained.

+ Routine recertification training should be mandated and cover a wide array of content beyond firearms training, to include refreshers on communications skills and de-escalation tactics.

+ Efforts to increase or improve police training in the U.S. should consider the associated costs and the source of those resources. Requirements for training expansion and enhancement should not be unfunded mandates.

+ Even if training programs are grounded in research and have been proven effective, training alone is not sufficient to prepare officers to police in a respectful, constitutional manner that comports with agency policies and prioritizes the preservation of life. Training should be accompanied by clear, detailed written policies and buttressed by engaged supervisors who model practices in accordance with training principles and agency policy – and hold officers accountable when they are out of compliance.

Endnotes

1 The average is measured by the median among the 132 responding municipal police academies.

2 In this instance, average refers to the median number of hours among 280 responding agencies.

3 These data include all manner of law enforcement training academies, including sheriffs' departments and state police agencies.

4 These data pertain to all training academies, including state police and sheriffs' departments.

References

Baric, Richard L. 2020. "North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission: Recommendations for Law Enforcement Field Training Programs." North Carolina Justice Academy.

Belur, Jyoti, Agnew-Pauley, Winifred, McGinely, Brendan, and Lisa Thompson, L. 2019. "A Systematic Review of Police Recruit Training Programmes." *Policing* 14(1): 76-90.

Bennell, Craig, Jones, Natalie J., and Shevaun Corey. 2007. "Does Use-Of-Force Simulation Training in Canadian Police Agencies Incorporate Principles of Effective Training?" *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 13(1): 35-58.

Berger, Miriam and Noack, Rick. 2020, June 6. "From guns to neck restraint: How police tactics differ around the world." *The Washington Post.*

Bezrukova, Katerina, Spell, Chester S., Perry, Jamie L., and Karen A. Jehn. 2016. "A Meta-analytical Integration of Over 40 Years of Research on Diversity Training Evaluation." *Psychological Bulletin* 142(11), 1227–1274.

Birzer, Michael L. 2003. "The Theory of Andragogy Applied to Police Training." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management.* 26: 29–42.

Bluestone, Julia, Johnson, Peter, Fullerton, Juditch, Carr, Catherine, Alderman, Jessica, and James BonTempo. 2013. "Effective in-service training design and delivery: evidence from an integrative literature review." *Human Resources for Health* 11(51).

Blumberg, Daniel M., Giromini, Luciano, and Laura B. Jacobson. 2016. "Impact of Police Academy Training on Recruits' Integrity." *Police Quarterly* 19(1), 63-86.

Blumberg, Daniel M., Schlosser, Michael D., Papazoglou, Konstantinos, Creighton, Sarah, and Chief Chuck Kaye, C. 2019. "New Directions in Police Academy Training: A Call to Action." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16(24): 4941.

Burke, Lisa A. and Hutchins, Holly M. 2007. "Training Transfer: An Integrative Literature Review." *Human Resource Development Review* 6(3): 263-296.

Bykov, Olga. 2014. "Police Academy Training: An Evaluation of the Strengths and Weaknesses of Police Academies." *Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science* 2(9).

Carpenter, Dick M., Knepper, Lisa, Sweetland, Kyle, and Jennifer McDonald. 2017. "License to Work: A National Study of Burdens from Occupational Licensing, 2nd Edition." The Institute for Justice.

Chappell, Allison. 2008. "Police academy training: comparing across curricula." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 31(1): 36-56.

Cheatham, Amelia and Lindsay Maizland, L. 2020, November 12. "How Police Compare in Different Democracies." Council on Foreign Relations.

COPS. 2020. "New Standards Improve the Quality and Accessibility of Law Enforcement Training." *Community Policing Dispatch.* Vol. 13, issue 4. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community-Oriented Policing.

Dekanoidze, Khatia and Khelashvili, Madlen. 2018. *Police education and training systems in the OSCE region.* Kyiv, Ukraine: Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe.

Devine, Patricia G., Forscher, Patrick S., Austin, Anthony J. and William T.L. Cox. 2012. "Long-term Reduction in Implicit Race Bias: A Prejudice Habit-breaking Intervention." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48(6), 1267-1278.

Dulin, Adam, Dulin, Linda, and Jairo Patino. 2020. "Transferring Police Academy Training to the Street: the Field Training Experience." *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 35: 432-442.

Engel, Robin S., Corsaro, Nicholas, McManus, Hannah D. and Gabrielle T. Isaza. 2020. "Examining the Impact of Integrating Communications, Assessment, and Tactics (ICAT) De-escalation Training for the Louisville Metro Police Department: Initial Findings." Report. International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) / University of Cincinnati (UC) Center for Police Research and Policy.

Follett, Tatiana, Hultin, Suzanne, Widgery, Amber, and Lesley Kennedy. 2020. Law Enforcement Certification and Discipline. National Conference of State Legislatures.

Goh, Li Sian. 2021. "Did de–escalation successfully reduce serious use of force in Camden County, New Jersey? A synthetic control analysis of force outcomes." *Criminology and Public Policy*. 1-35.

Haarr, Robin. 2005. "Factors Affecting the Decision of Police Recruits to 'Drop Out' of Police Work." *Police Quarterly*. 8(4), 411-430.

Hilal, Susan, Densley, James A., and David Squier Jones, D. 2017. "A signaling theory of law enforcement hiring." *Policing and Society* 27(5), 508-524.

Hinkel, Dan. 2017, March 14. "Chicago police recruits rarely flunk out, raising concerns about training." Chicago Tribune.

The Institute for Criminal Justice Training Reform. N.d. "State Law Enforcement Training Requirements." Trainingreform.org.

Jannetta, Jesse, Esthappan, Sino, Fontaine, Jocelyn, Lynch, Mathew, and Nancy La Vigne. 2019. Learning to Build Police-Community Trust: Implementation Assessment Findings from the Evaluation of the National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Kang, Sean H.K. 2016. "Spaced Repetition Promotes Efficient and Effective Learning: Policy Implications for Instruction." *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3(1): 12-19.

Kates, Graham. 2020, June 10. "Some U.S. police train for just a few weeks, in some countries they train for years." CBS News.

Knowles, Malcolm S. 1980. "The modern practice of adult education: Andragogy versus pedagogy." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge Adult Education.

Lewinski, William. 2019. "Block Training in the Academy – Efficiency and Effectiveness Are Not the Same." The Force Science Institute.

Lum, Cynthia, Koper, Christopher, Gill, Charlotte, Hibdon, Julie, Telep, Cody, and Laurie Robinson. 2016. "An Evidence Assessment of the Recommendations of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing — Implementation and Research Priorities." Fairfax, VA: Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, George Mason University. Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police.

McLean, Kyle, Scott E. Wolfe, Jeff Rojek, Geoffrey P. Alpert, and Michael R. Smith. 2020. "Randomized Controlled Trial of Social Interaction Police Training." *Criminology and Public Policy* 19: pp. 805-832.

McCraty, Rollin and Atkinson, Mike. 2012. "Resilience Training Program Reduces Physiological and Psychological Stress in Police Officers." *Global Advances in Health and Medicine* 1(5): 44-66.

Mugford, Rebecca, Corey, Shevaun, and Craig Bennell. 2013. "Improving police training from a cognitive load perspective." Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management 32(2): 312-337.

O'Neill, John, O'Neill, Dawn A., Weed, Katelyn, Hartman, Mark E., Spence, Willilam, and William J. Lewinski. 2018. "Police Academy Training, Performance, and Learning." *Behavior Analysis in Practice* 12: 353-372.

Owens, Emily, Weisburd, David, Amendola, Karen L., and Geoffrey P. Alpert. 2018. Can you build a better cop? Experimental evidence on supervision, training, and policing in the community. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 17(1), 41-87.

Police Executive Research Forum. 2015. "Critical Issues in Policing Series: Re-Engineering Training on Police Use of Force." Police Executive Research Forum.

Reaves, Brian. A. 2016. "State and Local Law Enforcement Training Academies, 2013." Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Semuels, Alana. 2020, November 20. "Society Is Paying the Price for America's Outdated Police Training Methods." Time.

Serhan, Yasmeen. 2020, June 10. "What the World Could Teach America About Policing." The Atlantic.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2020, September 10. "How to Become a Plumber, Pipefitter, or Steamfitter." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Vander Kooi, Gregory P. and Palmer, Louann B. 2014. "Problem-based Learning for Police Academy Students: Comparison of Those Receiving Such Instruction with Those in Traditional Programs." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 25(2): 175-195.

Violanti, John M. 1993. "What Does High Stress Police Training Teach Recruits? An Analysis of Coping." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 21: 411-417.

Wolfe, Scott, McLean, Kyle, Rojek, Jeff, and Geoffrey Alpert. (2019). Evaluating a long-term social interaction police training program: A randomized-controlled trial in the real world. Presentation at the ANNALS of the AAPSS Fatal Police Shootings Conference, February 7, The Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

Wolfe Scott, Rojek Jeff, McLean Kyle, and Geoffrey Alpert. 2020. Social Interaction Training to Reduce Police Use of Force. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.* 687(1):124-145.

About The Task Force

The independent **Task Force on Policing** was launched in November 2020 by the **Council on Criminal Justice**. Its mission is to identify the policies and practices most likely to reduce violent encounters between officers and the public and improve the fairness and effectiveness of American policing. The **11 Task Force members** represent a diverse range of perspectives and experience and include law enforcement leaders, civil rights advocates, researchers, a former mayor, and community members who have lost loved ones to police violence. The Council staffs the Task Force, and the **Crime Lab** at the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy is serving as its research partner.

The Task Force on Policing thanks Benjamin Feigenberg and Eleni Packis from the Crime Lab for their contributions to this brief.