

# Implicit Bias Training

POLICY ASSESSMENT MARCH 2021

Research indicates that all humans make automatic, unconscious associations about groups of people based on their culture, identity, upbringing, and larger societal biases. In the context of policing, such biases may influence officer behaviors, leading to racial disparities across a variety of policing activities, including stops, frisks, arrests, and uses of force. Implicit bias training is designed to help officers develop awareness of their personal implicit biases, understand how those biases can influence their behaviors, and devise ways to prevent biases from leading to disparate treatment of members of the public, particularly with regard to the use of force.

## SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

- + A growing number of police departments are offering implicit bias training, but evidence that it reduces biases in police activities and interactions with members of the public is lacking. The only study that rigorously examined the impact of implicit bias training on officer behaviors found no evidence that such training diminished racial disparities in policing.
- + Among the two evaluations of implicit bias training for police, researchers found that trainees had greater awareness of personal biases, a better understanding of the potential for implicit biases to yield disparate impacts, and improved knowledge of the situational factors that influence their decisions.
- + Implicit biases may affect decision-making at both the individual and organizational level. Addressing implicit bias through department culture may bolster or prove more effective than training.
- + Implicit bias training might pair well with [duty-to-intervene](#) and mandatory reporting policies, both of which are intended to address the underlying culture of policing.
- + Supervisors can play a critical role in minimizing biases that manifest in disparate policing by modeling inclusive and unbiased behaviors and holding officers accountable for demonstrating similar conduct. Policing leaders must be trained and supported to fulfill that role effectively.
- + Lowering the frequency of high-discretion police stops may be more likely to reduce biased policing than offering implicit bias training.
- + Additional research is needed to determine whether implicit bias trainings that differ in content and/or dosage may yield better outcomes. Such research should also explore the differential impact of models that use community members as co-instructors, as well as those that employ reconciliation processes.



## Current Practice and Research

### THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The concept of implicit bias has its roots in cognitive psychology and is based on findings that the human ability to recollect, encode, store, and retrieve data occurs unconsciously and is activated automatically and uncontrollably (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Neely, 1977). Biases are embedded in these unconscious responses, as evidenced by the well-known Implicit Association Test (IAT), which reveals biases through rapid-word associations (Greenwald et al., 1998). These implicit biases, which pertain to race and gender, among other identifying characteristics, are correlated with explicit measures of bias (Nosek, 2005) and discriminatory behaviors (Jost et al., 2009; Oswald et al., 2013; Kurdi et al., 2019).

### IMPLICIT BIAS TRAINING IN PRACTICE

In recent years the notion that implicit biases among officers contribute to racial disparities in police stops, searches, frisks, uses of force, and arrests has gained prominence, leading to the proliferation of implicit bias training in law enforcement agencies. According to a 2019 survey of 150 large police departments, 69% offered some form of implicit bias training (CBS, 2019).

Implicit bias training is distinctly different from most other forms of police training in that it aims to change officers' behaviors by altering their attitudes and thinking patterns, rather than focusing on tactics and processes. Implicit bias training explains that everyone has implicit biases; illustrates how such biases manifest in policing; describes how biases affect outcomes for community members, officers, and agencies; and teaches skills that help officers recognize their biases and alter their reactions. The training is intended to teach officers to slow down, check their personal biases and assumptions, and conduct themselves in an equitable and impartial manner. Some forms of implicit bias training also encourage officers to make connections with members of identity groups other than their own as a means of negating stereotypes that may be ingrained and may fuel biased interactions. Studies indicate that police implicit bias training is typically delivered in a classroom-based environment, is of limited duration (typically eight hours), and is presented during a one-time event with no booster or follow-up trainings (Worden et al., 2020; Jannetta et al., 2019).

In terms of content, there is some controversy over the value of implicit bias training. Some critics question whether implicit bias training **gives "bad actors" a pass** – "everyone has implicit biases, so it's fine if you have them—you are still a good person" – rather than **addressing explicit biases head on**. The counterargument is that naming explicit biases will prompt defensiveness and lead some share of officers – arguably those who could most benefit from the training – to shut down (Bagenstos, 2018). Worse yet, some scholars have observed that conscious efforts to control implicit biases may actually increase biased judgments (MacRae et al., 1994).

Questions also persist about the degree to which implicit bias training can influence officer behaviors in the field, given that such biases are reactive and based on strong mental associations that are ingrained over time and reinforced by societal biases and environmental and contextual factors (Spencer et al., 2016). Some academics have questioned whether it would be more impactful to reduce the volume of high-discretion police stops – those that are officer-initiated, such as broken tail light stops and pedestrian stops and frisks – as a means of reducing biased policing (see, for example, Feigenberg and Miller, 2021).

Others suggest that it would be more effective to focus on changing behavioral norms rather than seeking to diminish underlying biases or enhance awareness of them (Swencionis and Goff, 2018). This suggests that implicit bias training might pair well with **duty-to-intervene** and mandatory reporting policies, both of which, when implemented alongside accountability measures, underscore the expectation that wrongdoers –



including those who police in a biased manner – will not be tolerated. However, more research is needed to assess whether this type of paired response is effective.

In some cases, implicit bias training is coupled with reconciliation practices, creating opportunities for police to become familiar with, recognize, and apologize on the part of the agency and jurisdiction for past harms, especially the biased treatment of Black people and other marginalized populations (e.g. the LGBTQIA community) (Mentel, Z., 2012; Jannetta et al., 2019; Kuhn and Lurie, 2018). This process involves excavating the history of abusive policing practices toward people of color, from their roots in slavery and evolution into Jim Crow laws, and examining more recent criminal justice practices that are oppressive to marginalized populations. One dimension of the work involves recognition by police that some members of the public may hold their own implicit biases about police based upon this history. While research has documented the ability of reconciliation processes to mend deep-seated wounds inflicted by members of dominant groups on subjugated populations (see Gibson, 2004), no research has identified the degree to which they may bolster police implicit bias trainings and promote less disparate policing practices.

## RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Despite the growth and prevalence of police implicit bias training, strong evaluations on its effectiveness are scarce (Smith, 2015). One rigorous study of the New York Police Department examined the impact of the Fair and Impartial Policing training on police activities and interactions with members of the public (Worden et al., 2020). The curriculum consisted of an eight-hour training divided over six modules, which together are designed to heighten participants' awareness of their biases and equip them with tools to manage them in order to neutralize their effects. This curriculum was delivered to over 15,000 officers at randomized, pre-specified points in time. Pre- and post-training surveys of participants detected modest and short-term effects on officers' recognition of personal biases. But researchers found no correlation between the training and changes in racial disparities in stops; frisks, searches and use of force during stops; arrests; use of force in arrests; summonses, or citizen complaints.

Other research has been confined solely to the question of whether officers trained in implicit bias expressed an understanding and increased awareness of the concept of biases and the way they can influence decision-making. For example, evaluators conducted surveys prior to and following an eight-hour, classroom-based implicit bias training in the six police departments involved in a pilot program conducted by the [National Initiative for Building Community Trust and Justice](#) (Jannetta et al., 2019). Researchers found that immediately following the training, officers had greater understanding of the potential for implicit biases to yield disparate impacts, as well as an improved knowledge of the situational factors that influence their decisions. The evaluation did not include an examination of the degree to which such understanding influenced officer behaviors in the field.

Evaluations of implicit bias training in non-policing contexts can be helpful in understanding the potential effectiveness of implicit bias training in police departments. Research has found that one-time interventions can result in short-term reductions in implicit biases, but those reductions do not persist over time (Lai et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2016). Evidence from social psychological research on implicit bias training in general (not specific to policing) suggests that longer-duration and more intensive interventions, including those focused on repeated practice, may prove more effective (Devine et al., 2012). In addition, a randomized controlled trial of university faculty trained in gender bias awareness found that treatment group members were more likely to report taking actions to promote gender equity following the training (Carnes et al., 2015).



## Critical Policy Elements

- + The research on implicit bias training is thin. More rigorous studies are needed, particularly those that examine both changes in attitudes, motivations, and intentions as well as officer behaviors in the field.
- + The goals of implicit bias training might be better achieved through de-escalation training and trainings that teach procedural justice principles, such as treating people neutrally and equitably.
- + Addressing departmental culture and behavioral norms may have greater impact on reducing biased officer behaviors than training on implicit biases. Agencies that decide to invest in implicit bias training should also seek to address dominant cultural norms that perpetuate biases of all kinds.
- + Supervisors play an important role in setting departmental norms; addressing inequitable policing practices through focused supervisory oversight could help reduce racial biases in policing (Spencer et al., 2019).
- + Reducing the volume of proactive police stops, frisks, and searches of community members is another means of potentially reducing racial biases in policing, but more research is needed.
- + Future research should explore the degree to which reconciliation processes that help officers understand the history of harm that has shaped relationships between police and Black and Brown communities, along with other marginalized populations, reduce racially disparate policing.

## Expected Impacts

### PREVENTING MISUSE OF FORCE

Research has not documented any impact of implicit bias training on use of force. To the extent that the training leads officers to slow down and reconsider their responses to members of the public in real time, misuse of force could be reduced.

### ENHANCING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Implicit bias training on its own is unlikely to enhance an agency's transparency or accountability.

### STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY TRUST

Agencies that invest in implicit bias training that includes reconciliation conversations may strengthen community trust by repairing relationships with communities of color.

### REDUCING RACIAL DISPARITIES

Implicit bias training is specifically designed to reduce the racially disparate treatment of members of the public by police, but there is no evidence that such training is effective.

### ENSURING OFFICER SAFETY

If implicit bias training leads officers to refrain from misuse of force, officer and community member safety will be enhanced.

### PROMOTING PUBLIC SAFETY

Public safety may be improved if implicit bias training combined with complementary reconciliation practices builds trust in communities experiencing high volumes of crime. Under such a scenario, residents would be more likely to report crimes they witness and experience, cooperate in investigations, and partner in crime-prevention measures.



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## 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.

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