



Peace Officers

Improving community perspectives about law enforcement

Agency: Ashland (OR) Police Department

Project Duration:
04/09/19–06/20/19

Pracademic*: Chief Tighe O'Meara

Context

Police officers may evoke a sense of law and order, but they may also be viewed by some as “outsiders” rather than members of the community. This sense of separation can interfere with efforts to make communities safe, but it also may have more insidious consequences by implying an adversarial relationship rather than a helpful one.

Key Finding

Responses from the community sample showed that fewer people thought that the community supports the police, and fewer people thought that community trust in the police could be increased, after the “Peace Officer” decals were applied.

*BetaGov provides ongoing training to agency personnel to become research-savvy “Pracademics” who can lead trials.

Background

Efforts to counter negative perceptions of law enforcement agencies are ongoing using a variety of strategies. One option targets changing opinions of both the community and police officers themselves, by evoking a sense of law enforcement officers as guardians who protect and support the community. A subtle method for changing how officers are viewed is adding the term “Peace Officer” to mentions of “Police Officer.”

The Ashland Police Department staff view relationship-building as a core function of a police officer. However, the department recognizes that relationships with the public are often strained by local, state, and national events. In an ongoing effort to build and maintain positive relationships with the community and to improve community perspectives on law enforcement, the department tested new “Peace Officer” decals placed on patrol vehicles. The goal of applying these decals was to identify police officers as a friendly force and to remind the public that the officers are there to keep them safe.

Design

APD used a pre-post survey design to study the effectiveness of “Peace Officer” decals displayed on police vehicles for improving community members’ perceptions of police. Ten questions addressed police-community relations using a 5-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

Survey participants were asked to complete the Time 1 survey before the decals were applied and the Time 2 survey two months after. Nine

APD cruiser vehicles and one motorcycle had the decals applied to ensure that the term “Peace Officer” was clearly visible.

Lessons Learned

Announcements at community events, flyers, and information provided through the media asked community members and students to provide their perspectives about the police and community relations. APD staff were asked by leadership to complete the surveys as well. Time 1 surveys were completed by 332 community members, 18 police staff, and 10 students; Time 2 surveys were completed by 128 community members, 21 staff, and 1 student. The share of community respondents who think that the community supports the police decreased from Time 1 to Time 2, as did the share who think that community trust can be increased. Police-staff surveys show no changes from Time 1 to Time 2. Only one student completed the Time 2 survey, so Time 1 and Time 2 results were not compared.

Next Steps

This was a first effort to strengthen relationships between the police department and the community. The “Peace Officer” decals don’t appear to have had a meaningful effect on any of the surveyed groups; however, it may be that the effect of the decals on community perspectives will build over time. Generally, voluntary surveys attract those at either end of the satisfaction scale, and the results may be evidence of this effect. The large drop in Time 2 community-survey responses also affects the confidence in those results.

Why BetaGov Spark?

Sometimes a rigorous trial of an innovative idea just isn’t possible, but with a Spark project a practitioner can learn important information about the idea, the agency, and the sample. What’s more, a positive signal may inform a future randomized controlled trial and more definitive results. Spark projects meet Pracademics where they are comfortable—giving them the opportunity to learn about research and apply that learning to internal research projects.