



Community Perceptions of Officers' Appearance

Uniform and other appearance components for increasing community support

Agency: Keizer (OR) Police Department

Trial Duration: 05/25/19–08/19/19

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Context

Law-enforcement-officer appearance may influence how the community perceives officers and their ability to maintain peace in the community. Gathering input from community members may help to guide department dress code and improve community interaction and public safety.

Key Finding

Compared with the standard uniform, the addition of certain uniform components worsened respondents' perceptions of the officer's professionalism, approachability, and reliability. Load-bearing vests (LBV) had mixed results. Perceptions of professionalism, approachability, and reliability worsened when facial hair was included.

*BetaGov trains agency personnel to become research-savvy "Pracademics" who lead trials.

Background

Although research generally finds that uniformed police officers are associated with positive public perceptions including safety, competence, reliability, intelligence, and helpfulness, little research has addressed which components of an officer's appearance influence community perceptions. In previous studies, police officers were perceived as more competent, reliable, intelligent, and helpful in images showing them in full uniforms as compared to images of them in civilian attire. They were also perceived less favorably when depicted on a bicycle or on foot than when in a police vehicle. Police in high-visibility vests evoked positive perceptions, whereas officers wearing black gloves, long-stick batons, or sunglasses evoked negative perceptions. Officers wearing load-bearing vests (LBV) evoked both positive and negative perceptions.

In an effort to build and strengthen relationships with the community, the Keizer Police Department launched a project to gather community perspectives on officer appearance, including the potential use of LBV.

Trial Design

Community members were invited to complete a survey to gather their perspectives on officer-appearance components. Photos of the same male officer in different uniform components and different physical characteristics such as facial hair and tattoos were shown in a randomized order to control for potential order effects. Respondents were asked to rate each image individually on professionalism, approachability, and reliability. Announcements of the project and

a link to the survey were made at community meetings with a police presence and in local media sources. The survey was open for three months and all surveys that were at least 50% complete were used in analyses.

Results

Surveys were submitted by 900 respondents. Majorities of respondents were between 18 and 50 years old (65%), female (62%), and white (87%). In analyses of the total sample that had completed at least 50% of requested responses, compared with a standard uniform, perceptions of the officer's professionalism worsened, on average, when he also wore a hat, gloves, or shorts, or had a tattoo.

Perceptions of approachability worsened when the officer wore sunglasses, gloves, shorts, or had a tattoo (either colorful or black). This was also true for two of three versions of the LBV, however, with the vest pictured in center above, approachability was not affected. Perceptions of reliability worsened when the officer wore sunglasses, gloves, or shorts, or had a tattoo.

Additional analyses addressed subgroups on the basis of homeownership, residential zip code, and age. Some subgroup results differed from the general sample results, typically in the direction of worse perceptions of all three outcomes (professionalism, approachability, and reliability). Shorts, compared to the baseline uniform, worsened the perception of the officer's professionalism, approachability, and reliability for all subgroups. Only one increase in the perception of approachability was found, for colored tattoos for the 18–30 age subgroup.

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