

“Peace Officer” Decals

Testing community and officer perceptions about “Peace Officer” decals on patrol cars

Agency: Richland County (SC) Sheriff’s Department

Trial Duration: 01/31/18–04/30/18

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Context

Efforts to maintain and strengthen relationships between law enforcement and the community are essential to ensure public safety and effective policing. Law enforcement officials and communities they serve rely on each other to address and reduce crime and find solutions to neighborhood problems.

Key Finding

Citizens in both the intervention and control areas were likely exposed to the trial intervention, limiting the ability to interpret findings. Both groups, however, reported high levels of satisfaction with relations between the Sheriff’s Department and the community, and the roles of each.

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Background

Negative perceptions of law enforcement agencies may create a separation between law enforcement officials and the community, interfering with efforts to maintain positive relationships and ensure public safety. Using the term “peace officer” in lieu of “police officer” is one strategy that might emphasize the role of officers as guardians rather than warriors. This perspective might strengthen relationships between law enforcement agencies and citizens.

Trial Design

The Richland County Sheriff’s Department pilot tested the use of “Peace Officer” decals for improving perspectives about police. Six districts were matched by community similarities and residents’ socioeconomic status and each district pair was randomly assigned such that patrol vehicles in the intervention district received “Peace Officer” decals, whereas patrol vehicles in the control district received no decals. An internet survey collected perspectives about law enforcement for three months and ensured response anonymity and confidentiality. Staff were encouraged during staffing meetings to complete the survey, whereas community members were invited to complete the surveys on social media notices, a live national television program (*Live PD*), and at community events. The surveys collected residential zip codes to sort responses by districts.

Results

Surveys were completed by Sheriff’s Department staff (n=80), and results indicated perceptions of good relationships between the department and the community. Analysis of community surveys (intervention=64; control=67) found a difference across the conditions for one item; “Do you think people can change?” (endorse or strongly endorse: intervention=88%, control=67%, p<0.05). A second item, “I prefer the identity for the Sheriff’s Department as ‘guardians’ rather than ‘warriors’” was endorsed or strongly endorsed by 72% of the intervention group, and 55% of the control group (not statistically significant).

Survey results were very supportive of the Sheriff’s Department in both conditions, and no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups. However, these results are confounded by the failure to maintain the condition assignments. That is, the trial was intended to reflect exposure to the decals in the intervention group compared with the control group not exposed to the decals. Because of the promotion of the decals, it is likely that all respondents, regardless of district or assigned condition, were exposed to the decals through community announcements and social media. 76 surveys were completed by respondents living outside the participating districts due to the survey website being announced on the national television show *Live PD*.

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