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Efforts to Improve Community-Police Relations

Input from community members and policing staff

Agency: Foster City (CA) Police Department

Project Duration: 09/24/20–02/05/22

Pracademic*:
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Context

Building and strengthening ties between the community and police officers may increase community harmony and safety. A strategy to introduce a different means of identifying officers was tested by surveying both the community and officers.

Key Finding

Assessing community and police perspectives on a range of topics before and after adding “Peace Officer” decals to police vehicles found little change in community and police survey responses; however, responses were generally positive from both groups.

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

Background

Many law-enforcement agencies recognize the need to engage those they serve in order to increase community safety and satisfaction. Efforts to portray law-enforcement officers as part of the community, working as “guardians” rather than “warriors,” has been one strategy to strengthen community-police relationships. Having the support of the community enables law-enforcement officers to perform their jobs better. Many police agencies are working to improve perspectives of both the community and the police officers themselves by changing the term “police officers” to “peace officers.”

Design

The Foster City Police Department tested the use of new “Peace Officer” decals affixed on patrol vehicles as a way to identify police officers as a friendly force acting in the community’s interest.

A 10-item community survey was used to capture perspectives on the police and community both before (Time 1) and after (Time 2) the decals were applied. Examples include: “The community is generally very supportive of the Foster City Police Department” and “I believe the Foster City Police Department addresses public safety issues responsibly.” To address current events, additional items assessing police COVID-pandemic response, civil unrest, and other topics were added to the police-officer survey and the Time 2 community survey. Invitations to complete surveys were posted on the police-department website, printed on flyers given at community events, and included in announcements made to police staff. Dedicated links to the online surveys were provided to each group. Responses were compared across time to see if perspectives changed after the decals were applied.

Lessons Learned

Time 1 surveys were completed by 184 community members and 24 police staff. Time 2 surveys were completed by 57 community members and 27 police staff. No statistical analysis was conducted due to the imbalance in the number of responses by timepoint.

Two-thirds of the community sample reported seeing the “Peace Officer” decals at Time 2, with over 45% of respondents agreeing that the decals should be kept on police cars, 33% neutral on this issue, and 19% disagreeing. The police group reported less favorable views of the decals, with 40% believing they should be on police cars, 18% neutral, and 37% disagreeing with this plan. Community members generally reported positive views on police at both timepoints, but some improved from Time 1 to Time 2. For example, “I have enjoyed a good relationship with the Foster City Police Department” rose from 65% to 76%. At Time 1, 36% agreed with “The Foster City Police Department needs to devote more attention to community relationships,” compared with 21% at Time 2, suggesting that community relationship building may have improved between the survey timepoints.

Next Steps

This was a first step in efforts to build and strengthen community-police relationships using a visual-reinforcement strategy. Although community respondents’ perspectives on police did not improve for all items, some positive changes were documented. As this trial occurred during a period of disruption, it would be helpful to conduct a similar trial in the near future to build on these findings.

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.