BETAGOV spark

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Peace Officer Decals for Police Vehicles

Improving community relations

Agency: Gonzales (CA) Police Department

Project Duration: 02/18/19–10/31/19

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Context
Efforts to build and strengthen community-police relationships may benefit from efforts to improve the perception of police as being helpful and sincere. "Peace Officer" decals placed on patrol vehicles may be a first step to evoke positive community perspectives about law-enforcement officers.

Key Finding
Decals did not significantly change perspectives about the police and community-police relationships.

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

Background

Nationwide, police departments are identifying strategies to lower crime rates and increase public safety. At times, however, policing is viewed negatively and additional efforts must focus on building and maintaining positive relationships with the community. Having the support of the community increases the ability of law-enforcement officers to do their jobs. Many police departments are working to improve perspectives of both the community and the police officers themselves by presenting law-enforcement officers as protectors working to keep communities peaceful and safe.

Design

The Gonzales Police Department tested new "Peace Officer" decals placed on six patrol vehicles as a way to suggest a positive change in the law-enforcement mission. The aim of using "Peace Officer" decals is to identify police officers as a friendly force acting in the community's interest.

A 10-item survey was used to capture perspectives about the police department both before (Time 1) and after the decals were applied (Time 2). Links to the surveys were provided to community members, students, and police staff. Responses were compared across time to see if perspectives changed after the decals were applied. Invitations to complete surveys were available on the department website, in flyers passed out at community events, from school resource officers, and in announcements made to police staff.

Lessons Learned

Time 1 surveys were completed by 157 community members, 32 students, and 11 police staff. Time 2 surveys were completed by 127, 8, and 8 community members, students, and police staff, respectively. A little over half the community sample and less than half the student sample reported seeing the "Peace Officer" decals at Time 2. All police staff saw the decals. Although some improvements in the perspectives about police were documented, none of the changes were statistically significant. Community members generally reported positive perspectives about police, and students were generally less favorable (see figure below). Similarly, the community was supportive of the decals, whereas students and police staff were neutral.

Next Steps

This was a first step in efforts to build and strengthen community-police relationships. Although perspectives about police did not change significantly for any of the three groups surveyed, it may be that positive change will be slow, and additional strategies may help to build on the current findings.

Positive responses to "The community/students are supportive of the police" (Agree/Strongly agree)
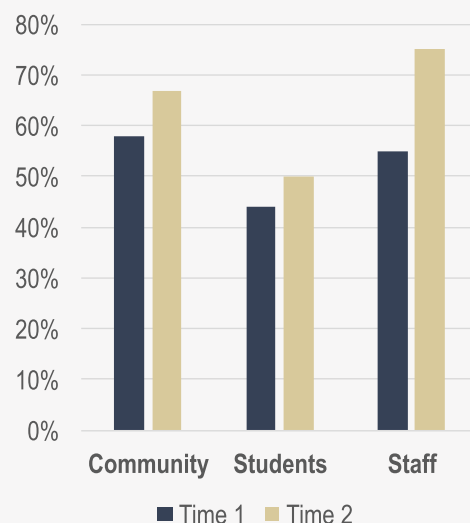
Why BetaGov Spark?

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.