

## Law Enforcement De-escalation Training: A Summary of Research and a Scan of Practice

### **National Developments**

The *Law Enforcement De-escalation Training Act*, passed in December 2022, creates a new federal funding stream to support training for law enforcement officers on de-escalation. The Act requires the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to certify existing de-escalation training programs. This brief is intended to assist law enforcement agencies seeking guidance on de-escalation training in light of this new Act.

While an agreed-upon definition for de-escalation in policing remains elusive, de-escalation typically refers to a range of verbal and tactical skills used to slow down the sequence of events during police-citizen encounters, enhance situational awareness, conduct proper risk and response assessments, and allow for better decision-making to reduce the likelihood that a situation will escalate into a physical confrontation or injury and to ensure the safest possible outcomes.<sup>1</sup> De-escalation tactics are thought to provide officers with options to resolve confrontational situations with members of the public using lesser or no force at all.

### **What We Know from Research**

To date, only a handful of studies have examined the impacts of de-escalation training for police and even fewer have attempted to measure officer behavior. This brief focuses on classroom-based training programs; training programs focused on applied skill practice (e.g., VirTra, MILO) are not included.

A literature review resulted in 10<sup>2</sup> studies related to the following de-escalation training programs. (See the References section at the end for full citations.)

- Verbal Judo Institute: *Verbal Judo*
  1. Giacomantonio, Goodwin, and Carmichael (2019)
- Police Executive Research Forum: *Integrating Assessment, Communications, and Tactics* (ICAT)
  2. Isaza, McManus, Engel, & Corsaro (2019)
  3. Engel, Corsaro, Isaza, & McManus (2020)

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (2019). *Law Enforcement Best Practices: Lessons Learned from the Field*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

<sup>2</sup> Note that a research team from Arizona State University evaluated a customized de-escalation training program implemented in the Tempe Police Department as part of a Smart Policing Initiative grant. They published two articles that document the findings of the evaluation, but they are not included in this scan because they are based on a customized training that is not offered to outside agencies and officers. See <https://www.smart-policing.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Tempe%20SPI%20Final%20Report%2012-21.pdf> for the full study.

4. Engel, Isaza, Motz, & Corsaro (2021)
5. Goh (2021)
6. Engel, Corsaro, Isaza, & McManus (2022)
7. Engel, Isaza, Motz, & McManus, (2022)
- Polis Solutions: *Tact, Tactics, and Trust* (T3)
  8. McLean, Wolfe, Rojek, Alpert, & Smith (2020)
  9. Wolfe, Rojek, McLean & Alpert (2020)
- Law Enforcement Innovation Center: *Applied De-escalation Tactics* (instructor-level)
  10. Isaza, Engel, & Motz (2021)

Highlights from the research include:

- Only one study of de-escalation training found significant training impacts on officer behaviors in the field. A recent randomized control trial evaluation of the Police Executive Research Forum's *Integrating Communication, Assessment, and Tactics* (ICAT) de-escalation training supplied the first evidence that de-escalation training can reduce use of force. The evaluation of ICAT training with the Louisville Metro Police Department stands as the only peer-reviewed, published study to date that has **demonstrated statistically significant reductions in police use of force (-28%), citizen injuries (-26%), and officer injuries (-36%) directly associated with the ICAT training (Engel et al, 2020)**. Additional research is underway to see if these same study results can be replicated in other jurisdictions.
- Additional studies demonstrate the impact of ICAT training on officer attitudes and self-reported skill use in a direction amenable to de-escalation principles.
- A retrospective study comparing the Camden County Police Department (CCPD) to 36 other large regional police departments in New Jersey demonstrated a 40% reduction in use of force incidents at CCPD after implementing ICAT; this same reduction in use of force was not demonstrated by any other department in New Jersey.
- In contrast, evaluations examining officer behavior before and after T3 training resulted in no significant changes in uses of force in the field across two sites (Fayetteville, North Carolina and Tucson, Arizona Police Departments).
- Researchers failed to find discernable differences in reported uses of force between trained and untrained officers after the implementation of customized de-escalation training in Tempe, Arizona. However, the study did identify minor differences in trained officers' actions during interactions with citizens based on coded body-worn camera footage.
- The single evaluation of *Verbal Judo* training did not examine officer behavior in the field but found that 5 of 15 coded de-escalation behaviors during simulation practice changed in the expected directions.

- A study of *Applied De-escalation Tactics* did not analyze officer behavior but demonstrated positive shifts in measured officer attitudes and perceptions immediately after training.

### **Training Elements to Consider**

Most training programs have not yet been subject to scientific evaluation. The following lists, while not exhaustive, identify some established elements considered to be effective and ineffective that can assist law enforcement agencies considering revisions to de-escalation training programs or new de-escalation training programs.

#### *Effective Training Elements*

- Detailed curriculum with specific learning objectives
- Learning concepts including officer decision-making, understanding crisis events, and effective communication
- Scenario-based training emphasizing officer skill practice
- Other skill-based practice such as the use of virtual reality training or in-class practice
- All practice coupled with individualized instructor feedback
- Training programs that recommend and provide resources for refresher/re-certification training

#### *Ineffective Training Elements*

- Conducted entirely online
- Short duration (less than 8 hours)
- Lecture-only (no interactive components)
- No skill practice with individualized instructor feedback
- Instructors that are not well-versed in the topic or with little practical experience in law enforcement

### **Scan of National Practice**

The Knowledge Lab conducted a national scan to identify existing de-escalation training programs for law enforcement that are offered by public or private vendors, where agencies may pay or use grant funds to receive training services.<sup>3</sup> De-escalation training programs were identified through 1) the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office regional de-escalation training centers and 2) a snowball/convenience sampling technique and using specific keyword searches on

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<sup>3</sup> Note that training programs that are internally developed and administered in-house by law enforcement agencies are not included.

Google.<sup>4</sup> The two approaches resulted in the identification of 57 unique de-escalation training programs (see Table 1).

The content, duration, and delivery of de-escalation training vary significantly across law enforcement-focused programs in the US. Similarities of program elements include: video-based instruction, formal and informal lectures with accompanying PowerPoint presentations, and scenario-based instruction. Common conceptual areas often include use of force (current events, context of critical incidents, statistics), emphasis on community member *and* officer safety, effective communication, officer decision-making, the recognition of potential crisis situations/persons experiencing crisis, and recognition of the impact of officer decision-making in crisis situations. Some programs also emphasize tactics, including tactical positioning, distance, and cover.

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<sup>4</sup> Key words included: "de-escalation training programs for police", "law enforcement de-escalation tactics training", "conflict management training de-escalation police", "verbal defusion training police", and "tactical defusion police training."

## References

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