



Improving Police-Minority Relations: The Out-of-Car Experience

[Richard R. Johnson, Ph.D.](#)

January, 2017

In the wake of a significant increase in officer deaths from violent attacks and unceasing criticism by media outlets, political figures and other groups in 2016, citizen satisfaction and confidence in the police in America has actually rebounded from a pattern of decline that has been going on since the early 1970s. In 1968, Gallup Poll data showed 78% of Americans had “a great deal” of confidence and satisfaction with their local police. Since that year, confidence and satisfaction in the police has declined, bottoming out at 47% satisfaction in 2015. **In the latter half of 2016, however, citizen satisfaction and confidence in the police rebounded, with 76% of Americans indicating that they had “a great deal” of confidence in the police as of October, 2016.**¹

A national disconnect continues to exist, however, between the law enforcement profession and members of racial and ethnic minority groups. The recent Gallup poll data continues to reveal that African-Americans and Hispanics express less satisfaction or confidence in the police than do Whites. Nationwide, non-whites are still 20% to 40% less likely than whites to have confidence in the police. In fact, **less than 50% of African-Americans surveyed by Gallup in 2016 had confidence that police officers would treat them fairly.**²

Think about that. One out of every two African-Americans has a mistrust of law enforcement. **This is a national problem in law enforcement that needs to be addressed. But how do we address it?**

The most common recommendations from civil rights leaders, politicians, and other policy makers is multicultural training for law enforcement officers. In fact, it was a major recommendation in the *Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing*. In this report, under Pillar Five – Training and Education, the Task Force stated that police officer training should include, “implicit bias, fair and impartial policing, historical trauma, and other topics that address capacity to build trust and legitimacy in diverse communities.”³ Many individual states and communities have recently formed commissions that have made similar recommendations.

Is there research evidence that requiring officers to go through multicultural or implicit bias training has any effect on the attitudes and behaviors of officers, or the attitudes and behaviors of citizens? Is there any evidence that these things will “improve understanding and effectiveness in dealing with all communities” as the President’s Task Force has claimed?⁴ After all, similar recommendations have been made by many commissions on law enforcement over the last half century, yet relations between the law enforcement profession and minority communities, especially the African-American community, still remain strained.

Multicultural Awareness Training

The underlying theory behind multicultural awareness training (also known as cultural diversity training) is that if law enforcement officers have greater knowledge of the experiences, histories, and cultural norms of groups other than white males of European descent, they will become “enlightened,” more sensitive to the experiences and cultural norms of others, hold fewer prejudiced opinions, and behave in a less prejudicial manner toward citizens they encounter that are not white males of European descent.⁵ These types of training experiences often involve a combination of video clips, lectures, discussions, and field trips that seek to educate officers. More recently, training in “implicit bias” has arisen. This training informs officers about the prevalence of their unconscious biases and their unconscious racist actions.⁶

Unfortunately, even though such training has been going on for decades, the published research provides no evidence that this sort of training has any effect on attitudes or behaviors of the attendees. The majority of the existing research on police multicultural training simply discusses the amount or type of training conducted, or how the training was perceived by the officers.⁷ Mostly this training is perceived negatively by law enforcement officers and recruits, even among officers who are members of racial minority groups.⁸ Only three studies could be found that examined the effects of this sort of training on officer prejudicial attitudes.

The first study, conducted in 1975 in three police academy classes of the Detroit Police Department, involved diversity training in which white and African-American recruits discussed problems associated with human relationships and responded to role-play scenarios regarding issues of racial diversity.⁹ Compared to control groups of academy cadets who did not receive the training, white recruits who completed the training exhibited more prejudiced attitudes toward African-Americans, but African-American recruits developed more positive attitudes toward whites. More recently, a 2013 study was conducted among police academy recruits in Illinois who completed a block of training on multicultural diversity.¹⁰ Attitude surveys of the recruits before and after the training revealed that the training had no influence on the racial attitudes of the recruits. After learning the results of the study, this police academy changed their multicultural diversity training curriculum, but a second study still found that the new training still had no influence on recruit racial attitudes.¹¹ While the research is limited to only three studies, all three of these studies agree that police multicultural diversity training has no positive influence on officer attitudes.

These findings are also consistent with the research on multicultural training more broadly. One article reviewed 13 studies that evaluated the influence of multicultural education on attitudes among grade school students. Eight of the studies (62%) showed the education had no influence

at all on student racial attitudes, and the remaining five only showed limited results, such as only improving attitudes about Asians or Jewish persons, but not African-American or Hispanics.¹² Even among the studies showing limited results, surveys 6 months after the program showed the students' attitudes had returned to the same levels as before the training. Many more recent studies continue to demonstrate the same results, that multicultural training has no impact on attitudes or behavior.¹³ **It is safe to say that there is no evidence that traditional multicultural training has any significant positive influence on attitudes or behavior.**

What Actually Breaks Down Racial Barriers?

Princeton University Psychologist Elizabeth Paluck has recommended that multicultural education and training be dropped as the method for reducing prejudice, and replaced with programs that foster intergroup contact. Her research has revealed that when people of different backgrounds (be it a difference in race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.) are required to work cooperatively on a project, or engage in leisure activities together, the biased attitudes of all involved decline. Furthermore, the decline remains consistent for long periods after the experience.¹⁴

Dr. Paluck and her team of researchers at Princeton University have conducted numerous experiments in which research subjects of various races are brought together in small groups and given tasks to work on as a group. These tasks, ranging from party games to sports to complex puzzles, all require the team members to cooperate with one another in order to successfully complete the task. Each of the participants in these experiments also consented to complete surveys on their conscious racial biases before the experiments. After participating in many hours of these tasks, these research subjects were tested again about their conscious racial biases. Time after time, in experiment after experiment, it has been revealed that many months after the experiment, participants still show reduced levels of racial animus against people of other races. They also tend to reveal greater racial diversity among their actual friends and friends on Facebook. Some studies even revealed physiological differences, such a lower heart and respiration rate, when around people of other races after the experiments.

In fact, psychologists Thomas Pettigrew of the University of California, and Linda Tropp of Boston College, examined 515 separate research studies on inter-group contact experiments and found overwhelming support for the argument that these experiences consistently reduce prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, with the effects lasting for months or years.¹⁵ **This evidence clearly reveals that situations that cause people of differing groups – blacks and whites, men and women, gay and straight – to cooperatively work together on a common cause, decreases biased attitudes between members of these groups.** As people spend quality time with members of different groups, they begin to develop empathy toward one another and they are confronted with experiences that contradict some of the false stereotypes they may have been holding.

Out-of-Car Experiences

These research studies have consistently revealed effectiveness in helping reduce biases between members of different groups, so it makes sense that law enforcement officers and minority citizens interacting in partnership to solve a specific problem can reduce bias and animosity on both sides.

Consider, for example, community meetings with African-American residents of a particular apartment complex dealing with a crime problem where the meetings involve breaking into groups consisting of 4-8 citizens and one officer per group, for the purposes of collaboratively developing a response to the crime problem. Based on the research discussed above, it is likely that such an activity requiring officers and citizens to work together will see some preconceived prejudices reduced on both sides. The officers will likely develop a greater understanding of the citizens, and the citizens will develop a greater appreciation for the officers. In fact, research has revealed this type of activity actually does increase citizen satisfaction with the police.

One study, conducted in three neighborhoods in Baltimore, involved officers conducting targeted community problem-solving meetings with neighborhood residents to address crime and disorder. This study surveyed neighborhood residents before these meetings occurred, and then again six months after the meets started occurring. The study revealed that citizen fear of crime had decreased, and citizen satisfaction with the police had increased, after these working meetings began occurring between officers and citizens.¹⁶ Similarly, another study within several neighborhoods of Chicago found that when these types of collaborative community meetings took place, overall citizen satisfaction with the police increased within these neighborhoods.¹⁷

There is extensive evidence that when officers get out of their patrol cars and intentionally focus on getting to know minority citizens on their beats, these informal interactions can also reduce biases for both the officers and the citizens. A review of 13 studies of foot patrols in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia found in every case that foot patrols reduced fear of crime and increased satisfaction with the police among the residents in the neighborhoods where the foot patrols were deployed.¹⁸

Likewise, another article reviewed 6 studies where patrol officers were required to engage in intentional, non-enforcement contact with average citizens on their beat. While conducting routine motor patrol, officers were required to stop during their shifts to meet residents at their homes, or business people at their stores or offices. During these contacts the officers were expected to introduce themselves, and say the purpose of the visit was simply to get acquainted or learn whether there were any problems in the area the citizen felt the police should know about. In all 6 studies, these types of contacts increased overall citizen satisfaction with the police among the residents of the neighborhoods targeted.¹⁹ The Princeton University research on breaking down racial and other barriers suggests that when officers are out of their cars, experiencing life with the people of color in their beats on a daily basis, it will help break down cultural barriers between the police and African-American and Hispanic communities.

Conclusion

The research evidence suggests that multicultural awareness or diversity training generally has no lasting impact on people's racial attitudes. The research evidence is clear that biases and stereotypes are reduced in people when they spend quality time cooperating on a project with people of different groups. **There is also substantial evidence that when police officers work closely with citizens on their beat in community problem-solving meetings, and through informal contacts with average citizens on the beat, overall citizen satisfaction with the police increases. Therefore, perhaps the best way to improve police-minority relations is not to send**

officers to multicultural or implicit bias training, but rather to send them out to engage in activities that bring them into close contact with average citizens in neighborhoods populated by members of racial minority groups. The available research evidence indicates that law enforcement resources would be put to better use engaging in intentional activities that bring officers and minority citizens in closer contact for the purposes of getting to know each other and working together to solve neighborhood problems.

References

- ¹ Gallup (2014). *Urban Blacks in U.S. have Little Confidence in the Police*. Omaha, NE: Gallup; Gallup (2016). *Americans' Respect for Police Surges*. Omaha, NE: Gallup.
- ² Gallup (2016).
- ³ President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015). *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*. Washington, DC: Department of Justice.
- ⁴ President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015).
- ⁵ Schlosser, M. D. (2013). Racial attitudes of police recruits in the United States Midwest police academy: a quantitative examination. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 8(2), 215-224.
- ⁶ Paluck, E. L. (2006). Diversity training and intergroup contact: a call for action research. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 577-595.
- ⁷ Blakemore, J. L., Barlow, D., & Padgett, D. L. (1995). From the classroom to the community: introducing process in police diversity training. *Police Studies*, 18(1), 71-90; Zimny, K. (2015). Racial attitudes of police recruits at the United States Midwest police academy: a second examination. *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, 10(1), 91-101.
- ⁸ Bolton, K., & Feagin, J. (2004). *Black in Blue: African-American Police Officers and Racism*. New York, NY: Routledge; Cashmore, E. (2002). Behind the window dressing: ethnic minority police perspectives on cultural diversity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(2), 327-341.
- ⁹ Teahan, J. E. (1975). Role playing and group experience to facilitate attitude and value changes among black and white police officers. *Journal of Social Issues*, 31(1), 35-45.
- ¹⁰ Schlosser (2013).
- ¹¹ Zimny (2015).
- ¹² Bigler, R. C. (1999). The use of multicultural curricula and materials to counter racism in children. *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(4), 687-705.

¹³ Paluck, E. L. (2006). Diversity training and intergroup contact: a call for action research. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 577-595; Paluck, E. L., & Green, D. P. (2009). Prejudice reduction What works?: a review and assessment of research and practice. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 339-367; Pendry, L. F., Driscoll, D. M., & Field, S. (2007). Diversity training: putting theory into practice. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 80(1), 27-50; Stewart, T. L., LaDuke, J. R., Bracht, C., Sweet, B., & Gamarel, K. E. (2003). Do the ‘eyes’ have it? A program evaluation of Jane Elliott’s “blue eyes / brown eyes” diversity training exercise. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 33(9), 1898-1921.

¹⁴ Paluck (2016).

¹⁵ Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783.

¹⁶ Gordner, G. W. (1986). Fear of crime and the police: an evaluation of a fear-reducing strategy. *Journal of Police Science & Administration*, 14(2), 223-233.

¹⁷ Skogan, W. G., & Hartnett, M. G. (1997). *Community Policing: Chicago Style*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ Zhao, J., Scheider, M., & Thurman, Q. (2002). The effect of police presence on public fear reduction and satisfaction: a review of the literature. *The Justice Professional*, 15(3), 273-299.

¹⁹ Zhao, Scheider, & Thurman, (2002).