Does Verbal De-Escalation Training Work?
What is the Evidence?

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Activists and politicians are often quick to demand specific changes in police practices before there is firm evidence to support the effectiveness of their proposals. A prominent example is found in the call for "de-escalation training", despite the fact that there are many different (and sometimes conflicting) definitions of what "de-escalation training" actually means.

As providers of verbal de-escalation training at Dolan Consulting Group, we read the positive course evaluations from the trainees who attend our courses. We also frequently receive feedback from law enforcement officers whose careers have been made better and safer as a result of our verbal de-escalation training. But what do we know about the impact de-escalation training has on the outcomes of interactions with the public? Does de-escalation training result in decreased incidences of violence? Are students leaving the training with useful tools to do their jobs better and more safely? What does the social scientific evidence reveal?

General Studies of De-escalation Training

Studies that evaluate de-escalation training within a law enforcement environment are very recent – only occurring within the last four years. Before these law enforcement research studies existed, a research team from the University of Cincinnati, headed by Dr. Robin Engel, examined all of the existing research on de-escalation training in fields *other* than law enforcement.[1] This team located and examined every scientific study available that evaluated some form of de-escalation training. They defined de-escalation training as any program, "based on a process designed to defuse situations and reduce the likelihood of physical or verbal confrontation between parties."[2] Also, in order to be considered in their study, the training had to involve *only* de-escalation

training, thus they excluded evaluations of mental health crisis intervention team training, of which verbal de-escalation is only one small part.

The research team found 64 studies that evaluated the impact of verbal de-escalation training. The studies ranged in date from 1976 to 2016. A total of 86% of the studies involved verbal de-escalation training for medical staff in hospitals, nursing homes and psychiatric facilities. The remaining 14% of studies took place within schools, psychological counseling centers and business workplaces. There were 58 different verbal de-escalation training programs across the 64 studies, so nearly every study encountered a different type of de-escalation training program.

Nevertheless, there were similarities across the programs, as 63% included instruction on types and causes of aggression, and warning signs of impending aggression. Approximately 56% of the training programs discussed techniques and strategies for handling someone who is already aggressive, while 41% also addressed methods for defusing situations *before* someone becomes aggressive. The training curricula ranged in length from a few hours to several days. All of the training involved classroom instruction and nearly all of the training programs also included role-play scenarios.[3]

Most of the studies surveyed the participants before and after the training course in order to measure their perceptions of the training they received. **Of those studies in these various non-law enforcement professions, about 90% of participants perceived they had greater confidence and knowledge for handling confrontation situations after the training and more than 87% were satisfied with the training. About 60% indicated that they were safer after the training and more than 78% indicated they experienced less violence at work after the training**.[4]

Approximately one third of the studies also evaluated actual behavioral outcomes after the training, such as documenting whether de-escalation techniques were actually used by participants, changes in the number of incidents of violence and changes in injuries from violence. Of the studies that measured whether or not de-escalation techniques were actually used, 92% found that de-escalation techniques were regularly employed after the training. **Of the studies that measured incidents of physical violence, 52% of the studies found a decrease in the number of violent incidents after the training and 100% of the studies found a decrease in the severity of violent incidents after the training.**

Additionally, 77% of the studies found fewer employee and client injuries occurred after the training.[5] **This evidence suggests that general de-escalation training in medical, psychiatric, school and workplace settings results in fewer—and less serious—incidents of violent behavior in these settings.**

Evaluations of Police De-escalation Training

Regarding the impact of de-escalation training within a law enforcement agency, only a few studies exist and all of these studies are very recent. While we look forward to further studies on the topic of verbal de-escalation training's impact on law enforcement officers in the future, the studies that are currently available show striking results.

Halifax Regional Police Department (2017)

A research team from the RAND Corporation evaluated the impact of de-escalation training on officers with the Halifax Regional Police Department in Canada during 2017. The patrol personnel of this department received a brief, 3.5 hour verbal de-escalation course. This half-day training included classroom instruction, followed by role-play scenarios designed to have the attendees practice the techniques taught within the classroom.[6]

After the training was complete, the research team randomly called on officers to participate in videotaped training scenarios with police instructors who simulated agitated citizens. Before the de-escalation training took place, 64 officers participated in these videotaped scenarios and served as a comparison group to see if the training had changed officer behaviors. Compared to the officers who had **not** received the de-escalation training, the officers who **had** received the training were significantly more likely to utilize the techniques taught in the training. Specifically, the trained officers were significantly more likely to greet the citizen in the scenario, introduce themselves and their agency, repeat the citizen's statements back to the citizen in a reflective manner and explain the citizen's options. **The trained officers were 6% less likely to use force in the scenarios. When force was used, the trained officers took 7% longer before resorting to the use of force.**[7]

The researchers then examined the actual incidences of use of force and citizen complaints recorded by the department. **Over the five years before the training, the department averaged 2.68 use of force incidents per 1,000 calls for service. During the year after the training of the patrol personnel, the department averaged 2.63 use of force incidents per 1,000 calls for service. This was a decline of 2%. Over the five years prior to the training, the department averaged 48 citizen complaints per year, but in the year following the training, only 43 complaints were received. This was a decline of approximately 7%**. With each officer receiving only a few hours of training, small decreases in use of force incidents and citizen complaints were revealed.[8]

Louisville Metropolitan Police Department (2019)

A research team headed by Dr. Robin Engel from the University of Cincinnati, examined the impact of verbal de-escalation training on the Louisville Metro Police Department in Kentucky. Over the course of several months during 2019, all of the sworn personnel employed by this agency received de-escalation training. Each employee received two full days of training that included both classroom instruction and role-play scenarios for the purposes of honing the skills taught in the classroom.[9]

The personnel who received the training were surveyed before the training and again three more times after receiving the training. A year after receiving the training, greater than 60% of the personnel reported having used de-escalation tactics at least once in their last 60 days of work. Compared to their survey responses before receiving the training, the personnel demonstrated significantly more positive attitudes about the usefulness of de-escalation techniques.

Using official agency statistics, the research team compared the years before and after the training. It found that in the period after the training, **use of force incidents declined by 28%, citizen injuries from use of force declined by 26% and officer injuries declined by 36%**. Although the year after the training included the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also included the period of prolonged protests and civil unrest in Louisville surrounding the police shooting of Breonna Taylor. In addition, Louisville experienced more than a 100% increase in responses to violent crimes between 2019 and 2020. Therefore, it is unlikely that these reductions in incidents and injuries were due to reductions in the number of police-citizen contacts during the pandemic.[10]

Tempe Police Department (2019)

A research team headed by Dr. Michael White from Arizona State University evaluated the impact of verbal de-escalation training on the Tempe Police Department in Arizona. One hundred officers from the department's patrol division were selected for the study and half of these personnel completed a two-day verbal de-escalation training program involving both classroom instruction and role-play scenarios. The entire sample of officers was surveyed before, as well as one year after, the training. The survey's purpose was to see if the training changed officer behaviors and determine if the trained officers' responses differed from the officers who did not receive the de-escalation training.[11]

The research team found that both the trained and untrained officers reported positive perceptions of verbal de-escalation tactics, and both groups frequently used these tactics. The officers who had completed the training shared with their peers the techniques that they

had learned and the untrained officers also learned from watching the trained officers interact with citizens. Nevertheless, the officers who had received the formal training were still more likely than the untrained officers to use de-escalation tactics, engage in more officer safety techniques (such as maintaining distance and using the contact and cover system), engage in compromise with citizens and exercise a willingness to walk away from situations.[12]

Conclusions

The impact of verbal de-escalation training has been evaluated in law enforcement, hospital, educational, business and psychiatric settings. Despite the fact that these evaluations have included training courses of different lengths and different types of curricula, the findings are consistent. Verbal de-escalation training provides individuals with knowledge, tools and tactics that give them greater confidence and control in situations involving interpersonal conflict.

While de-escalation training does not eliminate all conflict and violence, by applying the knowledge, tools and tactics they learned, individuals can defuse more conflict situations that might otherwise have led to violence. The existing evidence is growing and consistently reveals the same conclusions.

De-escalation training has been associated with decreases in violence, the severity of the violence and injuries resulting from violence. Curricula and quality may vary, as is the case in any area of training, but the available research clearly indicates that training in verbal de-escalation benefits contact professionals, including law enforcement officers. **As common sense would dictate, the research proves that training nurses, teachers and police officers in "how to talk to people" makes a positive difference for them and the people they encounter in their workplaces.**

Armed with this knowledge, it would seem that *any* people-intensive industry or profession would be well-served to prioritize routine training in verbal de-escalation skills.

About the Author

Richard R. Johnson, PhD, is a trainer and researcher with Dolan Consulting Group. He has decades of experience teaching and training on various topics associated with criminal justice, and has conducted research on a variety of topics related to crime and law enforcement. He holds a bachelor's degree in public administration and criminal justice from the School of Public and Environmental Affairs (SPEA) at Indiana University, with a minor in social psychology. He possesses a master's degree in criminology from Indiana State University. He earned his doctorate in criminal justice from the School of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati with concentrations in policing and criminal justice administration.

Dr. Johnson has published more than 50 articles on various criminal justice topics in academic research journals, including Justice Quarterly, Crime & Delinquency, Criminal Justice & Behavior, Journal of Criminal Justice, and Police Quarterly. He has also published more than a dozen articles in law enforcement trade journals such as the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, Police Chief, Law & Order, National Sheriff, and Ohio Police Chief. His research has primarily focused on police-citizen interactions, justice system responses to domestic violence, and issues of police administration and management. Dr. Johnson retired as a full professor of criminal justice at the University of Toledo in 2016.

Prior to his academic career, Dr. Johnson served several years working within the criminal justice system. He served as a trooper with the Indiana State Police, working uniformed patrol in Northwest Indiana. He served as a criminal investigator with the Kane County State's Attorney Office in Illinois, where he investigated domestic violence and child sexual assault cases. He served as an intensive probation officer for felony domestic violence offenders with the Illinois 16th Judicial Circuit. Dr. Johnson is also a proud military veteran having served as a military police officer with the U.S. Air Force and Air National Guard, including active duty service after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Before that, he served as an infantry soldier and field medic in the U.S. Army and Army National Guard.

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