

THE EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPLICATIONS OF POLICE REFORM: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE



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Abstract: Repeated and deadly encounters between law enforcement officers and Black Americans have given way to mounting calls for police reform. Reformers have proposed reallocating funds from policing to communities and social services, rethinking police use of force policies, and improving measures for officer accountability. This literature review briefly describes the impetus for police reform, reviews proposed police reforms, and examines available research on the effectiveness of police reforms. Overall, research indicates police agencies should not only focus on reducing crime, but also protecting and fostering the relationship between the public and police.

Introduction

High-profile incidents of excessive force have damaged the relationship between police and communities. Public unrest reached a critical point following the police killings of Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020, and George Floyd on May 25, 2020.¹ In response, national protests proliferated across the country in support of the [Black Lives Matter](#) movement and led to a resurgence of calls for police reform.² Since Floyd's death, legislators in 31 states have introduced over 400 police reform proposals.³ However, the methods in which to enact such reforms continues to be debated. Some suggest incidents of excessive force are the result of a few "bad apples," while others argue that the role of the police is structurally unjust and should be deconstructed, either through defunding or abolishing traditional law enforcement.⁴ U.S. policing is highly decentralized, and enacting uniform reform strategies across nearly 18,000 police departments poses a significant challenge.⁵ Nonetheless, the public continues to demand answers to and accountability for unchecked police behavior.⁶

Police reform efforts require the input and buy-in of stakeholders—including law enforcement, the communities they serve, researchers, and legislators. In this article, we discuss strategies for local, state, and national police reform. This review is not intended to be a fully comprehensive or a systematic review of every potential reform strategy.

Police Reform in the 2021 Illinois SAFE-T Act

The Illinois [Safety, Accountability, Fairness, and Equity Today Act](#) (SAFE-T Act) of 2021 mandates substantial police reform throughout the state. The Act describes changes in policing, the pretrial process, and corrections. We provide text boxes throughout the article highlighting many police reforms in the Act.

For more information on the Act, see Reichert, J., Zivic, A., & Sheley, K. (2021). [The 2021 SAFE-T Act: ICJIA roles and responsibilities](#). Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.⁷

Reform at the Individual Level

Engaging in Procedural Justice

Law enforcement policies and officer discretion guide community interactions.⁸ The most basic reform efforts target how individual officers engage with the public. Procedural justice refers to the quality of decision-making procedures and fairness in the way individuals are treated by police.⁹

Empirical evidence supports a procedural justice framework in which officers engender cooperation from citizens during their interactions.¹⁰ A procedural justice framework is comprised of four components, including:¹¹

- Treating citizens with dignity.
- Transparency in police action.
- Giving citizens a voice during encounters.
- Impartiality in decision-making.

Previous research suggests that procedural justice can improve the perceived fairness and legitimacy of the police.¹² Research also indicates an association between perceived police legitimacy and the willingness of individuals to obey the law.¹³ Studies find that when citizens view police as respectful, they are more likely to have positive attitudes toward the police and comply with the law.¹⁴ Therefore, increasing perceptions of police legitimacy through the use of procedural justice principles can ease tensions and improve community safety.

Expanding Officer Training

Although police officers receive hundreds of hours of training, reform advocates suggest the types of training offered are not always adequate.¹⁵ Research suggests current police training procedures are insufficient for reducing excessive force incidents.¹⁶ For example, a survey of nearly 300 law enforcement agencies found the largest segment of recruitment training was on firearms, with a median of 58 hours of training, while 10 hours were devoted to communication skills, and eight hours were provided on de-escalation techniques.¹⁷ Therefore, one police reform strategy is to alter or expand the training officers receive to include de-escalation and implicit bias training.¹⁸ Although these trainings are popular and often recommended, researchers note that the evidence base is rather limited.¹⁹ A more detailed overview of each training follows.

De-Escalation Training

De-escalation training differs from traditional police training, which teaches quick decision-making. De-escalation training focuses on using verbal and non-verbal communication techniques to reduce a threat, allowing for more time to consider the routes of action or resources to resolve a situation.²⁰ Proponents suggest that when properly trained, officers can de-escalate a potentially volatile situation with less risk of injury to both the officer and citizen.²¹ The training works to improve officer social interaction skills, such as active listening and reading situational cues, to effectively communicate with citizens.²² De-escalation training is generally supported by police leaders but has not been widely implemented by departments. A recent report found of the nation's 100 largest city police departments, only 56 require officers to attempt to de-escalate situations prior to using force.²³

Officers and researchers have suggested a lack of consensus on what defines de-escalation training.²⁴ Engel et al. (2020) noted that both varying definitions and limited research quality creates challenges in determining the effectiveness of de-escalation training.²⁵ The authors described de-escalation training as a “catch-all of sorts, symbolizing a different but perhaps more progressive policing approach for handling potential use-of-force encounters” (p. 724).²⁶ Differences in de-escalation training across departments can be a barrier to interpreting its effects on police behavior, so more rigorous research design and narrower definitions are needed.

Implicit Bias Training

People of color, particularly Black and Latinx men, are disproportionately subjected to higher rates of police use of force.²⁷ Such disparities are found in arrests²⁸ and traffic stops,²⁹ as well as levels of respect afforded during police-citizen encounters.³⁰ Implicit bias is defined as unconscious mental associations between groups and certain attributes, such as race, gender or sexual orientation, which can affect decision-making and non-verbal behaviors.³¹ Some reform advocates suggest implicit bias training for officers may reduce the use of bias and stereotyping in their decision-making.³²

Generally, implicit bias training provides an overview of what implicit biases are, where those biases originate, and how to counter those biases. An evaluation of the New York City Police Department's implicit bias training found it increased awareness and knowledge of officers' implicit biases.³³ The officers also reported an increased understanding of racial discrimination as a societal problem to be addressed, rather than a fictional, media-generated conspiracy. Whitfield (2019) found that officers considered implicit bias training useful and reported that it helped improve communication with citizens.³⁴ However, Whitfield (2019) acknowledged implicit bias training study limitations and noted other evaluations showed the training failed to affect officer biases.

Worden et al. (2020) concluded that implicit bias training alone is not enough to eliminate disparities in the criminal justice system, such as those emanating from economic inequalities, histories of discrimination, and gaps in healthcare, housing, and education.³⁵ Onyeador et al. (2021) emphasized that simply knowing about one's biases does not solve a lack of diversity on work staff. They suggested that police administration must also prepare for backlash from majority group members and strengthen their whole organization's responsibility for equity goals.³⁶

Illinois SAFE-T Act: Police Training

The SAFE-T Act expands officer training on topics that include:³⁷

- Crisis intervention.
- De-escalation.
- Use of force.
- High-risk traffic stops.
- Implicit bias.
- Racial and ethnic sensitivity training.
- Emergency response.

Reform at the Departmental Level

Several reform strategies may be implemented and supported at departmental and administrative levels.

Altering Stop-and-Frisk Tactics

A police tactic known as “stop-and-frisk” emphasizes heavy enforcement of low-level misconduct. A stop-and-frisk refers to the stop of an individual when police have reasonable suspicion that a crime has been, is being, or is going to be committed by that person.³⁸ Upon implementation of stop-and-frisk in New York, some argued violent and property crime dropped.³⁹ However, recent studies show a much weaker causal relationship between stop-and-frisk and crime reduction and cite a high social cost of the tactic.⁴⁰ During the use of this practice in New York, Black and Latinx men were nine times as likely to be stopped than White men, resulting in several lawsuits and community backlash against police and the government.⁴¹

Critics of stop-and-frisk say it results in the aggressive “over-policing” of communities of color without increasing safety.⁴² For example, data on stop-and-frisk from New York shows that from 2006 to 2013, only 14 out of every 10,000 stops conducted turned up a gun, and about 1,200 out of every 10,000 ended with a fine, seizure, or arrest of an illegal weapon.⁴³ People of color were more likely to get stopped, even though their White counterparts were twice as likely to be found with a gun.⁴⁴ A survey of approximately 500 adults stopped by the police in highly patrolled New York Police Department areas found 71% reported being frisked at least once and 64% searched.⁴⁵ Of those surveyed, only 12% believed residents in their area trusted the police. The researchers suggested police speak and collaborate with communities of color to develop police practices. Examples of this include officers becoming involved in community activities, speaking with the people who live and work in the community, and engaging in procedural justice.

Implementing Body-Worn Cameras

Body-worn cameras record officer conduct during citizen encounters.⁴⁶ One study found that as of 2016, 47% of law enforcement agencies used body-worn cameras, with 86% of them having a formal body-worn camera policy.⁴⁷ Body-worn camera footage can be used as evidence for encounters where force was used.⁴⁸ Many law enforcement agencies are currently exploring ways to review body-worn camera footage to help shape officer decision-making and reinforce accountability.

However, a comprehensive review of 70 studies on the use of body-worn cameras found mixed results indicating positive, negative, and no effects of cameras on police use of force, accountability, transparency, or officer safety.⁴⁹ As police use of body-worn cameras rapidly increases, rigorous evaluation is needed to better understand the technology.⁵⁰

Illinois SAFE-T Act: Body Worn Cameras

The SAFE-T Act:

- Expands police use of body worn cameras.
- Changes guidelines and requirements for cameras.
- Specifies who may access, review, or delete camera footage.
- Creates stricter camera regulations.⁵¹

Diversifying the Police Force

Historically, White men have comprised the majority of the U.S. police force.⁵² Researchers and advocates suggest police personnel that are representative of their community's genders, races, and sexual orientations could be an important aspect of police reform and result in less force against marginalized groups. In an analysis of approximately 3 million patrol assignments, Ba et al. (2021) found Chicago Black and Hispanic officers used force less often than White officers, especially against Black citizens.⁵³ Women officers also may contribute to reform efforts, as studies indicate they are less likely to use excessive force and are involved in fewer lawsuits.⁵⁴ However, researchers emphasize departments must first reform and support an inclusive organizational culture before hiring applicants representative of marginalized groups. This will prevent issues of department alienation and empower representatives to share their own perspectives and strategies.⁵⁵ In addition to culture change, police departments also need to ensure their strategies are not rooted in discriminatory practices and policies that officers of color become trained to enforce.⁵⁶

Utilizing Co-Responder Teams

Police are called on to not only enforce laws, but respond to homelessness, mental and physical health distress, substance misuse, and school discipline issues.⁵⁷ Police may not always have appropriate training and expertise in those areas. Reform advocates suggest that rather than adding more responsibility to police officers, social service providers and other community resources could help shift the burden of appropriately responding to those issues.⁵⁸ The co-responder model features joint service call responses in partnership with civilian trained professionals.⁵⁹ In some co-responder models, service workers offer remote support via radio or telephone. Other models dispatch service workers once an officer has deemed a situation safe. In another model, police dispatchers direct a team of an officer, medic, and crisis worker to emergency calls.⁶⁰

Puntis et al. (2018) found that the use of co-responder teams reduced the number of persons detained in police custody. In addition, citizens involved felt less distressed and less criminalized than with standard police responses, and citizen service provision was more accessible.⁶¹ However, the researchers noted the variation in co-responder models made it challenging to establish best practices. Robertson et al. (2019) suggested that departments using a co-responder model should properly evaluate the model with performance indicators that can be shared across participating agencies (e.g., emergency services, health services, police departments).⁶²

Investing in Police Deflection and Diversion

Another police reform strategy is to reduce the reliance on police to address behavioral health issues. Police deflection and pre-arrest diversion programs allow police to refer individuals to treatment or other services.⁶³ While no meta-analyses or systematic reviews are available on the relatively new strategies of police deflection and diversion, a literature review by Lindquist-Grantz et al. (2021) showed the programs may have promising effects on psychosocial outcomes, recidivism, and substance use.⁶⁴

Illinois SAFE-T Act: Police Deflection and Diversion

The SAFE-T Act:

- Requires officers to issue a citation rather than arrest persons suspected of committing certain low-level offenses.⁶⁵
- Allows other first responders, in addition to police, to engage in pre-arrest diversion/deflection programs.⁶⁶

Creating Civilian Oversight Boards

Comprised of members of the community, civilian oversight boards conduct external reviews of police action, taking the place of officers charged with investigating other officers. These boards are often categorized into four types:

- **In-house review**, where civilians are hired to work for a department's internal affairs unit.
- **External supervision**, where civilians review investigations completed by a department's internal affairs unit.
- **External investigatory**, where civilians directly participate in the review process and may interview those involved in a complaint.
- **Auditor**, where civilians are granted access to police records and then report on policy.⁶⁷

Civilian oversight boards are mostly seen in larger police departments—around 80% of the 50 largest police departments in the United States retain civilian oversight boards, but they are far rarer in smaller departments.⁶⁸ In Illinois, the Chicago Police Department developed the [Civilian Office of Police Accountability](#), which investigates patterns of misconduct and provides policy recommendations to the department.

Little is known about the effectiveness of civilian oversight boards. Researchers debate over how to measure effectiveness; previous studies have examined rates of sustained complaints, yielding mixed findings.⁶⁹ Civilian oversight boards have been noted for their ability to bring in community collaboration and input, but they must have access to adequate resources, as well as continued community and political support.⁷⁰ Resistance from police officers also prevents boards from enacting change. Research suggests transparency is the most critical component of any civilian oversight board, and the review process should be easily understandable.⁷¹ An open dialogue between police and communities and police acknowledgment of civilian complaints are integral to this approach.

Reform at the State Level

Updating Use of Force Statutes and Conduct Standards

State guidance on police use of force varies.⁷² Although most states have statutes regarding police use of force, many have not been amended or updated since the 1970s.⁷³ In states without

statutes, judicial decisions regulate use of force. Stoughton et al. (2020) found 36 states have statutes for both deadly force and non-deadly force, and six states have only deadly force statutes. In some of these states, their statutes are interpreted using the Fourth Amendment. Researchers have noted this can create confusion for officers, as the amendment does not necessarily provide clear guidance on when force is allowed.⁷⁴ By adopting state laws that clearly define reasonable force and provide stronger guidance as to when and how much force officers can use during citizen encounters, the inappropriate use of force may be reduced.⁷⁵

Illinois SAFE-T Act: Police Use of Force

The SAFE-T Act:

- Provides new standards for when police use force.
- Requires officers to provide aid after using force.⁷⁶
- Requires officers to intervene if other officers use unauthorized or excessive force.⁷⁷
- Mandates use of force reporting to the FBI National Use of Force Database.⁷⁸
- Requires reporting of deaths in police custody and deaths due to use of force.⁷⁹

Decertifying Police Officers

States often require police officer certification as set by a standards and training commission.⁸⁰ Many states allow decertification of officers who have been found to have engaged in misconduct. However, some states only allow for decertification after an officer is convicted of a felony or serious misdemeanor. Between the 1960s and 2010s, approximately 30,000 officers were decertified, with Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina comprising approximately half of the cases.⁸¹ There are barriers to access of officer disciplinary records and use-of-force investigation documents.⁸² Sometimes fired officers are hired in other jurisdictions. One study found officers who were hired by a police agency after termination from another police agency were more likely to engage in future misconduct, compared to non-terminated officers.⁸³

States have made efforts to improve police discipline and certification status tracking.⁸⁴ For example, New York maintains a police officer registry, updated annually to include information on discharged police officers. Florida and California laws ensure disciplinary records on police-citizen encounters involving use-of-force and shootings are made public.⁸⁵ In 2020, Colorado and Oregon established new state decertification databases. In addition, the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST) developed the National Decertification Index for hiring agencies to prevent interstate rehiring of problem officers.⁸⁶ IADLEST also provides guidance and minimum standards for states, including officer criminal background checks, G.E.D. certification, human relations courses, and ethical use of police discretion training.⁸⁷

Illinois SAFE-T Act: Police Misconduct, Complaints, and Decertification

The SAFE-T Act:

- Establishes a statewide decertification process for officers.⁸⁸
- Allows the attorney general to investigate, initiate civil lawsuits, and enforce settlements against police agencies that have a pattern of depriving individuals of their rights.⁸⁹
- Allows for investigation of anonymous complaints against officers.⁹⁰
- Bans the destruction of police misconduct records.⁹¹
- Allows complaint filings against police officers without sworn affidavits or other legal documentation.⁹²
- Removes requirements that officers under investigation must be informed of complainants' names or of the officer in charge of the investigation.⁹³
- Prohibits local governments from retaliation against employees who report improper government actions.⁹⁴
- Expands notification of police misconduct to the Illinois State Training and Standards Board.⁹⁵
- Makes data on misconduct more accessible.⁹⁶
- Requires a publicly available database for any police misconduct resulting in decertification.⁹⁷

Reform at the Federal Level

Establishing Consent Decrees

A consent decree is a federal court order that mandates police departments to alter policies or procedures. The U.S. Department of Justice can negotiate a consent decree with police departments found to have practices or patterns of misconduct.⁹⁸ Consent decrees are typically enforced using a court monitor to oversee an affected department.⁹⁹ This measure is used for departments that are deemed unable to handle misconduct on their own, and the decree may last for several years. These decrees are considered a serious intervention, and only a few dozen have been enforced since their inception in the 1990s.¹⁰⁰

Goh (2020) examined a dataset of 962 police agencies over the years 2000-2016 to investigate how federal intervention may affect police killings. They found that consent decrees themselves did not reduce killings, but the presence of a court monitor and investigation did decrease killings.¹⁰¹ Goh (2020) further noted that police departments may vary significantly in the type and structure of reform efforts they implement in response to consent decrees and that more research is needed to further evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions. Consent decrees are not without criticism. Police assert consent decrees lower morale, are costly, and offer little flexibility. However, others contend upfront costs save money in the long run by reducing litigation stemming from misconduct.¹⁰² Alpert et al. (2017) noted that once a consent decree is fulfilled, many departments lack accountability for maintaining reform efforts, resulting in short-lived improvements to police practice.¹⁰³

Demilitarizing the Police

Police departments can access military-style weapons, tactics, training, uniforms, and equipment.¹⁰⁴ This is supported, in part, by the federal 1033 program, which transferred excess military equipment to local and state law-enforcement agencies at no cost.¹⁰⁵ Between 2006 and 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense transferred over \$1.5 billion in equipment, including military-style vehicles, grenade launchers, bayonets, and camouflage.¹⁰⁶ By 2014, about 80% of all U.S. counties received military equipment.¹⁰⁷ The 1033 program has received intense scrutiny and multiple attempts at reform across federal administrations. In 2015, then-President Barack Obama issued an executive order restricting the transfer of equipment, such as armored vehicles, single-shot grenade launchers, and bayonets to law enforcement. Former President Donald Trump reversed that executive order in 2017.¹⁰⁸

Those in favor of demilitarization as a police reform strategy point to the use of military vehicles and flash grenades against civilians, including during the George Floyd protests, as excessive force.¹⁰⁹ Although critics of demilitarization suggest this equipment is important for protecting officers, Lowande (2020) found that recalling weapons and equipment obtained through the 1033 program did not impact violent crime or officer safety.¹¹⁰ Further, research indicates receipt of such military equipment increased violence perpetrated by law enforcement.¹¹¹ Police militarization has been found to create psychological transformation within police officers, shifting attitudes toward lethal force as an acceptable and rapid response.¹¹² Some citizens argue for the importance of militarized police for responding to terrorist attacks or hostage situations.¹¹³ However, deploying these personnel or equipment in response to protests may lower public support for these responses.¹¹⁴

Illinois SAFE-T Act: Police Use of Force

In terms of use of force, the SAFE-T Act:

- Prohibits police access to any military equipment surplus program or purchasing specific types of equipment.¹¹⁵
- Requires publishing of any purchase, request, or receipt of equipment through any military purchasing program.¹¹⁶

Defunding or Reallocating Police Funds

One of the most debated reform strategies is law enforcement defunding. Defunding involves reallocating police department funding to other government or social service agencies,¹¹⁷ with some advocates calling for complete defunding or dismantling of traditional law enforcement.¹¹⁸ Advocates of defunding argue that reallocating police funds to instead improve social welfare will lessen the risk of death and over-policing in underserved communities, particularly for those with serious mental illness.¹¹⁹ Research from Thomas et al. (2021) found Black men showing signs of mental illness were more likely to be shot and killed by police than White men showing the same signs.¹²⁰ Reallocating police funding toward mental health services and resources could

decrease officer engagement with individuals in crisis and help them avoid fatal justice system involvement.¹²¹

According to an inflation-adjusted analysis from The Urban Institute, from 1977 to 2019, state and local government spending on police budgets increased from \$44 billion to \$123 billion, equating to an increase of approximately 179%.¹²² As such, reformers have furthered efforts to reduce or divert police funding across the country. The New York City Council approved of a \$1 billion cut to the New York City Police Department in 2020.¹²³ The city of Camden, New Jersey, dismantled, and then recreated, its entire police force using a community-focused approach. Camden officers seeking rehiring were required to complete a 50-page application and retake a psychological evaluation.¹²⁴ However, news outlets have reported increases in major cities' police budgets again in 2021.¹²⁵

Critics of defunding argue that less funding means fewer officers on the streets, increasing the burden on remaining officers.¹²⁶ Others suggest that defunding police may lead to increased crime, reduced officer safety, and excessive ticketing or other measures designed to make up lost funds.¹²⁷ Little is known about defunding outcomes, but researchers have suggested several considerations prior to implementation, including:¹²⁸

- Training 9-1-1 dispatchers and other emergency responders to resolve or refer police calls.
- Increasing resources and making substantial investments in mental health and social service infrastructure to offset increased caseloads.
- Training for service providers responding to crises to ensure their own safety.¹²⁹

More research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of diverting law enforcement costs in terms of both crime control and police legitimacy.¹³⁰

Conclusion

Although there are national interests in police reform, determining the most effective strategies can be a challenging process. Some reform strategies may not be easily implemented across different departments due to their varying sizes and community characteristics. Further, it may be tough for those outside policing to significantly alter police culture and traditional practice. Repairing the relationship between police and the public is a critical first step in reform efforts; without public faith in the police, the effects of these efforts may be short-lived.¹³¹ Together, community members, law enforcement leaders, policymakers, and researchers should continue to collaborate and evaluate police reform efforts. Continued data collection and research are needed to explore the effectiveness of reform efforts and other areas for reform.

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