RBT study shows a little respect goes a long way

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In a world-first trial, criminology researchers at The University of Queensland have tested the theory of procedural justice in policing and found that respectful dialogue with citizens during routine encounters makes a big difference to the way citizens think of police.

Funded by the Australian Research Council's (ARC) Centre for Excellence in Policing and Security (CEPS), Criminology Professor Lorraine Mazerolle's team at the Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR) conducted the Queensland Community Engagement Trial (QCET) - a randomised field trial of police - citizen encounters at 60 Random Breath Testing (RBT) operation sites in Brisbane over a period of seven months.

The experimental test involved officers communicating with citizens in a way that incorporated the four principles of procedural justice: neutrality in decision making, conveying trustworthy motives, ensuring citizen participation and treating people with dignity and respect.

These principles were embedded into the conversation police officers had with drivers during 12,000 RBTs included in the trial.

The experimental test group encounters with police lasted, on average, a minute-and-a-half. The 12,000 control group drivers experienced the usual 20 to 30-second encounters with police. After the RBT encounters, drivers in both the control and test groups were given a survey to take home and complete.
"The trial tested the key principles of procedural justice: all of which are very well known in the criminological literature," Professor Mazerolle said.

"For the experimental group, the police conveyed to citizens that their motives for doing the RBT were trustworthy and that police were genuinely concerned about alcohol-related traffic accidents and deaths.

"Police also provided the experimental group of drivers with community safety information and asked drivers if they had any questions about crime issues in their neighbourhoods. For the experimental group of drivers, the RBT encounter went for an average of a minute-and-a-half, which is about four times' longer than usual RBT stops."

Dr. Sarah Bennett, project manager of QCET, said it was not the length but the quality of the interaction between the police officer and the driver that was important.

"The trial shows that a relatively short interaction with the public using the procedural justice elements can have a dramatic effect not just of the individual police officer's legitimacy but on a citizen's global perception of police legitimacy," Dr. Bennett said.

"The Queensland Police Service, under the leadership of Assistant Commissioner Peter Martin, suggested the RBT encounter as a starting point to explore ways that the police could change the way they engage with citizens to increase perceptions of police legitimacy.

"From a research perspective, RBTs had the advantage of being a high-volume, consistent interaction which made it easy for us to monitor the trial."

The results showed that the experimental test group of citizens ended up
with higher levels of satisfaction with police and said that they would be more likely to comply and cooperate with police. They felt they were treated with fairness and that the police had conveyed trustworthy motives.

"We're also looking to replicate the project in different sites in the US and the UK. What we want to now explore is whether or not these results can they be replicated in different contexts, and whether they can hold for different types of police-citizen encounters," Dr. Bennett said.

Based on these research findings, says Professor Mazerolle, this extra minute of quality communication by the police, using the principles of procedural justice, makes all the difference in the way citizens think about police.

"We're keen to share these findings with police departments, policy makers and our research colleagues in other countries and other parts of Australia," Professor Mazerolle said.

Provided by University of Queensland

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