

Controversial police bills of rights don't lead to more civilian fatalities

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Law enforcement officers' bills of rights, known as LEOBRs, don't result in an increase in police-related fatalities, according to new

research from Cornell University professor Jamein Cunningham.

In the wake of several recent high-profile police killings of unarmed civilians, LEOBRs—adopted by 19 [states](#)—are receiving heightened scrutiny from activists and legal scholars. Are these laws, which limit the accountability of officers, leading to extreme use of force?

The answer is no, according to Cunningham, an economics professor in Cornell's Brooks School of Public Policy, and his collaborators. An article about their findings, "Law Enforcement Officers' Bills of Rights and Police Violence," was published in *AEA Papers and Proceedings*.

Opponents of LEOBRs say their limitations on who can lead an investigation, the length of an investigation, officer access to evidence, limits on the scope of disciplinary action and restrictions on external oversight could result in a lack of accountability for inappropriate use of lethal force, resulting in an uptick in civilian fatalities.

Proponents say the nature of police work can result in unwarranted complaints.

The researchers examined statistics on police-involved killings of white and non-white civilians before and after states adopted LEOBRs and found no evidence of a significant change. They noted that their results do not rule out changes in the use of non-lethal force.

"LEOBRs have not played a meaningful role in high levels of civilian deaths in the United States in the short run," Cunningham said. There still could be long-run implications as policing norms and the collective bargaining process incorporate the protections offered by LEOBRs over time.

Little research has explored the impact of LEOBRs, Cunningham said,

and they remain controversial. Maryland was the first state to enact a state LEOBR, and in April 2021, it became the first state to repeal the law, according to the Urban League, which tracks legislative actions concerning the issue.

More information: Jamein P. Cunningham et al, Law Enforcement Officers' Bills of Rights and Police Violence, *AEA Papers and Proceedings* (2022). [DOI: 10.1257/pandp.20221099](https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20221099)

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