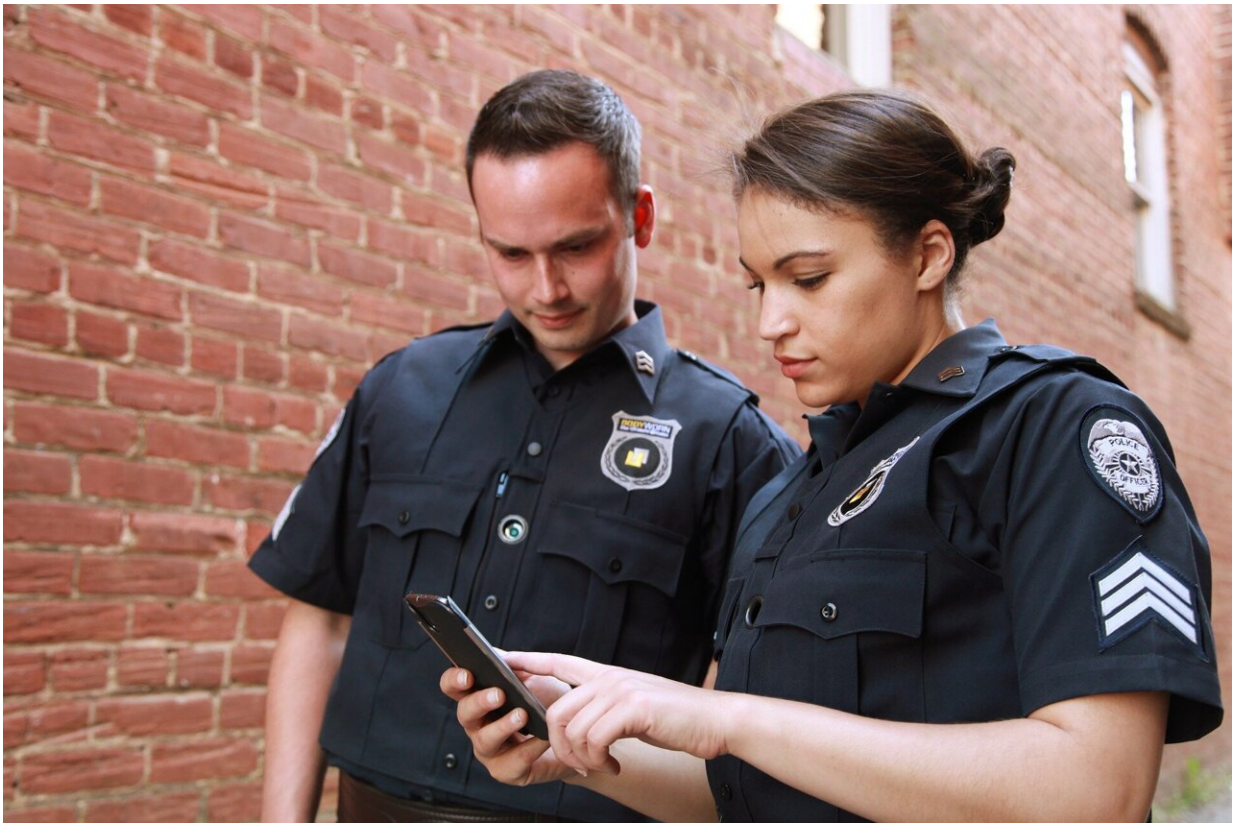


Test of police implicit bias training shows modest improvements

October 18 2023, by Sara Zaske



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A two-part training designed to help police officers recognize their implicit bias, revealed some behavior improvement and lowered citizen discrimination complaints in a controlled study. While a small study

involving one police department, it is the first-known research to provide evidence that this type of training can produce positive behavioral effects.

Led by Washington State University researcher Lois James, the study found some improvement in the anti-[bias](#) trained officers' behavior toward [homeless people](#) in particular, compared to a control group. The trained officers also had 50% fewer discrimination complaints overall, though these were low at the start with—21 before and 11 after the training. The researchers detailed their findings in [Policing: An International Journal](#).

While more research needs to be done, the findings are promising, said James.

"We did see these small but significant decreases in disparities in how officers treated different types of people and in community member discrimination complaints for the group that received this combined training intervention," said James. "This provides some preliminary evidence that implicit bias training could be impactful and that we could start to see some [positive changes](#)."

For the study, the researchers had 50 Sacramento, California police officers take 12-hours total of coursework and Counter Bias Simulation training, or CBTSim, an interactive training James helped develop which uses full-scale video to create virtual simulations of citizen encounters.

The researchers then assessed bodycam footage from actual patrol shifts to analyze interactions of the officers before and after the training as well as those of a [control group](#). They coded specific officer behaviors, such as whether they offered a polite greeting, explained the purpose of the encounter and tried to de-escalate volatile situations.

The analysis found a small but significant improvement in the officers' interactions overall following training, and a reduction in disparities around how officers interact with people suffering homelessness across different racial and gender groups. They also found community complaints about discrimination of any type were lower for the officers who had undertaken the training.

As opposed to explicit prejudice against people who are different, implicit bias is unconscious. Many scholars believe this type of bias is hard-wired into humans by evolution, stemming from a time when anyone from outside a kin group was a potential threat. Since implicit bias does not serve [modern humans](#) well, especially in fields like [law enforcement](#), researchers and educators have been trying to come up with trainings to make people aware of their implicit bias and combat its effect.

Until this study, research has been unable to validate that such trainings are effective. For instance, a large 2020 study of the New York Police Department found that while an anti-bias classroom training raised officers' awareness of implicit bias, it didn't seem to have an effect on outcome measures, including use of force and citizen complaints.

For this study, the Sacramento police officers not only trained in the classroom but also on CBTSim, which allows officers to go through simulated scenarios and then analyze their own responses.

"We're trying to bring implicit bias into the person's conscious awareness because if we're aware of our mental filter, then we have more control—and just the general ability to influence our own behavior," said James.

The effect sizes were small and broader research is needed to confirm the findings, the authors emphasized. However, the findings provide

some hope, James said, especially since this was a relatively short training period and longer trainings tailored to each police agency may have greater effects.

"This study provides a tentative positive message: We shouldn't give up on implicit bias training," she said. "It doesn't mean that [implicit bias training](#) is going to fix all the problems, but it could help."

More information: Lois James et al, Results from an effectiveness evaluation of anti-bias training on police behavior and public perceptions of discrimination, *Policing: An International Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.1108/PIJPSM-01-2023-0014](#)

Provided by Washington State University

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