

## As Use of Force Incidents Lead to Calls for Policing Reform, New Behavioral Science-Based Police Training Found to Reduce Adverse Policing Outcomes and Racial Disparities in Arrests

*The Situational Decision-making (Sit-D) program cut use-of-force incidents by 23% and significantly reduced disproportionate arrests of Black civilians.*

CHICAGO, IL — In the wake of high-profile use of force incidents by police across the country, the national conversation around reform has focused on individual officer and department accountability. While important, those efforts overlook the role of cognitive demands inherent in policing that can lead to adverse outcomes.

A [new study](#) released today by the University of Chicago Crime Lab found that Situational Decision-making (Sit-D), a behavioral science informed police training program, can significantly reduce adverse policing outcomes and help close the race gap in arrests. A randomized controlled trial of Sit-D, the gold standard for evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, found that by addressing these demands directly, it reduced use-of-force incidents by 23% while maintaining police productivity and increasing officer safety. Sit-D also led to a reduction in the disproportionately higher number of arrests of Black civilians, suggesting that it could help reduce [racial disparities](#) in policing.

“Officers face high-stress situations that require quick thinking under pressure, but there has been surprisingly little investment in the lever that directly addresses improving this type of decision-making: behavioral science-informed police officer training,” **said Roseanna Ander, Founder and Executive Director of University of Chicago Crime Lab.** “What’s more, even though Sit-D wasn’t designed to tackle racial bias in policing, its ability to effectively use behavioral-science-informed training actually has the potential to reduce glaring racial disparities in the field.”

The program, which was piloted with the Chicago Police Department between 2020 and 2021, helps improve officer decision-making when handling the complex, high-stress situations they often encounter. Sit-D teaches officers to recognize default thinking they may experience in high-stakes situations and teaches them to systematically consider alternative interpretations of these situations to avoid these types of pitfalls. The training employs a mix of lectures, scenario-based simulation, and peer-led debriefings to impart these lessons. The study’s results suggest that it could help to improve police-community relationships.

The study’s findings reveal that Sit-D teaches officers to question their default assumptions when assessing a stressful environment, which in turn can significantly impact policing outcomes, including:

- **Fewer uses of force and discretionary arrests.** Sit-D-trained officers were 23% less likely to use force. The training also led to a 23% reduction in discretionary arrests, a category that includes charges for minor offenses like disorderly conduct and obstructing

an officer – and therefore viewed as unnecessary and arbitrary, while holding little public safety value.

- **Fewer racial disparities in policing.** Sit-D also led to a reduction in the arrests of Black civilians, without leading to an equivalent reduction in arrests of others. In so doing, it reduced the race gap in arrest rates (which is three times higher for Black civilians than others in Chicago). In other words, teaching officers to question their default thinking when assessing situations has the potential to reduce racial disparities in policing.
- **No drop in productive policing activity.** The study observed no change in productive policing activity. This is measured by a pre-specified index of activities such as firearm recoveries, drivers' stops, warrants, citations, and all non-discretionary arrests.
- **Fewer officer injuries.** The study also found that officers who participated in the program took fewer days off due to injury. In fact, the cost savings from this reduction in injuries alone more than offsets the cost of the training. Given a host of other benefits to the training (e.g., fewer physical or psychological costs to the community from arrests and uses of force), the research suggests that Sit-D is cost-effective.
- **More confidence and better stress management.** Officers who completed the training reported greater confidence and demonstrated changes in how they regulate emotions and the strategies they use to cope with stress.
- **Better communication and problem-solving.** Sit-D can help officers both be more decisive and consider alternative perspectives in ambiguous, potentially dangerous situations. Officers who completed the training were also more communicative with subjects and less likely to freeze when facing threats in the training simulations.

“When an officer responds to a call for service, they often have a few moments to make life-and-death decisions, which means they’re likely relying on snap judgments to guide their response,” said **Oeindrila Dube, PhD, one of the study’s authors and a professor of Global Conflict Studies at the University of Chicago.** “Sit-D gives officers the cognitive tools they need to recalibrate their in-the-moment decision-making – so they do not resort to default assumptions, and instead, systematically assess the situations they are in before responding. Sit-D is designed to help officers navigate the cognitive demands inherent in policing, and our research shows that it works to make policing more effective and equitable.”

"The findings from the Sit-D evaluation show important promise for police officer training, and CPD is proud to have piloted it with our officers," said **Larry Snelling, Chief of the Bureau of Counterterrorism for the Chicago Police Department.** "Since the Department has overhauled its Use of Force policies we have increased and expanded training for all officers. Sit-D is a unique innovative training to re-enforce our policies and ensure that officers have the skills they need to serve the communities they live and work in."

While the trial was conducted in partnership with the Chicago Police Department, researchers hope the study will inspire departments and local leaders across the country to rethink their approaches to officer training.

This study was made possible by generous financial support from Citadel founder and CEO Kenneth C. Griffin, Motorola Solutions Foundation, and the National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research.

To read *A Cognitive View of Policing* by Oeindrila Dube, PhD, Sandy Jo MacArthur, PhD, and Anuj Shah, PhD please see [here](#).

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