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Enhancing Procedural Justness of Encounters Through Substantiation (EPJETS): The Atlantic County Randomized Controlled Trial*

Research Brief

Traffic stops are among the most common forms of police-initiated interactions with the public. However, the public frequently perceives them as adversarial or unnecessary. The existing negative public perceptions, along with high-profile use-of-force incidents following traffic stops, erode public trust. The Enhancing Procedural Justness of Encounters Through Substantiation (EPJETS) project was designed to evaluate whether utilizing procedural justice principles, emphasizing fairness, dignity, neutrality, and transparency, evidence-based targeted enforcement, and making BWC footage accessible to citizens improves the quality of encounters and enhances perceptions of law enforcement legitimacy.

Project Overview

EPJETS was conducted in partnership with the Atlantic City and Pleasantville police departments and led by researchers from Stockton, Rutgers, and Northwestern Universities. The project ran from October 2022 through June 2024. The goal was to evaluate whether traffic stops conducted based on the EPJETS protocol would yield improved public perceptions and trust in law enforcement, compared to stops conducted under standard procedures.

Methodology

The two agencies conducted a total of 1,423 motor vehicle stops over 20 months. Drivers were randomly assigned to either a control group (n = 752), which experienced standard enforcement procedures, or an experimental group (n = 671), which was exposed to the EPJETS protocol that included the following elements:

- A script emphasizing fairness, dignity, and transparency.
- A pamphlet outlining high-risk accident zones, developed through risk-terrain modeling.
- Participants were invited to complete an anonymous survey assessing their perception of the encounter.
- Access to the body-worn camera (BWC) footage of their traffic stop, made available via a secure website.

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During the stops, officers informed motorists about the number and locations of crashes in the city, educating them on traffic safety and showing that the police care about their safety while driving. Drivers were invited to complete a survey following the stop, and 55% of them participated.

Results

The findings suggest that even brief, routine encounters such as traffic stops can enhance perceptions of community trust and police legitimacy. The EPJETS protocol not only improves citizens' perceptions of the police but also improves compliance with police directives. Individuals who received the EPJETS protocol are more likely to assist police in solving crimes and sharing information. Furthermore, individuals who experienced the EPJETS protocol found police officers more professional compared to those who received business-as-usual treatment. There were also higher levels of perceived police professionalism among those who were promised to be given access to their BWC footage. Please go to the NACJD website, and type in "Enhancing Procedural Justness of Encounters Through Substantiation" to search box to learn more about this research: <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/NACJD/index.html>