A national disconnect appears to exist between the law enforcement profession and members of racial and ethnic minority groups. Gallup poll data has revealed that citizen satisfaction with the police is at an all-time low, and it is lowest among African-Americans and Hispanics. Nationwide, less than 50% of Hispanics and less than 35% of African-Americans surveyed by Gallup in 2014 had confidence that police officers would treat them fairly (Gallup, 2014). Think about that. One out of every two Hispanics and two out of every three African-Americans has a mistrust of law enforcement. This is a national crisis in law enforcement that needs to be addressed. But how do we address it?

The most common recommendations from civil rights leaders, politicians, and other policy makers is multicultural training for law enforcement officers and the diversification of law enforcement agencies by hiring more police officers from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups. For example, these were two major recommendations in the Final Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing. In this report, under “Pillar One – Building Trust and Legitimacy,” the Task Force wrote, “law enforcement agencies should strive to create a workforce that encompasses a broad range of diversity including race, gender, language, life experience, and cultural background to improve understanding and effectiveness in dealing with all communities” (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015: 2). Under “Pillar Five – Training and Education,” the Task Force stated that police officer training should include, “implicit bias, fair and impartial policing, historical trauma, and other topics that address capacity to build trust and legitimacy in diverse communities” (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015: 56). Many individual states and communities have also recently formed commissions that have made similar recommendations.

Is there research evidence that creating a more diverse police force or requiring officers to go through multicultural or implicit bias training has any effect on the attitudes and behaviors of officers, or the attitudes and behaviors of citizens? Is there any evidence that these things will “improve understanding and effectiveness in dealing with all communities” as the President’s Task Force has claimed? Are these “evidence-based” recommendations or ideological / political rhetoric? After all, similar recommendations have been made by many commissions on law enforcement over the last half century, yet relations between the law enforcement profession and minority communities, especially the African-American community, still remain strained. This research newsletter will
examine the empirical research evidence on the effects of police agency racial diversity, and multicultural / human diversity training, on behavior and attitude outcomes.

**Multicultural Awareness Training**

The underlying theory behind multicultural awareness training (formerly known as cultural diversity training) is that if law enforcement officers have greater knowledge of the experiences, histories, and cultural norms of groups other than white males of European descent, they will become “enlightened,” more sensitive to the experiences and cultural norms of others, hold fewer prejudiced opinions, and behave in a less prejudicial manner toward citizens they encounter that are not white males of European descent (Schlosser, 2013). These types of training experiences often involve a combination of video clips, lectures, discussions, and field trips that seek to educate officers. More recently, training in “implicit bias” has arisen. This training informs officers about the prevalence of their unconscious biases and their unconscious racist actions (Paluck, 2006).

Unfortunately, even though such training has been going on for decades, there is little published research on whether or not this sort of training has any effect on attitudes or behaviors. The majority of the existing research on police multicultural training simply discusses the amount or type of training conducted, or how the training was perceived by the officers (Blakemore, Barlow, & Padgett, 1995; Schlosser, 2013; Zimny, 2015). Mostly this training is perceived negatively by law enforcement officers and recruits, even among officers who are members of racial minority groups (Bolton & Feagin, 2004; Cashmore, 2002). Only three studies could be found that examined the effects of this sort of training on officer prejudicial attitudes.

The first study, conducted in 1975 in three police academy classes of the Detroit Police Department, involved diversity training in which white and African-American recruits discussed problems associated with human relationships and responded to role-play scenarios regarding issues of racial diversity (Teahan, 1975). Compared to control groups of academy cadets who did not receive the training, white recruits who completed the training exhibited more prejudiced attitudes toward African-Americans, while African-American recruits developed more positive attitudes toward whites. More recently, a study was conducted among police academy recruits in Illinois who completed a block of training on multicultural diversity (Schlosser, 2013). Attitude surveys of the recruits before and after the training revealed that the training had no influence on the racial attitudes of the recruits. After learning the results of the study, this police academy changed their multicultural diversity training curriculum, but a second study still found that the new training still had no influence on recruit racial attitudes (Zimny, 2015).

While the research is limited to only three studies, all three of these studies agree that police multicultural diversity training has no positive influence on officer attitudes. These findings are also consistent with the research on multicultural training more broadly. Bigler (1999) reviewed 13 studies that evaluated the influence of multicultural education on attitudes among grade school students. Eight of the studies (62%) showed the education had no influence on student racial attitudes, and the remaining five only showed limited results, such as only improving attitudes about Jewish persons but not members of other groups. Even among the studies showing limited results, surveys 6 months after the program showed the students’ attitudes had returned to the same levels as before the training. More recent studies continue to demonstrate the same results (Paluck, 2006; Paluck & Green, 2009; Pendry et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2003). It is safe to say that there is no evidence that
traditional multicultural or implicit bias training has any significant positive influence on attitudes or behavior.

**Diversifying Police Forces**

Law enforcement organizations, like all government agencies, should have racial, ethnic, and gender diversity because that is embodiment of the American ideals of fairness and the ability of every person to achieve their dreams if they work hard enough. In democratic, fair, and free societies people should not be barred from employment in law enforcement due to their race, sex, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Police departments should have diversity simply because it is the right thing to do. Having a department that is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, sex, and sexual orientation, with a clear plan to recruit and hire individuals of diverse characteristics also helps agencies defend against legal challenges of employment discrimination. The premise behind the argument in the President’s Task Force report, however, is that racially diverse police forces will improve understanding and effectiveness in dealing with all communities. Unfortunately this argument is contrary to all the existing research evidence.

Hickman and Piquero (2009) examined a national sample of 496 city police agencies in the U.S. and found that the amount of racial diversity within each police department had no influence on the number or proportion of excessive force complaints filed by citizens, or the percentage of these complaints that were substantiated. Eitle, D’Alessio, and Stolzenberg (2014) studied a national sample of 497 municipal police agencies and found the racial diversity of the organization had no influence on the number of citizen complaints filed against officers. Willits and Nowacki (2014) explored a sample of 325 large and small city police departments and found that the degree of racial diversity within each department had no influence on rates of deadly force incidents. Sharp (2014) used a national sample of city police departments and found that racially diverse police forces were no more or less likely to make arrests for minor order maintenance offenses such as loitering, disorderly conduct, or public drunkenness. Finally, Hur (2012) looked at a national sample of 464 municipal police departments and found that, even after controlling for the economic conditions of each city, more racially diverse police forces actually had lower clearance rates for both violent and property crimes.

There is also evidence that communities of color do not show African-American officers any more respect. In fact, the research has revealed that African-American police officers tend to be treated worse than white officers when dealing with African-American citizens. Several studies with African-American law enforcement officers have revealed that they encounter more hostility and resistance from citizens of all races than do white officers (Bolton & Feagin, 2004; Dulaney, 1996; Leinen, 1985; Martin, 1994; Sun, 2003). Finally, research interviews of African-American residents of high crime neighborhoods have consistently revealed that these individuals generally either perceive law enforcement officers equally, or have even less favorable attitudes toward African-American officers, referring to them as “sell-outs” or “race traitors” (Anderson, 1992, 2000; Brunson, 2007). There is absolutely no research evidence to support the argument that increasing racial diversity in a police force will result in improved understanding and effectiveness in dealing with minority communities.
So What Works?

Yale University Psychologist Elizabeth Paluck has suggested that multicultural education and implicit bias training be dropped as methods to reduce prejudice and replaced with programs that foster intergroup contact. Her research has revealed that when people of different backgrounds (be it race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or whatever) are required to work cooperatively on a project, or engage in leisure activities together, the biased attitudes of all involved decline, and the decline remains consistent for long periods after the experience. In fact, psychologists Thomas Pettigrew of the University of California and Linda Tropp of Boston College examined 515 separate research studies on inter-group contact experiments and found overwhelming support for the argument that these experiences reduce prejudicial attitudes and behaviors, with the effects lasting months or years.

This suggests situations that cause law enforcement officers and minority citizens to work together in partnership to solve a specific problem, and situations which cause officers and minority citizens to engage in recreational activities together, can reduce bias and animosity on both sides. Consider community meetings with African-American residents of a neighborhood dealing with a crime problem where the meeting involves breaking into groups of 5-10 citizens, and one officer per group, for the purposes of working through the S.A.R.A. process and developing a response to the crime problem. According to the research, such an activity of officers and citizens working together will see any preconceived prejudices reduced on both sides.

Likewise, when officers get out of their patrol cars and intentionally focus on getting to know minority citizens on their beats, these informal interactions can also reduce bias for both the officers and the citizens. These types of activities have already been shown to improve citizen satisfaction with the police (Zhao, Scheider, & Thurman, 2002), and the results of 515 studies on intergroup interaction suggests these types of interactions will reduce biases held by officers and citizens. Rather than wasting money and time on multicultural or implicit bias training that shows no evidence of effectiveness, perhaps law enforcement resources would be put to better use engaging in intentional activities that bring officers and minority citizens in closer contact for the purposes of getting to know each other informally, and working together to solve neighborhood problems.

References


**Note:** Court holdings can vary significantly between jurisdictions. As such, it is advisable to seek the advice of a local prosecutor or legal adviser regarding questions on specific cases. This article is not intended to constitute legal advice on a specific case.