



How Police Departments Can Get Officers to Support Early Intervention Systems

Key Takeaways

- Officers are more likely to support early intervention systems—tools that flag potentially problematic behavior before formal discipline is needed—when they are familiar with how those systems work.
- Officers who see their agency's early intervention system as a wellness tool rather than a punishment tool have significantly higher levels of support for the system.

Why This Matters

Early intervention systems (EISs) are data-driven tools used by law enforcement agencies to identify officers who may be showing signs of problematic behavior and to offer support or corrective action before formal discipline becomes necessary. Despite widespread adoption—found in nearly 75 percent of agencies with 500 or more officers as of 2020—these systems are unlikely to achieve their goals when officers distrust or resist them. Without genuine support from the rank and file, EIS programs are unlikely to work as intended.

Prior research on EIS effectiveness has been mixed. Studies in Minneapolis, New Orleans, and Miami-Dade County found that early intervention led to reductions in officer complaints and use of force (Walker et al., 2001). A study of the Australian Victoria Police found a 71 percent reduction in complaints over two years (Macintyre et al., 2008). However, other studies found no meaningful improvements, with one study of 94 agencies concluding that departments with newer EIS programs showed no positive outcomes in complaint rates or use of force.

Despite this body of research, very little work has examined what officers themselves think about EIS programs or what shapes their willingness to participate. This study took a first look at the factors that predict officer buy-in—defined as believing the system is effective, viewing its alerts as legitimate, and being willing to accept interventions—across five US police departments.

How the Study Worked

Researchers analyzed survey data from 553 sworn officers across five police departments that participated in a broader study on officer wellness conducted by CNA Corporation between January and April 2023. Respondents included patrol officers (28.4 percent), detectives (18.6 percent), line supervisors (33.1 percent), and upper management (16.6 percent). The sample was predominantly male (79.9 percent), White (68.5 percent), and between 40 and 49 years old (40 percent). All five departments had established EIS programs in place.

The survey measured several key concepts: officer buy-in for the EIS, familiarity with the system (including training received and the ability to provide input), beliefs about whether the EIS is disciplinary in nature, and beliefs about whether the EIS is focused on officer wellness. Researchers used regression analysis—a statistical method that estimates how much each factor contributes to an outcome while accounting for others—to identify which factors most strongly predicted officer buy-in while controlling for demographics such as rank, tenure, gender, age, and race.

What Was Learned

- **Familiarity was the strongest predictor of buy-in.** Officers who reported being familiar with their agency's EIS—including having received sufficient training and having the opportunity to provide input on the system—showed the highest levels of support. Familiarity had the largest effect of any factor studied.
- **Viewing the EIS as a wellness tool increased buy-in.** Officers who believed their EIS was focused on officer well-being and identifying wellness solutions reported significantly higher buy-in. This was the second strongest predictor of support.
- **Viewing the EIS as disciplinary reduced buy-in.** Officers who saw the EIS as punitive or as a tool that penalizes proactive officers reported lower levels of support. The researchers note that because EIS flags can occur even when an officer has not violated any policy, perceiving the system as punitive can cause officers to feel they lack due process.
- **Demographics alone explained very little.** A model using only demographic factors such as rank, age, gender, and race explained just 5 percent of the variation in buy-in. Adding the EIS-specific factors raised that figure to 40 percent, showing that how officers perceive the system matters far more than who they are.

What This Means in Practice

Agencies can meaningfully increase officer support for EIS programs by investing in training and reframing how the system is communicated. Officers who understand how the EIS works, have had the opportunity to provide input, and see it as a tool designed to support their well-being are significantly more likely to accept its alerts and interventions as legitimate. This means training is not just about compliance—it is a direct lever for program effectiveness.

The authors caution that policy language and supervisor training should explicitly emphasize the wellness benefits of the EIS and avoid language or practices that imply the system is punitive. They also note that this study cannot speak to agency-level implementation decisions—such as oversight structures, resource allocation, or policy content—and that future research using qualitative methods and a broader set of measures is needed to better understand the reasons behind variation in buy-in, including differences across rank.

Source article

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