



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

One Name, Many Systems: How Police Early Intervention Programs Differ Across Agencies

Key Takeaways

- Police early intervention systems vary widely from agency to agency; thus, there is no single “early intervention (EI) system,” but rather many different programs operating under the same (or similar) name.
- Agencies share a few common features, such as tracking citizen complaints and using numerical thresholds to flag officers, but they vary widely in which indicators, thresholds, interventions, and follow-up practices that they use.
- Policies are inconsistent regarding how officers are monitored after an intervention or how the system itself is checked through audits.

Why This Matters

El systems are widely considered a “best practice” for police accountability and officer wellness, and they are common in large agencies. As of 2020, about 75 percent of agencies with 500 or more sworn officers reported using an EI system. The problem is that research on whether these systems are effective has not kept up with the speed at which agencies adopted them. One reason is that EI systems vary so much across agencies that they are difficult to study systematically.

Two earlier efforts tried to measure the variation in EI systems, both of which used surveys to gather data on identification and selection criteria, interventions, and monitoring processes. Both efforts found wide differences across agencies, but both relied on what agencies reported they did rather than on the written policies that officially guide these EI systems.

Until now, no one had closely reviewed the actual policies that govern EI systems. This study fills that gap by examining the written policies of 67 large agencies to see how their systems are set up in practice.

How the Study Worked

The researchers began with a scan of law enforcement agencies with 500 or more sworn officers that reported having an EI system. They collected publicly available policies, most of them directly from agency websites, resulting in a sample of 67 agencies. The sample covered all US regions, with the South most heavily represented (32 agencies). For each policy, the researchers recorded whether it included specific features: the EI system’s name, its location within the agency, what behaviors it tracks, how it flags officers, what interventions it offers, how it monitors officers afterward, and whether it is audited. Both researchers independently reviewed all 67 policies and then compared notes, meeting to resolve any differences. The researchers then examined how often each feature appeared and where commonalities and differences existed among policies.

What Was Learned

- **Systems go by many different names.** Only 14 of the 67 agencies called their program an “early intervention system,” and 23 used a name unique to their own department. The word “early” appeared in 50 of the names.
- **A few indicators are nearly universal, but the number tracked varies widely.** Every agency that listed indicators tracked citizen complaints or discipline, and about 89 percent tracked nonlethal use of force. Some agencies used just one indicator, and others used more than 50.
- **Most agencies flag officers using numerical thresholds, but thresholds vary substantially across agencies.** About 81 percent of agencies used a threshold, meaning a set number of events within a set time. For example, for nonlethal force over a six-month period, some agencies flagged an officer after two incidents, and others had up to nine.
- **Training and counseling are the most common responses, and follow-up is often unclear.** Nearly 94 percent of agencies listed extra or remedial training as an intervention, and about 71 percent listed mental health counseling. But only about 36 percent of policies clearly described monitoring officers after an intervention, and about 36 percent of policies made no mention of auditing the system.

What This Means in Practice

The label “EI system” is too vague. Because agencies design these EI systems so differently, practitioners cannot assume that a program praised as a “best practice” at a different agency will resemble their own. The researchers suggest that it may be more useful to focus on specific features or combinations of features that work well, rather than treating all EI systems as equivalent.

The researchers also point to a practical consequence of what they found: many agencies may have limited ability to tell whether their EI system is working as intended. Because only about a third of policies clearly described monitoring officers after an intervention, and about a third said nothing about auditing the system, many departments may lack a clear way to track officers’ progress or to check whether their thresholds, indicators, and interventions are producing the results they want. Without that information, agencies may struggle to know when parts of the system need to be adjusted.

The researchers note that because existing studies are mostly single-agency case studies, practitioners should be cautious about drawing broad conclusions about whether EI systems are effective. They recommend that agencies treat EI system design and adoption as a deliberate, evidence-informed process, carefully weighing the features most likely to support accountability, officer wellness, and long-term improvement, rather than simply replicating what other agencies have done.

Source article

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For more information, contact Tom Christoff, Senior Research Scientist (christoffc@cna.org)

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