



Police Attitudes Toward Their Involvement in Post-Overdose Outreach Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, the number of opioid-related overdose deaths in the United States has quadrupled to nearly half a million (Lurigio, Andrus, & Scott, 2018). 2017, alone, saw over 70,000 fatal overdoses with over two-thirds of these (47,600) involving opioids (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). This resulted in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services formally declaring this current opioid crisis a public health emergency in October of 2017 (Johnson & Wagner, 2017).

With police historically fighting on the front lines against illicit drugs, their position in this current epidemic has proven to be no different. However, it has changed form. Stemming from the War on Drugs and continuing through the beginning of this epidemic, law enforcement agencies devoted themselves to the traditional, crime control, model of policing (Fulkerson, Keena, & Longman, 2016). As the epidemic got exponentially worse, many law enforcement officials realized their methods were not working and began to shift toward a more service-centered model of policing (Botieri, Allen, Varano, Kelley, & Nevins, 2018).

Armed with the mindset that “we can’t simply arrest ourselves out of this,” police departments throughout New England began to develop initiatives that involve officers making outreach visits to the homes of those who have recently experienced a non-fatal overdose in an effort to offer the victim services and encourage him or her to enter treatment (Botieri et al, 2018). However, there is very little research regarding how officers perceive these programs. As a result, with post-overdose outreach programs gaining popularity throughout the area, there is a critical need to understand how police officers perceive the role in these programs. Thus, the current study focuses on the research question: Do officers believe encouraging treatment, as they are called upon to do through their participation in post-overdose outreach programs, is a responsibility of the police?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role Theory

Role Identification

Impact of role on how individual views himself

Behavior aligns with role (Biddle, 1986)

- ❖ Related to policing, officers have two main roles that they can choose to fill: “law enforcer” or “public servant.” The role in which an officer chooses to fill impacts how the officer responds to a variety of incidents on the job. For example, officers who view their role as “law enforcer” are more likely to resolve situations with arrests or the use of other punitive measures. On the other hand, officers who view themselves as public servants are less likely to rely on their arresting powers and, instead, are more likely to prefer sitting down with the individual to determine the root cause of the behavior (McKenna & White, 2017).
- ❖ Green et al. (2013) published one of the first studies to discuss officer role in relation to policing the opioid crisis. The authors found that many officers were conflicted between the law enforcer and public servant roles. Specifically, these officers felt obligated to enforce the drug laws in order to keep their communities drug-free, while feeling empathy toward those who have recently overdosed and wanting to help them prevent future overdoses.
- ❖ Saucier et al. (2016) found that the majority of officers believe that addiction is best handled through treatment and that police have a role to play in the prevention of future overdoses.
- ❖ Most recently, Murphy & Russell (2020) found that nearly 62% of officers agreed that police should play an active role in referring an overdose survivor to treatment.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Methodology

- ❖ To ascertain officers’ attitudes toward their role in post-overdose outreach programs, survey research methods were employed.
- ❖ Surveys were sent electronically to police officers in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, three states significantly impacted by this current opioid epidemic and known to have high levels of participation in outreach programs.
- ❖ Law Enforcer: 3-item factor score comprised of “Individuals with substance use disorder (SUD) should be punished for the crime of possession,” “All drug laws should be enforced at all times,” and “Drug possession should be mainly punished through the criminal justice system.”
- ❖ Public Servant: 6-item factor score combining “It is the job of police officers to both protect and serve,” “Overdose prevention requires a proactive police response,” “Police officers should act as community caretakers,” “I wish I had more time to spend on service-related calls,” “If officers act in a service capacity, it detracts from their ability to fight crime,” and “Crime is only one of the several problems of which police should be concerned.”

Analysis

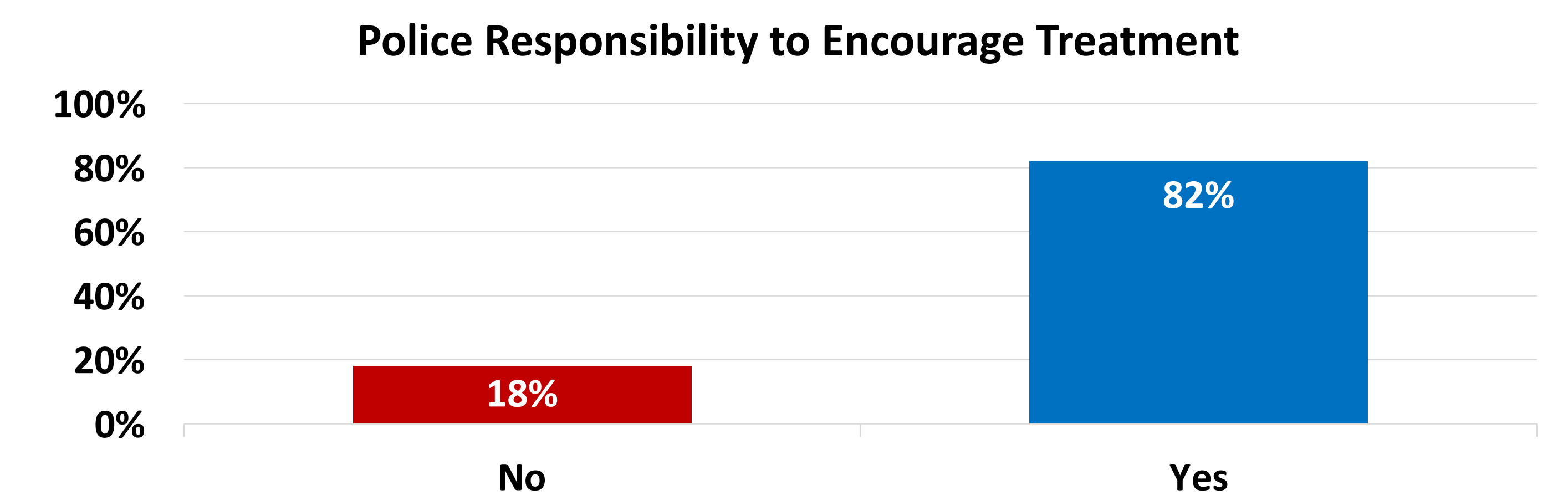
- ❖ First, descriptive statistics were run to determine what percentage of officers believe it is the responsibility of police to encourage individuals with SUD to enter treatment
- ❖ Next, to determine the effect of each independent variable on the outcome variable, binary logistic regression was used.
- ❖ Finally, following the full regression model, three groups of variables were stepped in through the use of stepwise regression.
 - ❖ Group 1: Demographics
 - ❖ Group 2: Experience with Addiction
 - ❖ Group 3: Officer Role

| Binary Logistic Regression: Full Model Variable | b (Std Error) | Sig | Exp(B) |
|---|----------------|----------|--------|
| (Constant) | 2.435 (0.431) | 0.000 | 11.411 |
| Years Served ¹ | 0.004 (0.014) | 0.743 | 1.004 |
| Command Staff ¹ | 0.228 (0.280) | 0.415 | 1.256 |
| Department Size ¹ | -0.003 (0.001) | 0.002* | 0.997 |
| Education: Bachelor’s Degree ¹ | 0.049 (0.242) | 0.840 | 1.050 |
| Gender ¹ | 0.078 (0.433) | 0.858 | 1.081 |
| Race ¹ | 0.439 (0.350) | 0.211 | 1.550 |
| Personally Know Someone Suffering From Addiction ² | -0.208 (0.262) | 0.428 | 0.812 |
| Personally Know Someone Who Has Overdosed ² | -0.416 (0.261) | 0.111 | 0.660 |
| Recent Overdose Responses ² | -0.019 (0.107) | 0.860 | 0.981 |
| Adequate Training ² | -0.168 (0.228) | 0.460 | 0.845 |
| Law Enforcer ³ | -0.379 (0.116) | 0.001*** | 0.685 |
| Public Servant ³ | 0.900 (0.130) | 0.000*** | 2.459 |
| Sig | 0.000 | | |
| -2 Log Likelihood | 520.027 | | |
| Cox & Snell R Square | 0.152 | | |
| Nagelkerke R Square | 0.250 | | |

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics



Binary Logistic Regression: Full Model

- ❖ The full regression model indicates that there are three significant predictors of police responsibility to encourage treatment.
- ❖ In terms of officer role, *law enforcer* negatively predicts police responsibility to encourage treatment, while *public servant* positively predicts responsibility.
 - ❖ As *law enforcer* increases by one unit, the odds of viewing encouraging treatment as police responsibility decrease by 31.5%.
 - ❖ As *public servant* increases by one unit, the individual is 2.5 times more likely to believe police are responsible for encouraging treatment.
- ❖ Additionally, *department size* negatively predicts police responsibility with the odds of viewing the encouragement of treatment as a responsibility of the police decreasing by 0.3% with each one-unit increase.

Stepwise Regression

- ❖ Model 1, accounting for all demographic variables, explains 7.3% of the variance.
- ❖ Model 2, stepping in addiction experience variables, explains an additional 3.3% of the variance for a total of 10.6% explained variance.
- ❖ Model 3, further stepping in officer role variables, explains 14.4% more of the variance for a cumulative 25% of variance explained.

DISCUSSION

Consonant with prior literature regarding role theory, officers who identify with the law enforcer role are less likely to view encouraging treatment as the responsibility of police, while officers who identify with the public servant role are more likely to hold this viewpoint.

Given the results of the stepwise regression, we can see that the majority of variance is explained through the police roles. Therefore, in order to increase the number of officers who view encouraging treatment as police responsibility, there should be greater training on the public servant aspect of policing. Greater exposure to these service-oriented ideals is likely to cause officers to identify with this role and thus, have a greater likelihood of viewing police as being responsible for encouraging treatment.

In terms of limitations, it is important to note that surveys were only collected from officers working in three New England states. As such, these results may not be able to be generalized to other regions of the country. Additionally, this study may have been subject to selection bias as both departments and individual officers chose to participate in this study. It is possible that the officers who chose to participate were more likely to hold the public servant role as they were willing to take the survey.

Future research should replicate this study to determine if police attitudes toward their involvement in post-overdose outreach programs remain consistent across the country. In addition, more research should be conducted to understand the predictors of the public servant role, specifically as it relates to working with individuals with substance use disorder.