

Examining Organizational Change and Procedural Justice: An International Cross-Site Evaluation of Two Police Departments

Executive Summary

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Background

With support from the Open Society Foundation, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) partnered with University College London's (UCL) Institute for Global City Policing in 2019 to undertake an assessment of organizational justice reforms within West Midlands Police (WMP) in the United Kingdom and Arlington Police Department (APD) in Texas, United States of America. The aim of this partnership was to comparatively assess how organizational changes are being implemented in WMP and APD and to propose recommendations for other departments to implement similar reforms. This comparative evaluation examines the process of implementation and whether reforms geared toward organizational justice are both understood and accepted by the members of police organizations. Because the evaluation focused on these internal organizational justice reforms, there are limitations to the extent that this research can predict increased community perceptions of fairness and trust. In this report, the researchers present a preliminary evaluation of the changes introduced in both police organizations, focusing on the implementation of principles of organizational justice in the two workforces.

Methods

Following initial conversations between WMP and APD leadership and UCL and Vera researchers, the working group jointly decided to focus on five key areas for comparative evaluation: Professional Standards Department (in WMP) and Internal Affairs (in APD); Promotions; Recruitment (in APD); Training; and Taser Training (in WMP) and Defensive Tactics (in APD). Three researchers at Vera and two researchers at UCL carried out fieldwork in Birmingham, Coventry, and Wolverhampton (in the West Midlands) and in Arlington (Texas) between June and December 2019. Vera researchers conducted 16 semi-structured interviews and UCL researchers conducted 24 semi-structured interviews, a combined total of 40 interviews with police officers and employees of both organizations. Each research team also organized and moderated two focus group discussions to understand the perceptions of rank-and-file and middle management officers. Both teams carried out qualitative fieldwork, including observations at police stations, in training academies, and on patrol. Additionally, officers from both organizations participated in two exchange trips, visiting each other to learn reform and implementation strategies that have generated the most success. The two key research questions in this evaluation are whether the organizational justice reforms were implemented in the respective organizations and whether these reforms were understood and accepted by members of the organization.

Summary of Key Findings

- **Strategies:** WMP and APD chose distinct organizational strategies for implementing changes. Whereas WMP took a more programmatic step-by-step approach, APD opted for a more organic overarching strategy. Organizational size and structure, jurisdictional size, and availability of resources were important factors in determining the approaches of both organizations. The progression from programmatic to organic implementation of these changes can vary depending on the size and structure of a police organization. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Scale:** In APD, many of the reforms were introduced in 2013 and at the time of the assessment were considered to have spanned the entire organization. In contrast, the change program in WMP ("Fairness in Policing") was in its second year of

implementation at the time of evaluation and thus had not reached across all of WMP's various departments and neighborhoods.

- **Results:** Because of differences in the longevity of each program, and the stages of implementation at the time of the evaluations, findings from the implementation at APD indicate generally positive outcomes, whereas findings from the WMP program are preliminary and cannot evidence exact outcomes of the changes introduced.
- **Conceptual confusion:** Both departments' organizational changes combine principles of organizational and procedural justice. In WMP, the conflation of the two concepts appears to confuse the delivery of the change program in certain areas. In APD, the conflation of the two terms did not affect the implementation of the changes but was noticeable during participant interviews.

Summary of Recommendations

- Those in charge of implementing changes must address the lack of conceptual clarity between the differences in "organizational" and "procedural" justice in order for future evaluations to assess exactly how such changes benefit organizations internally (to deliver organizational justice) and how the delivery of organizational justice affects perceptions of procedural justice externally, if at all. Conceptual clarity can be increased via a Theory of Change that offers clear desired outcomes and impacts of reforms.
- Further evaluation needs to take place to adequately assess the outcomes and impact of organizational justice programs in WMP and APD. This evaluation should be undertaken at a time when the changes have been more fully introduced across departments and geographies to understand the effects on both workforces.
- The procedural justice project in APD has survived despite changes in management and leadership because of a sustained commitment and institutionalized reforms. This commitment is important for building organizational memory, which could not be observed in WMP at the time of evaluation. To institutionalize organizational and procedural justice, departments should continue delivering the relevant organizational changes regardless of changes in management.
- The language and messaging of organizational reforms must be carefully and strategically selected to increase the likelihood of acceptance from rank-and-file officers and avoid resistance and backlash.
- Well-respected members of a department should be selected to champion the organizational changes. Experienced leaders will increase perceptions of legitimacy of the changes and may increase buy-in from the department.
- Areas in which organizational justice reforms are implemented should have a feedback mechanism to ensure that the reforms have measurable outcomes. A feedback mechanism will also hold those in charge accountable for the reforms to regularly evaluate the fairness of the organization.

Organizational justice training should not be limited to rank-and-file personnel but should include all sworn and non-sworn employees in an organization. The training should be distinct

from other trainings that employees receive with tangible examples of the importance of organizational justice.