

Training program leads to police using less force

March 18 2013

Researchers with the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry designed a one-day training program for the Edmonton Police Service that resulted in officers being more likely to quickly identify mental health issues during a call, and less likely to use physical force or a weapon in those situations. The training resulted in long-term behaviour change in the officers and saved the police force money because mental health-related calls were dealt with more efficiently.

The pilot study published in the open access and peer-reviewed journal, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, noted the following post-training findings: a 40 per cent increase in officers' abilities to recognize [mental health](#) issues as the reason for a call, a decrease in the use of physical force or weapons when officers interacted with those who were mentally ill, and more efficiency when officers dealt with calls involving mental [health issues](#).

The principal investigator was Faculty of [Medicine](#) & Dentistry researcher Peter Silverstone, who works in the Department of Psychiatry. He said the key goals of the training were to improve officers' empathy, communication skills and ability to de-escalate a tough situation. The training involved actors role playing six realistic scenarios with [police](#) officers. Sometimes the mental health issue was easily discernible, while in other scenarios the issue was masked or could be misconstrued as a drug addiction.

"I think what worked with the [training program](#) is that we managed to engage officers at a strong emotional level, not just an intellectual level,"

says Silverstone. "I think that's why it carried through to the work they do on a day-to-day basis. And that's why the behavioural change was long-lasting.

"It can be hard to differentiate between mania and a drug-induced high, or between psychosis and drug-induced problems. What we wanted to get across to officers is to not make assumptions right away. There may be underlying mental health issues that may not be immediately obvious or that may mimic drug or alcohol-related symptoms."

Insp. Kevin Kobi, with the Professional Development Branch of the Edmonton Police Service, added: "Every day the front line members of the Edmonton Police Service come face-to-face with people in crisis situations. This training complements our communication training by providing officers the tools to recognize and effectively deal with someone who is struggling with mental illness."

After the training scenarios, officers received feedback from the actor involved and from another actor who observed the interactions. The training program encouraged police behaviours such as verbally expressing empathy, maintaining eye contact, using non-threatening body language, "mirroring" the actor's movements and sharing non-threatening information..

Silverstone says that with many unfortunate interactions between police forces and those with mental illnesses the goal "is to try and stop these tragedies from occurring in the first place." The paper noted that studies in Canada and the U.K. have found that 37-48 per cent of people fatally shot by police had underlying mental health issues. He adds that better training is warranted since it is increasingly common for police to be first responders in calls involving those who are mentally ill.

The training program designed by Silverstone and his team cost \$120 per

officer and resulted in long-term savings of an estimated \$80,000 because subsequent calls were dealt with more efficiently.

Silverstone's team is working with the Edmonton [Police Service](#) on a second phase of research, to expand the study to include a larger cohort of officers, and interview a broader range of people who are directly impacted by the police. The first phase of research involved 663 officers.

Provided by University of Alberta Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry

Citation: Training program leads to police using less force (2013, March 18) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-03-police.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.