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Author

Khim, Amy

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Rewriting the Script: A Study on Cultural Humility and Police Violence

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

This idea lies at the heart of ongoing discourse about how to address one of California’s most complex policy challenges: police violence. Discussion surged in the midst of social justice movements such as the Rodney King Riots and Black Lives Matter, bringing to light what can be done to remediate the disproportionate impact of police brutality in marginalized communities. Garnering widespread global attention and mobilization, hundreds of thousands demanded action from government institutions and policy makers to recognize the weight of this issue. These movements pushed policymakers to consider how to not only respond after life has been ruined or taken, but what can be done to prevent harm in the first place.

My research takes a preventative lens as I examine whether cultural humility and implicit bias training can decrease police violence. Specifically, I ask whether departments that implement these programs can decrease irreparable use of force by law enforcement compared to departments that do not adopt these programs. To answer this question, I analyzed the rates of police violence of four police departments over the course of six years, two departments that have implemented an anti-bias training program and two departments that have not. I found that training centered on cultural humility and anti-bias can have a substantial impact on severe use of force by police, and I conclude with a discussion of what this means for police training policy in California law enforcement departments.

Background & Significance

Police violence and community-police relations continue to be a pressing issue in California. Researchers estimate that more than 250,000 of civilian injuries nationally are caused by law enforcement, with more than 600 people killed each year. California alone accounts for 200 deaths each year from interactions with law enforcement, and nearly 250 people are shot by police annually. (University of Illinois Chicago, 2025)

The burden of this violence is not evenly felt. The Los Angeles riots of 1992 and the Black Lives Matter movement starting in 2013 highlighted the tragic deaths resulting from policing's biased and excessive contact with people of color, especially with black communities. Statewide data reveals significant racial disparities in police stops and use of force. According to the California Racial and Identity Profiling Board, Black residents make up 5.4% of the state's population, but 12.5% of stops. Latinos were also disproportionately stopped, making up 32.4% of the population, but 42.9% of stops. Native Americans were searched most frequently compared with all racial groups, in 22.4% of stops, nearly double the search rate for white residents, who were searched in 12.4% of encounters (Premkumar et al., 2021) These jarring patterns in law enforcement contact reflects the systemic bias that largely impacts police-community relations across the state.

Rebuilding trust and community safety isn't just a moral imperative but a statutory one. Given California's clear commitment to equity and accountability, the issue of police violence and racial justice is significant in regards to state policy. Cities such as Long Beach, Oakland, and Los Angeles have faced several high-profile cases of police violence that have severely undermined the public's trust with law enforcement. Recent legislation such as AB 1506 in 2020

which requires state investigations of police shootings, and SB 230 in 2021 which emphasized de-escalation in use-of-force instances reflects the state's commitment to prioritize accountability for law enforcement. Even with these legislative efforts, incidents of violence still persist suggesting accountability policies may not be enough without preventative strategies. It is imperative that California displays a continued effort in remediating the issue of police brutality regardless of varying political and social climates.

Cultural humility is defined as the process of self-reflection and a commitment to recognizing one's own biases and privileges. A key aspect of this concept is acknowledging and dismantling power differences to create more equitable and respectful interactions. This principle extends to organizations which can incorporate cultural humility in their policies and practices to promote equity and institutional accountability.

Mandatory cultural humility training that teaches historical harm and emphasizes de-escalation strategies could have a potentially momentous impact in reducing violence. These training programs center concepts designed to reframe officer decision making before use-of-force. This could potentially decrease use-of-force, rebuild community trust and lessen racialized harm. Additionally, reducing police violence could prevent financial implications California spent over \$60 million on police misconduct settlements in 2023 alone (Jany, 2024). Reducing excessive use-of-force could greatly diminish these costs and can allocate these funds for other state priorities. Overall, implementing training programs could be highly beneficial for California in improving public confidence in law enforcement, remediating the instances of harm for marginalized communities, and reemphasizing the state's priority of the well-being of all Californians.

Literature Review

Existing research done on police violence consistently displays that officer behavior is not only shaped by individual decisions and mindsets, but by institutional frameworks and cultures that guide those decisions. Kincaid (2024) discusses in their paper “Excited Delirium: Training Encourages Law Enforcement Violence” the excited delirium syndrome which has been historically embedded in law enforcement training. This paper traces the origin of the excited delirium concept to explain deaths in police custody among substance-using individuals, and law enforcement officers were trained to recognize symptoms including: extreme agitation, aggression and resistance to pain. Rather than focusing on communication, Kincaid finds that because of excited delirium centered training, officers are more likely to use aggressive tactics earlier and have less patience to de-escalate. Kincaid also provides an analysis of how this legitimized the immediate and aggressive use of force against marginalized communities and people experiencing mental health crises. This research provides critical insights for my research: training itself is not inherently beneficial, but its content and framing can either exacerbate violence or remediate it. Kincaid also emphasizes the need to dissolve harmful training programs which opens space for evidence, empathy and community based training. (Kincaid, 2024)

The racialized patterns that Kincaid identifies aligns with the evidence showing vast systemic disparities in police-community interactions and outcomes. In Levin’s article “California Police Show Severe Racial Bias in Stops and Searches”, they report on state-level analysis data that people perceived to be black, indigenous/ native american, and latino are stopped or searched by law enforcement at disproportionate rates. Levin emphasizes that these

patterns of violence are suggestive of more systemic profiling rather than isolated incidents. (Levin, 2024) These findings strengthen my research as it also argues systemic changes are needed to address patterns of police violence instead of continuous isolated solutions. These disparities reflect the same patterns of racial harm in Kincaid's piece and together, they point to a structural issue that law enforcement institutions operate through frameworks that reinforce harmful racial stereotypes and legitimize violent tactics. Collectively this literature reveals gaps that my research seeks to address. Kincaid diagnoses how harmful frameworks contribute to police violence but does not evaluate what training frameworks will improve outcomes. Levin documents the extent of racial disparities in policing, but does not examine if and what efforts could alter these patterns. My study addresses these gaps by shifting the conversation from identifying the problem to identifying solutions.

Across multiple studies, academic scholars intersect on the idea that police education centered on empathy, cultural knowledge and communication has the potential to shape officer behavior. Kendall's (2022) research, "Increasing Religious Literacy in Law Enforcement" defines religious literacy as the ability to understand how religion and spirituality shapes behavior, values, and community norms. Kendall observed that in many African-American communities, faith and religious institutions have historically been a significant aspect in social justice and ways communities respond to injustice. This research hypothesized that enhancing religious literacy for law enforcement can be a meaningful tool in building trust between communities of color and law enforcement. Kendall's findings suggest that officers who are aware of faith traditions and spiritual strength in communities of color are in a better position to understand community behavior and responses without mistrust. (Kendall, 2022) This piece demonstrates that interpersonal understanding may be a crucial component in building safer

police-community interactions. This mirrors my research as it also centers the same foundational logic that misunderstanding and a lack of cultural awareness creates tension and mistrust which can then escalate into violent encounters.

Studies on de-escalation further reinforce this idea but also highlights challenges in implementing new interpersonal training. Isaza et al. (2024) evaluated a national de-escalation training program called “train-the-trainer” which was delivered in 3-day sessions. A UC research team observed training across the training sessions, and followed up with interviews and surveys about officer confidence and attitudes of the training. This study found that officers reported significant improvements in attitude and perception skills post-training. However, this study also revealed discrepancies in implementation of the training from varying agencies. This is suggestive of a notable challenge that even if a training model is effective in theory, inconsistent adoption of the program can limit the impact of these programs.

At the same time, other research suggests that not all training programs centered on implicit bias curriculum won’t always achieve meaningful change in officer behavior. Worden et al. (2024) in their research “Implicit bias training for police: Evaluating impacts on enforcement disparities” evaluated implicit bias training across police departments and found no statistically significant reduction of racial disparities in stops, arrests or use of force. These findings suggest that structural forces may have a greater effect on racial disparities than individual bias awareness alone. It can also suggest that traditional implicit bias training may not be sufficient therefore introducing new comprehensive and updated frameworks may be necessary for greater impact. My research responds to gaps in these works by comparing departments with and without such training over time, providing new quantitative evidence to an area of study that can lack comprehensive alternatives.

Theory & Hypothesis

The theory behind this project is that cultural humility training meaningfully alters officer behavior by reshaping the frameworks law enforcement embodies when it comes to the communities they serve, the historical and cultural context of those communities and power imbalances within interactions. The underlying logic is that implicit bias in policing is not just an individual choice but a product of assumptions reinforced by historical social dynamics. Therefore, when officers learn about the historical dynamics between law enforcement and marginalized communities, they become more aware of how their actions can be interpreted and how they themselves may misinterpret fear for threat.

Police departments that implement mandatory cultural humility training centered on historical racial harm, power dynamics and self-reflection will experience a decrease in instances of severe police violence than departments without such training. This effect occurs because cultural humility reduces officer bias, increases empathy and encourages de-escalation which lessens the likelihood of violent encounters.

I hypothesize departments that have implemented cultural humility training will have a statistically significant decrease in annual police violence per 100,000 residents within the three years following implementation compared to their own violence rates prior to implementation and departments without such training during the same period.

Research Design

My research designs consist of my independent variable (X) which is the presence of required cultural humility training within a police department. This is measured as a binary variable (1- program implemented; 0 = not implemented). This measure is chosen because it allows clear comparison across departments. Data for this variable will be drawn from the department training policies and the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST). My dependent variable (Y) is the rate of use-of-force incidents resulting in injury or death, measured as a continuous variable representing the number of violent incidents per population size in each county. This measure is chosen because it captures variation in violence frequency relative to population, allowing for comparison across counties with different population sizes. Data for this variable will be obtained from use-of-force data published by the police department as well as annual use-of-force data released from the Department of Justice.

To account for alternative explanations, my study controls for several control variables that may influence both the implementation of training and violence rates. These include racial composition, poverty levels and department training budget. These factors are included and controlled for because demographic composition can affect police contact rates, poverty influences enforcement patterns and department funding affects the implementation of the training program. Data for these controls will largely come from the U.S Census Survey and California financial reports.

The unit of analysis is country-level police departments, and the project uses a multiple-case over-time design analyzing three years before and after training implementation. The geographic scope includes departments across California with a particular focus on urban,

populated and diverse cities. The specific cities I analyzed are Long Beach, Los Angeles, Oakland and San Jose; Oakland and San Jose being the two departments with training and Los Angeles and Long Beach are the two departments without. I compared Oakland and Long Beach's annual use of force from 2012-2018, and I compared San Jose and Los Angeles' use of force from 2016-2022. The reason behind these two time periods is due to San Jose and Oakland implementing their cultural humility programs at different years, Oakland implemented in 2015 and San Jose in 2019. This observational design allows for comprehensive systematic comparison of departments with and without cultural humility training over time.

Additionally, I performed an ANOVA test because I am comparing more than two groups, and looking at multiple police departments over several years. Using an ANOVA test efficiently tests all these groups at once. This test measures how much the two police department groups differ from each other as well as how much the use of force rates vary inside each department. If the two department groups truly differ then the F-value will be high and the p-value will be low.

Results

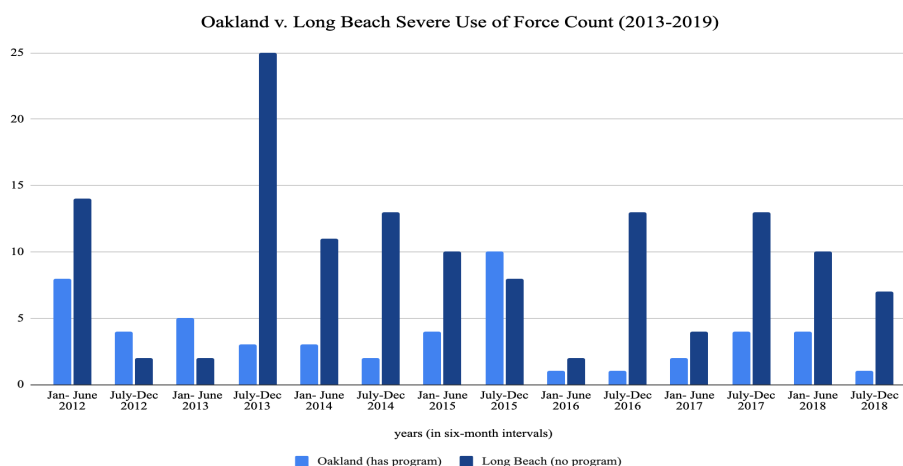


Figure 1 Data Source: Department of Justice Use Force Report

This graph compares severe use-of-force incidents from 2013 to 2019 for two police departments: Oakland, which adopted cultural humility training, and Long Beach, which did not. Each year is divided into six-month intervals to provide a more detailed view over time. Oakland implemented cultural humility training in July 2015, and the graph displays three years before and after the training begins. The Oakland trend line shows a general decline in severe use-of-force following implementation, though there are fluctuations most noticeably between 2017 and 2018. Even with these inconsistencies, post-training counts in Oakland are overall lower than the three years prior. Long Beach shows higher levels of use-of-force with many fluctuations over time. Overall, Oakland displays a more general trend of decreasing use-of-force compared to Long Beach, but it is not consistent enough to say use of force decreases solely due to the presence of cultural humility training.

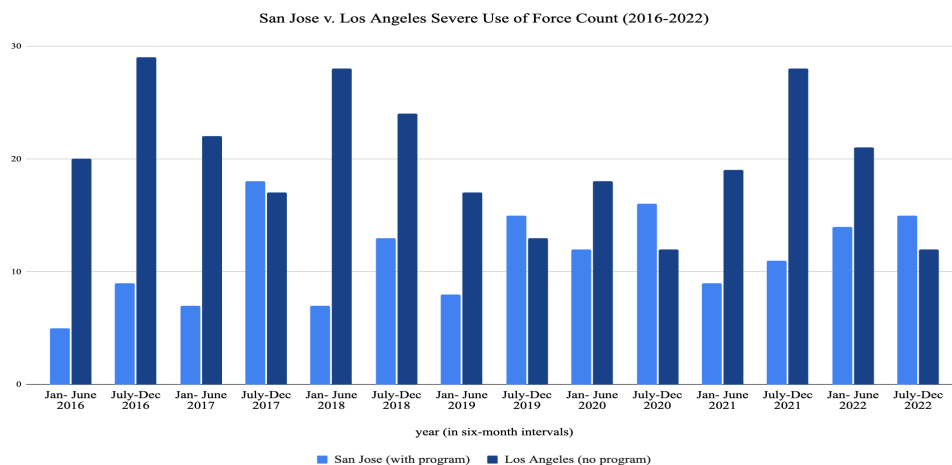


Figure 2 Data Source: Department of Justice Use Force Report

This graph presents severe use-of-force counts for San Jose, which implemented cultural humility training, and Los Angeles, which did not, across a seven-year period from 2016 to 2022. Like the previous graph, each year is split into six-month intervals to capture more detail

in the data. San Jose implemented their cultural humility training in June 2019, and the graph displays three years before and after implementation. The San Jose trend shows some reductions in severe use-of-force following training, though similar to Oakland's, is not consistently downward. Los Angeles also displays fluctuations with no sustained decrease over time and consistently higher levels of severe force than San Jose throughout the period. Like Oakland, San Jose's use-of-force count is not consistent enough to definitively say use of force decreases solely due to the presence of cultural humility training.

Furthermore, I ran an ANOVA test to see if there is a statistical significance in use-of-force count between Oakland and San Jose vs Los Angeles and Long Beach over the seven year time period. I got an F-statistic of 15.43 and a p-value of 0.000245. A higher F-value means that groups differ way more than one would expect from random chance. An F-statistic of 15.43 tells me that there is a real difference in severe use-of-force outcomes between police departments with cultural humility training and those without. Furthermore, a p-value of 0.000245 is below the 0.05 significance threshold meaning the differences between the two police department groups are very unlikely to be due to chance.

Discussion and Research Implications

This study sought to answer the question: Does police training centered around cultural humility reduce police use-of-force in California police departments? My hypothesis predicted that police departments implementing cultural humility training would experience a decrease in severe use-of-force incidents over time compared to departments without such training.

My findings and results support my hypothesis but also revealed complexity. The trend lines for police departments that adopted cultural humility training displayed a general downward direction in use-of-force, whereas departments without training displayed more consistent, upward trends. Furthermore, the ANOVA test further strengthened my hypothesis revealing that there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups. This indicates that the variability in use-of-force is highly unlikely to be due to random chance, giving evidence that cultural humility training can be associated with different use-of-force outcomes.

However, complexities arose as reductions in use-of-force among departments with cultural humility training were not consistent, suggesting that training alone does not automatically reduce police violence. Several alternative explanations can help to clarify why the results may not be as strong or consistent as originally expected. One alternative route could be that racial composition and poverty levels influenced patterns at the department level. Departments serving jurisdictions with higher rates of poverty or racial diversity are proven to experience elevated police contact rates which may result in higher levels of force regardless of training. Another explanation could be due to department training budgets and capacity likely affecting how comprehensively and consistently the cultural humility programs were implemented. This could explain why Oakland had a more consistent decline compared to San Jose even though both are implementing very similar cultural humility training programs. Third, another possible influence could be statewide trends such as crime rates, legislative reforms and changes in enforcement priorities that interacted with training effectiveness.

This research has a couple notable policy implications. First, it highlights the need for aggregated, city-level data. During the research process, it was difficult to find consistent data for police departments even for populated cities that pride themselves on data accessibility and

transparency. This is reflective of the need for policing data at the city level that is transparent, comprehensive and consistent. This would help future research focused on bias, force and police education. Second, my study suggests that state investment in comprehensive cultural humility or implicit bias training could be impactful in inciting structural change.

Overall, this study demonstrates that cultural humility training can play a meaningful role in reducing severe police violence but success is dependent on greater structural and institutional support. Future research should examine how differences in demographics, community characteristics, program quality, and instructional design influence outcomes. This study provides a more informed foundation in understanding whether training centered on the framework of cultural humility works, under what conditions it works and how it can be strengthened to provide safety and equity in policing.

Limitations and Extensions

Although my research provides valuable insights into the potential impact of cultural humility and implicit bias training on police use-of-force incidents, several limitations should be acknowledged. This analysis solely relies on public, accessible use-of-force data from the California Department of Justice which varies in completeness and consistency. Police departments reporting more detailed information about civilian interactions than others and underreporting may influence the accuracy of trends.

There were also barriers in finding information before certain years. This influenced my research as the original cities I was going to examine did not have published use-of-force reporting before 2013, making it difficult to compare to other departments with more available

data. Also, since this was a short term observational data, the window of three years before and after implementation may not fully capture long-term effects as behavioral changes typically need sustained reinforcement over an extended time. Ideally, I would extend the time frames but due to constraints with data availability from before certain years I was unable to do so.

Building on these limitations, there are multiple extensions that could deepen and refine future research. One extension would be to use incident-level data to examine how cultural humility training influences specific encounters such as mental health crises or traffic stops which make up a large percentage of severe use-of-force incidents. Another extension would include evaluation of different methods of cultural humility training and comparing programs with repeated instruction to departments with only a single-session workshop. This would help identify which aspects and methods of training are most effective in changes in officer behavior and in overall reducing inflicted harm. Additionally, qualitative extensions such as interviews with officers, supervisors and even community members could create a more comprehensive picture and deeper understanding of the experiences of the police department and its community.

Summary and Conclusion:

I sought to study a proactive and preventative approach to remediating police violence in communities. I examined whether cultural humility and implicit bias training can reduce severe police force incidents in California, a state where racial disparities and police violence have remained prevalent despite varying politics and social climates.

By comparing two police departments with adopted cultural humility training (Oakland and San Jose) to two departments without a published cultural humility training program (Los

Angeles and Long Beach), this research provides meaningful insight into the relationship between training and violent outcomes. Departments with training generally displayed downward trajectory while departments without training tend to display more erratic patterns. An ANOVA test confirmed this relationship, revealing a statistically significant difference between the two department groups. These findings suggest that cultural humility training is connected to changes in use-of-force trends and that training can play a role in reducing harm.

This research also highlighted complexities. The declines in use-of-force incidents among departments with cultural humility training were not fully consistent, suggesting significant influence from factors such as racial composition, poverty levels and department budgets. These findings suggest that while cultural humility and implicit bias training can contribute to reducing harm, training alone is not enough to result in consistent decrease in police violence.

For state policymakers, these findings reinforce the need for accessible aggregated data, greater evaluation of training content, improved transparency in use-of-force reporting and integration of culturally informed frameworks in state agencies. Investing in comprehensive and multi-dimensional reforms can move California towards more equitable public safety practices that prioritizes accountability and community. Future research could explore differences in training quality, further incorporate community characteristics, and analyze how training intersects with structural reforms to impact officer behavior.

Ultimately my research shows that meaningful reform is possible when departments invest in learning and multi-dimensional methods. Accountability rooted in humility can be a powerful catalyst for building a safer and more equitable future. Change is always possible- if we so choose it.

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