Driving forces: Police fatalities

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Trends Over Time

Theory, Research Questions & Hypotheses

This study combines academic literature on organizations, cultural change, and policy implementation in street-level bureaucracies.

Of key concern are driving policies and variations in implementation of policies within each police agency. This study assumes that the police culture affects policy implementation. It is from this point that the following hypotheses emerge:

**Hypothesis 1:** Driving policies are significant factors in the deaths of police officers in motor vehicle incidents.

**Hypothesis 2:** Technology distracts drivers and is a significant factor in motor vehicle incidents involving officers.

**Hypothesis 3:** Police culture significantly impacts effective driving policy implementation.

Survey, Sample Frame, and Data Collection

This research proposes a national survey of police executives. In the first stage, data from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund will be used to generate descriptive statistics from which state-by-state police fatalities will be compared to general population fatalities to see if correlations exist over time.

The proposed sampling frame for the survey is police executives in agencies that report to the Uniform Crime Reports maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.). A random stratified sampling method will be used to identify agencies and respondents. Semi-structured interviews may be conducted after survey data is collected and analyzed.

Policy, Pattern, and Problem

Law enforcement is an inherently risky occupation. The number of traffic-related fatalities for law enforcement officers in the U.S. during the past 13 years has been increasing; however, the number of fatalities for the general population in motor vehicle traffic incidents declined during the same time period.

The federal government reports that federal motor vehicle safety standards as well as behavioral and vehicle safety programs implemented by state and local law-enforcement agencies contributed to the downward trend for the general public.

What accounts for the pattern and problem with police driving-related deaths?

Implications and Importance

Officer safety is a requirement for service delivery in all law enforcement agencies. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask what lessons have been learned about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of more than 2,000 law enforcement officers who died in motor-vehicle incidents in the past 40 years.

The School of Environmental Studies and Public Affairs within the College of Urban Affairs provides the appropriate institutional context and a unique research opportunity with respect to bridging the gaps that exist among theory and practice with regard to addressing this problem.