

Mediation Training and Conflict Resolution: A Statistical Case Study of Urban Police Practices

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which a peer mediation and conflict resolution program is associated with behavioral outcomes and disciplinary actions among urban police officers. In a midwestern metropolitan police department, officers lacked structured interventions to address interpersonal conflicts and recurring behavioral issues, often resulting in formal complaints, internal investigations, and disciplinary measures. This study explored contributing factors to repeated misconduct or unprofessional interactions and assessed peer mediation as a potential strategy for improving officer behavior and professional conduct. One underlying issue appeared to be the absence of formalized training in mediation, de-escalation, or interpersonal coping strategies. Officers frequently responded reactively rather than proactively when navigating interpersonal conflicts or high-stress encounters. Participants in the study—officers trained as peer mediators—provided insights into their experiences using conflict resolution strategies as an intervention tool within the department. Through focus groups and reflective interviews, officers shared their involvement in facilitating peer conflict resolution, supporting professional accountability, and promoting leadership through collaborative decision-making. Findings demonstrated that officers who received mediation and conflict resolution training improved their leadership abilities and relationship-building skills. Additionally, participants showed increased knowledge of conflict resolution strategies, which supported: (a) positive behavioral change and reduced incidences of unprofessional conduct, (b) improved collaboration and communication within departmental culture, and (c) a measurable decline in formal disciplinary referrals and internal conflicts. Overall, the study supports the use of peer mediation programs as a proactive, relationship-centered intervention in urban policing environments.

Keywords: Mediation Training, Conflict Resolution, Urban Policing, Police Behavior, Peer Mediation, Law Enforcement Training, Police Disciplinary Actions, Officer Conduct, Interpersonal Communication, De-Escalation Strategies, Police Culture, Professional Development, Workplace Conflict, Behavioral Intervention, Organizational Accountability

Introduction

In recent years, heightened public scrutiny and increased demands for law enforcement reform have drawn significant attention to the internal operations and behavioral standards of police departments. While much of the national dialogue has centered on police-community relations, there is a growing awareness that the internal culture of police organizations—including how officers communicate, resolve conflict, and manage peer relationships—is equally vital to promoting ethical conduct and operational effectiveness.

In high-pressure environments such as urban policing, unresolved interpersonal conflict, ineffective communication, and limited access to conflict resolution training can lead to disciplinary infractions, eroded trust among colleagues, and reduced morale across the force.

This study examines the design, implementation, and outcomes of a mediation training and conflict resolution program in a metropolitan police department. The initiative was developed as a proactive, peer-led intervention intended to strengthen officer accountability, enhance communication, and reduce the frequency of internal disciplinary issues. Drawing on principles of restorative justice and communication theory, the program equips selected officers with mediation skills to address workplace tensions constructively and model collaborative problem-solving approaches within their teams.

This case study focuses on the experiences of officers who participated in the program as peer mediators, as well as those who engaged with them during conflict resolution efforts. Through qualitative data collection—including structured interviews, focus groups, and field observations—the research explores how peer mediation influences officer behavior, departmental culture, and interpersonal dynamics. The study contributes to ongoing conversations about sustainable reform in law enforcement by highlighting the value of relationship-based, internally driven interventions that build trust, professionalism, and resilience within police organizations.

Literature Review

Conflict Management in Policing: Addressing Interpersonal Disputes

The National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS)-sponsored study by Bard and Zacker (1976) represents one of the earliest empirical investigations into the role of police officers as informal third-party mediators in interpersonal conflicts. Focusing on patrol officers in Norwalk, Connecticut, the study revealed that, even in the absence of formal mediation training, officers frequently intervened in domestic and community disputes by facilitating dialogue, defusing tensions, and guiding parties toward temporary resolutions. Bard and Zacker's findings emphasized the critical role of interpersonal competence, discretion, and contextual judgment in managing volatile situations without resorting to enforcement. However, the study also cautioned against the risks inherent in relying solely on unstructured, intuitive approaches to conflict resolution. Their work contributed significantly to the conceptual foundation for formal mediation training within law enforcement and informed the evolution of reactive intervention models that incorporate de-escalation strategies, negotiation techniques, and restorative justice principles into everyday policing practices.

Police Conflict Management

A recent study by Emsing, Ghazinour, and Sundqvist (2024) offers a comprehensive scoping review of the current state of research on police-involved conflict and conflict management practices. The authors identify a prevailing emphasis in the literature on use-of-force incidents, reflecting a reactive approach to conflict rather than a proactive or preventive framework. While this focus has contributed to a better understanding of high-stakes encounters between law enforcement and the public, the study also underscores a notable gap in the research: limited attention has been paid to the theoretical underpinnings of conflict management and the efficacy of training programs aimed at equipping patrol officers with nonviolent resolution skills. This imbalance suggests the need for a broader, more holistic research agenda that integrates psychological, sociological, and procedural justice perspectives into everyday police practice.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Problem-Solving Approach in Police Station Conflict Management

A study by Corcoran (2014) critically evaluated the limitations of conventional problem-solving models in addressing internal disputes within police organizations. According to Corcoran, traditional approaches—often rooted in linear, procedural frameworks—tend to oversimplify complex interpersonal conflicts by focusing solely on surface-level behaviors and outcomes. These models frequently overlook the deeper emotional, cultural, and relational factors that influence conflict dynamics among officers. In response, Corcoran advocates for a more interpretative and relationally informed approach to conflict resolution, particularly at the supervisory level. This alternative model emphasizes the importance of understanding the subjective experiences, motivations, and social interactions that underlie disputes. By fostering reflective dialogue and empathetic engagement, supervisors can move beyond mere compliance enforcement and begin to address the root causes of tension, ultimately promoting healthier organizational relationships and a more cohesive working environment.

Empirical Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What proactive strategies are employed by police officers to shape behavior and effectively mitigate occurrences of internal misconduct?
2. How does organizational culture within police departments influence the management and escalation of conflicts involving officers?
3. To what extent can internal peer mediation programs contribute to reducing formal disciplinary measures within law enforcement agencies?

These questions underscore critical dimensions of peer mediation and conflict resolution within law enforcement that merit further empirical exploration to elucidate their impact on officer development, organizational dynamics, and the formulation of effective departmental policies.

Data Analysis

Participants/Demographic

The participants in the study comprised 12 police officers who were specifically selected and trained to serve as peer mediators within the department. These officers played a central role in facilitating conflict resolution among their colleagues. Additionally, 24 officers who had previously engaged in mediation sessions as part of internal conflict management initiatives were included to provide insight into the study's effectiveness from a participant perspective. The study also involved 5 supervisors who actively recommended and endorsed the peer mediation and conflict resolution program, reflecting leadership support crucial for its integration into departmental practices. The participating officers represented a diverse cross-section of the department, encompassing various ranks, units, and years of service. This diversity ensured that the findings captured a wide range of experiences and perspectives related to internal conflict and mediation processes. The study was sponsored and overseen by key departmental personnel, including the department's training sergeant, responsible for designing and delivering the mediation curriculum, and an internal affairs lieutenant, who contributed to monitoring study compliance and evaluating outcomes. Both sponsors were actively engaged throughout the study, providing strategic guidance and facilitating access to departmental resources necessary for successful study implementation and assessment.

Methodology

Data Collection

The data-collection methods used to assess the implementation of the mediation study included both qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluate increased senior officer engagement and improvements in junior officer performance and behavior. Qualitative data were collected through surveys and structured interviews with field training officers, command staff, and support personnel, as well as through open-ended questionnaires completed by mentee officers. Additional feedback was gathered through verbal comments and informal check-ins to capture perceptions of the mediation process and its effectiveness in real-world policing environments. These qualitative insights were collected on an ongoing basis and were essential in identifying themes related to officer development, communication, and operational conduct.

Quantitative data were used to measure changes in key performance indicators, such as disciplinary incidents, response time accuracy, team cohesion ratings, and training proficiency assessments. These metrics helped establish statistical patterns and informed conclusions about the influence of mentor involvement on the conduct and professionalism of junior officers. By integrating both forms of data, the study was able to more comprehensively assess the value of structured mentoring within the department and its impact on officer behavior, accountability, and overall job performance.

Procedures

The study was implemented through a systematic recruitment process led by the department's administration and training division, targeting officers interested in serving as peer mediators. Supervisors and commanders were encouraged to nominate candidates exhibiting strong communication competencies and potential for effective conflict resolution. Selection criteria included demonstrated interest, supervisory endorsements, and comprehensive review of disciplinary and performance records. During the initial month, a thorough analysis of internal departmental data spanning the preceding three years was conducted to ascertain the frequency, nature, and patterns of officer-related disciplinary incidents and internal conflicts. This review also evaluated the disciplinary measures applied and their efficacy in mitigating recidivism.

Prospective peer mediators were required to complete a formal application process that included endorsements from five colleagues or supervisors, one captain, and a training sergeant, along with approval from the department's command staff. Applicants also submitted a written narrative detailing their motivation to serve as mediators and highlighting key personal qualities—such as empathy, strong communication skills, integrity, and a commitment to constructive conflict resolution—that would support their effectiveness as leaders and stewards of departmental values. Applications were carefully reviewed by the training sergeant coordinator in collaboration with an internal affairs lieutenant. Although qualitative attributes were central to the selection process, no candidate was disqualified solely based on application content. Throughout the study, periodic debriefing sessions with the principal investigator were conducted to evaluate participant progress, assess program effectiveness, and identify areas for refinement. This reflective and adaptive approach ensured continued alignment between program goals and the dynamic needs of the department.

Results

The study's quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrated marked improvements in officers' conflict resolution skills, as evidenced by pre- and post-training evaluations and

comparative analyses between those who participated in mediation and those who did not. Participant feedback highlighted enhanced communication abilities, decreased interpersonal tensions, and stronger internal support networks. The peer mediation program contributed to a more collaborative and respectful departmental culture, reflected in a reduction of disciplinary referrals and internal complaints throughout the study period. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the evaluation incorporated both process measures—such as the number of mediations completed—and outcome indicators, including changes in disciplinary trends and officer satisfaction survey data. Overall, the findings support the program’s effectiveness in mitigating conflict and fostering organizational cohesion, providing a strong foundation for the continued integration of peer mediation within law enforcement settings.

Data Analysis

A focus group questionnaire developed by the investigator was administered to evaluate officers’ perceptions of conflict resolution practices, the prevailing departmental climate, their familiarity with peer mediation programs, and their individual problem-solving approaches. As Nordström et al. (2020) emphasize, the escalation of conflict is often influenced by the manner in which individuals choose to respond. Within this framework, officers identified as potential peer mediators demonstrated a strong interest in acquiring formal mediation training and actively participating in the development of an internal peer mediation program. Their engagement reflected a commitment to fostering a more constructive organizational culture, improving the departmental work environment, enhancing professional integrity, and promoting greater interpersonal cohesion across the agency.

Table 1. Responses to Police Officer Survey

Questions	Responses	% of Responses
Have you experienced conflict with another officer in your department?	Yes No Sometimes	8 61 31
Do current policies effectively address officer conflict and intervention?	No Sometimes Most of the time	57 32 11
How effective would a peer mediation program be in resolving officer conflicts?	Very Somewhat	87 13
How often do officers collaborate or share conflict resolution strategies?	Rarely No Sometimes Yes	61 15 21 3
Should the Chief of Police be primarily responsible for officer discipline?	Yes It is a shared responsibility No	72 23 5
Suspension is an appropriate response to unresolved officer conflicts.	Yes No Sometimes	7 62 31
I have received formal training in mediation or conflict resolution.	Yes No Very little	7 25 66

Note: Table 1 displays the percentage distribution of responses from participating officers (N = 24) who completed the survey.

In the interim, prospective peer mediators were administered a pre-assessment to evaluate their current skill levels relevant to serving as internal peer mediators. Officers were assured that the results would remain confidential and would only be reviewed by the principal investigator and co-investigator. It was emphasized that the purpose of the assessment was purely informational and would not affect their eligibility to participate in the peer mediation and conflict resolution study.

Table 2. Analysis of Officer Responses from the Peer Mediation Focus Group

Questions	Responses	% of Responses
Do you believe the current disciplinary procedures in your department are fair and effective?	Yes No Sometimes	8 77 15
Do you prefer to speak with peers or commanders regarding issues in your life?	Yes No Sometimes	37 56 7
What strategies do you typically use to resolve interpersonal conflicts or disputes with fellow officers	Verbal Utilize Physical Response Report to Superior	89 3 8
What is peer mediation?	Engaged in dialogue to address and resolve the issue Do not know	89 11
How do you regulate your emotional responses in the workplace?	Very well Well Not well Unsure	57 24 15 4
Which of the following best describes you most of the time on the job?	Accommodating Discipline Focused Friendly Irritable	11 41 23 13 12
Would you consider using mediation to resolve a conflict with a fellow officer?	Yes No Not sure	71 17 12

Note: Table 2 displays the percentage distribution of responses from participating officers (N = 24) who completed the survey.

Over the course of the six-month study, peer mediators facilitated 31 documented officer-to-officer conflict mediation sessions. Of these cases, one required escalation to formal administrative review, and another culminated in a physical altercation between the involved officers—both incidents occurred approximately two months after the study's initiation. Four cases necessitated follow-up mediation, and one officer participated in four separate disputes. Following each session, participants completed a Mediation Evaluation Questionnaire to evaluate the session's effectiveness and provide qualitative feedback. Although requests for mediation declined slightly toward the conclusion of the study, the frequency and nature of interpersonal conflicts remained consistent, indicating the ongoing need and applicability of peer mediation within the department (see Table 3).

Table 3. Analysis of Responses to the Mediation Evaluation Questionnaire

Questions	Responses	Number of Responses
How many conflicts with fellow officers have you had in the past year?	2 3 4 or more 1	7 11 5 8
What disciplinary actions occurred before peer mediation was introduced?	Sent straight to mediation Supervisory warning Don't know	12 13 7
Were the trained mediators effective in resolving your conflict?	Yes Extremely No Somewhat	12 6 8 5
Did you experience gossip after your mediation session?	Yes No	22 9
What was the issue or length of the conflict you mediated?	Arguing with another officer Gossip Nearly physical None of the above	11 15 2 3
Would you recommend mediation to other officers in conflict?	Yes No Maybe	28 1 2
Would you use mediation again for future conflicts?	Definitely Yes Maybe	24 5 2

Note: Table 3 presents the percentage distribution of responses from officers who participated in mediation sessions and completed the post-mediation survey (N = 31).

During the concluding peer mediation debriefing, officers who participated as peer mediators completed a postevaluation identical in format to the preevaluation administered at the study's outset. While all 16 officers who completed the initial two-day mediation training received the postevaluation, only 11 consistently attended weekly sessions and actively contributed to the department's core mediation efforts. Table 4 presents the comparative responses of all 16 trained officers across both evaluation periods. The findings suggest that the majority of participating officers perceived notable growth in their leadership skills, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution competencies, and overall confidence in managing officer-to-officer conflict as a result of their involvement in the peer mediation study.

Table 4. Results of Peer Mediation Self-Evaluation Among Police Officers:
Pre- and Post-Evaluation Comparisons

Self-evaluation category	Preevaluation	Postevaluation
Communicating effectively with fellow officers	5	9
Actively listening to fellow officers	3	8
Collaborating as part of a team	4	9
Demonstrating leadership in field or unit settings	5	6
Presenting information clearly and confidently	7	11
Adhering to protocols and directives	5	9

Acknowledging and learning from mistakes	4	7
Seeking guidance when necessary	5	6
Providing support to fellow officers	6	9
Making sound, timely decisions in operational contexts	4	10

Note: Table 4 presents the results of the Peer Mediation Self-Evaluation among police officers, comparing pre- and post-evaluation responses (N = 16).

Implications of Findings

This study explored proactive strategies designed to influence officer conduct and reduce the incidence of disciplinary actions within a law enforcement context. Central to this inquiry was the implementation of a peer mediation program intended to mitigate formal disciplinary interventions, particularly those arising from minor interpersonal conflicts among officers. Conceived as a preventative approach, the program aimed to facilitate early conflict resolution and de-escalation before issues reached the threshold of administrative involvement. It was further anticipated that as conflict resolution principles became integrated into the department's organizational culture, the overall workplace climate would improve (Cooper, 1997).

Quantitative and qualitative data collected through supervisory assessments and peer feedback indicated that when adequately reinforced, peer mediation served as an effective intervention. The program provided officers with structured opportunities to resolve disputes constructively and collaboratively, enhancing mutual respect and communication. Respondents emphasized the importance of institutionalizing peer mediation as a complement to existing disciplinary tools such as counseling, written reprimands, or suspension. For the program to function effectively, buy-in from all levels of the department—including leadership, field supervisors, and line officers—was deemed essential. Beyond theoretical support, the study highlights the critical role of practical application in sustaining such initiatives. Trained peer mediators must be equipped not only with foundational skills but also with ongoing support and opportunities for reflection. The program's success depends on consistent application, transparency in process, and genuine engagement by participants. While some officers may initially participate out of convenience or skepticism, with proper implementation, peer mediation can evolve into a cornerstone of departmental culture.

Ultimately, the findings affirm that peer mediation is not a static intervention, but rather a dynamic process requiring continual investment. Regular training, post-mediation debriefings, and responsive adaptations to evolving departmental needs are key to sustaining conflict resolution practices. As such, peer mediation holds promise not only for resolving disputes, but also for cultivating a more resilient, respectful, and cohesive police workforce.

Limitations

Several limitations impacted the validity of the study's outcomes within the law enforcement setting. These included inconsistent officer participation, varying levels of supervisory engagement, inadequate peer mediation training, and a limited number of disciplinary incidents appropriate for mediation as an intervention. Another constraint was the reluctance of some supervisors to recognize peer mediation as a viable alternative to traditional disciplinary measures. Additionally, certain officer-mediators reported a lack of confidence in assuming leadership roles, particularly when required to facilitate dialogue with fellow officers. A further limitation was the insufficiency of reliable data to clearly attribute changes in officer conduct to the peer mediation program, as opposed to other factors such as supervisory oversight or departmental policy changes.

Recommendations

It is recommended that law enforcement agencies engage in regular evaluation and dialogue concerning the need for intervention strategies, including mediation and conflict resolution programs, to support officers at all stages of their careers. Veteran officers are uniquely positioned to serve as mentors, guiding less experienced colleagues in the practical application of peer mediation techniques. By doing so, they contribute to cultivating a departmental culture that prioritizes proactive conflict management and effective communication.

The long-term success of peer mediation in policing depends on the sustained commitment of officers who not only engage with the program but also champion its expansion within other units or collaborating agencies. Trained personnel may seek administrative endorsement or institutional sponsorship to broaden the reach of mediation initiatives across jurisdictions. When such support is secured, the competencies gained through mediation training extend beyond the professional sphere, becoming transferable life skills that enhance both interpersonal dynamics within the department and relationships with the broader community.

For these programs to remain effective and evolve meaningfully, it is essential that peer mediators engage in continuous self-reflection and personal development. This includes cultivating self-awareness, honing communication and listening skills, and fostering leadership capabilities. While introductory mediation training—often delivered in brief, intensive sessions—lays the groundwork by covering key techniques and protocols, it is insufficient on its own. Lasting effectiveness requires deeper personal growth and ongoing engagement with the principles of conflict resolution.

Carlson and Sutton (1975) underscored the importance of communication-centered training in law enforcement, noting that both intra-agency and officer-community interactions benefit significantly from structured approaches to dialogue and mediation. Mediation, in particular, demands that officers possess strong verbal, written, and listening competencies to facilitate resolution and de-escalation. When these communication practices are integrated into the everyday operations of a department, they normalize peaceful conflict resolution and reinforce a culture of respect and accountability.

Crank (2004) similarly emphasized that the success of mediation programs depends on a shared understanding of their mission and intended outcomes throughout the agency. Equally vital is the engagement of external stakeholders—including families and community members—whose support can significantly influence the perceived legitimacy and impact of these initiatives. Given the diverse perspectives and communication styles found across home, cultural, and organizational environments, police departments must take intentional steps to involve and educate the public. Active community involvement not only strengthens program outcomes but also reinforces the collaborative foundation upon which successful policing rests.

Twersky-Glasner (2005) highlights the complex reality that police officers often receive conflicting messages from both the communities they serve and their internal organizational culture. Recognizing and addressing these tensions is essential for law enforcement agencies seeking to foster effective and sustainable peer mediation programs. Rather than adopting an oppositional stance, departments must prioritize collaboration with community stakeholders. Central to this effort is the need to equip officers with the skills necessary to cultivate constructive relationships—not only with the public but also within the ranks of the department itself. Such relational competence is foundational to the credibility, effectiveness, and long-term viability of conflict resolution initiatives in policing.

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