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Introducing New Criteria for Assessing Training Materials About the Elderly

Knowlton W. Johnson, Charles A. Beirnard, and Stephen R. Stiles

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Summary

In what ways do law enforcement personnel and agencies use knowledge about the elderly? This article presents the findings of a recent study conducted by the International Training Research and Evaluation Council on how law enforcement trainees make use of the knowledge they gained through training materials developed by the National Retired Teachers Association/American Association of Retired Persons.

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INTRODUCING NEW CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING
TRAINING MATERIALS ABOUT THE ELDERLY

by

Knowlton W. Johnson
and
Charles A. Beirnard

University of Alaska, Anchorage

and

Stephen R. Stiles

National Retired Teachers Association and
The American Association of Retired Persons

JC 8113

INTRODUCING NEW CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING TRAINING MATERIALS ABOUT THE ELDERLY.

Since 1975 there has been virtually a knowledge explosion on the subject of law enforcement and the elderly. A recent information search by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) found that technical information produced about law enforcement and older persons has increased each year at an astronomical rate. There are numerous published and unpublished materials available that present research, program descriptions, discussions of issues and the like regarding the emergence of this "new" categorical class as a law enforcement concern. This proliferation of knowledge production is quite established and is not likely to change, given the projected population growth of older persons and the increasing visibility of this group in local, state and national politics.

While the production of technical knowledge about law enforcement and the elderly has increased in recent years, there has been little attention given to its utilization. It is unfortunate, but there is no accumulation of evidence, at least not in published form, which demonstrates concern for how information is utilized by law enforcement decision makers. In light of this rather obvious void, we present the findings of a recent study that describes what law enforcement trainees do back home with technical information about the elderly. It is our intention to highlight the importance of recognizing different types of knowledge use as new criteria for assessing published materials, particularly training materials concerning older persons.

Different Types of Knowledge Use

In what ways do law enforcement personnel and agencies use knowledge about the elderly? One way of categorizing knowledge use is to ask whether the knowledge directly stimulates action or simply serves an enlightenment function. The terms "symbolic use" and "instrumental use" denote direct influences of knowledge. Decision-makers, for example, may use technical information symbolically when they employ the knowledge to justify current programs or to substantiate present budgeting. Examples of instrumental use are when technical information is used as the basis for modifying programming or planning to develop new ones. "Conceptual use" is a term which has been applied to characterize less tangible knowledge influence. It is knowledge use which is not instrumental, yet it may contribute to decision makers' work and the work of others. It can enlighten them.

These categories are not empty abstractions; rather, they label knowledge uses which empirical study reveals actually exist in the world of law enforcement practice. We think our recent study of the use of information about the elderly by law enforcement trainees reflects this real-world existence and subsequently provides significance to improving law enforcement programs. A brief description of this study, and then some suggestions about its implications, follow.

The Study

This study, which was conducted by the International Training Research and Evaluation Council, was designed to provide evaluative

data on the use of training materials being developed by the National Retired Teachers Association/American Association of Retired Persons. These results were channeled back to NRTA/AARP staff members who were responsible for making the final revisions in the training materials. Before commenting on the results, a word about the training materials.

The training materials were first assimilated in the form of a training manual, Law Enforcement and Older Persons, and then piloted in draft form through 30 training seminars conducted at various locations across the nation. These materials were aimed at bringing relevant information about crime and the elderly to law enforcement personnel at all levels. Information was presented in four (4) units: "The Process of Aging" explained the sensory and psychological changes accompanying aging; "Victimization of the Elderly" identified the types of crime which afflict the elderly and the impact of that crime as well as ways of confronting the problem; "Communicate with Older Persons" presented techniques of informing older audiences and ways of dealing with older crime victims and witnesses; "Older Persons as Community Resources" discussed using older persons in support roles in law enforcement and establishing programs which use older resource persons.

Our study aiming to identify and describe the fruits of these efforts to produce knowledge about crime and the elderly began with collecting data. In the fourth through sixth months after the first ten training seminars had been conducted by

NRTA/AARP, five trained interviewers sought telephone responses from a representative sample of trainees (approximately 60% of the first ten seminars' participants) to get data on the transfer and use of the training information. Of the 104 participants, representing 67 law enforcement agencies, who responded to the telephone interview, most revealed these characteristics: they were young (26-41), had attended or were attending college, held the rank of sergeant or below, and possessed varying amounts of law enforcement experience. Their job functions tended to be Crime Prevention/Community Relations (38%), Patrol (20%) or Investigations (17%). Eighty percent (80%) came from the municipal type of agency and 73% came from urban or suburban jurisdictions with moderate-to-large populations (100,000 and over).

Interview questions were designed to find out whether and how much technical information about the elderly was used by the training participants once they returned to their own agencies. To find out how much knowledge enlightened them or others, questions asked respondents if they had personally used training information to make oral or written presentations or if they had shared information on the training materials with co-workers and personnel from other agencies. To discern how the training information directly influenced organizational programming, questions were asked about activities in three program areas: volunteer programs using the elderly, direct service programs for older persons, and law enforcement training programs which contain a unit on the elderly.

Analysis of the data revealed that training information about the elderly can indeed have positive effects: strong ones on the personal actions that characterize conceptual use, less strong but still significant on symbolic and instrumental uses. Interview responses showed that 70% of the respondents said they used the training information about the elderly to make oral and written presentations; of these, 90% reported choosing oral presentations, such as lectures and speeches. Participants also gave much evidence of the second action which makes up conceptual use--sharing information with others. Ninety-three percent (93%) said they discussed ideas and facts with co-workers, while 67% said they passed on written materials to co-workers within their agency. As expected, less information was shared with individuals outside the participants' agencies.

This evidence of heavy personal use of knowledge about the elderly suggests that the enlightening of the participants might have value beyond itself as a contributor to uses which affect programming on the organizational level. That is, while the personal actions of sharing information and spreading it in oral and written presentations may not directly effect programming, the potential of these uses to indirectly affect organizational programming must be recognized. If lower-echelon law enforcement personnel share facts and ideas on a subject such as older persons or personally use such information in their jobs, this exposes the knowledge to others who may be in a position to make program change or who may have informal power to influence

policy-making. We surmise that since information from the NRTA/AARP training seminars had such heavy personal use, it would seem that this information about the elderly stands a good chance of eventually finding its way into use at the organization and program levels.

Interview questions which asked about how training information influenced programming showed a lower frequency of symbolic and instrumental uses than of conceptual use. Of the 55 agencies that had some type of programming for the elderly-older volunteer programs, direct service to the elderly, or police training about older persons--33% said they used the information specifically. That is, the knowledge served as evidence to maintain and support current program content and level of funding. As for the organizational use of information for program modification (instrumental use), the data, broken down into program types, revealed the strongest influence lay in modifying training programs about the elderly. Ninety-three percent (93%) of the 30 agencies with police training programs about older persons used the information to modify the training, such as changing its content or adding another segment to existing training programs on the elderly. Modifications to programs other than training occurred less frequently. Twenty-four percent (24%) of the 38 agencies with direct service programs to older persons used the information for program modification and only 10% of the 30 agencies with programs involving older volunteers used the seminar information to modify programs.

These results showed that instrumental use of technical information about the elderly did occur, but with variation according to the type of organization action. In regard to the three program types under study, respondents reported more departmental use of information in the police training area than in the service delivery or older volunteer programs. Information had the least influence on programs that utilized older persons as volunteers. But it is important to note that the most frequent reasons given by the representatives for not implementing the information were "no opportunity" and "not in position to use." Few respondents contributed the lack of use to organizational barriers to change, such as different priority levels or bureaucratic red tape.

Knowledge Into Practice: Some Implications

This study shows that training information has direct and indirect influences on programming in law enforcement. What implications do these findings have for the field of law enforcement?

In regard to the production of training materials, it is apparent that consideration has to be given to the ease or difficulty of translating training information into conventional law enforcement practices. For example, in our study we found that the training materials provided information which could be easily used in the following ways: in oral or written presentations, in police training programs, and in enlightening co-workers. Conversely, the same training material was less readily converted

into organizational actions such as program modification and expansion. With this knowledge about variations in uses of the training materials the NRTA/AARP staff members were provided specific direction in preparations of the revised editions of the Law Enforcement and Older Persons manuals. Availability of such data was helpful in making the final package more usable for program modification and development purposes. In addition, the study pointed to the most appropriate user in the organization. For the NRTA/AARP training materials, the package had the greatest direct application for training and crime prevention specialists.

We encourage other producers of training materials to generate data on knowledge use. This would require exposing an adequate sample size to draft materials and then contacting the participants later to determine the use of the information in their respective organizations. This follow-up information could be used to make final revisions in the training package.

How training materials are packaged can facilitate transferring use, but equally important to the transfer and use process are persons who disseminate technical information. For example, when conducting in-service training or talking to community groups, often the disseminator can heighten the relevance of technical information for particular locales. Operational personnel in law enforcement, particularly trainers and crime prevention specialists, should consider it vital to elicit feedback on what happens after they provide technical

information to various audiences. Also, implementing a knowledge use monitoring system at the operational level can provide periodic feedback to law enforcement specialists regarding the influence that technical information has on these groups. Additionally, questions could be asked that elicit ways in which technical information could be presented in a more usable form.

In conclusion, the issues raised above are based on our experience in trying to make a training package more relevant by introducing knowledge uses as assessment criteria. These are suggestions for others to consider, not absolutes, for this is only a single project. We do, however, encourage others to systematically examine the whys and wherefores of the use of published information in the area of law enforcement. We think it is time to begin increasing the amount of use-targeted and use-tested training materials being made available to the field.

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POLICE AND OLDER PERSONS: CRITERIA DEVELOPED TO ASSESS TRAINING MATERIALS, METHODS

By Knowlton W. Johnson
and Charles A. Beard,
University of Alaska, Anchorage
and

Stephen R. Stiles
National Retired Teachers Association/
The American Association of Retired Persons

Since 1975 there has been a virtual knowledge explosion on the subject of law enforcement and the elderly. For example, a recent information search by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) found that technical information produced about law enforcement and older persons has increased each year at an astronomical rate.

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RICHARD J. O'CONNELL, Publisher • BETTY B. BOSARGE, Editor • MANDY VAN WYEN, Subscription Manager
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CRIMINAL JUSTICE SERVICES

Reaffirms Reagan Position . . .

AG PLANS TO FIGHT CRIME WITH LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

* * * * *

"No Money," He Tells Media, Congress

Attorney General William French Smith said in two separate appearances in Washington on Oct. 22 and 23 that crime must be fought with innovation, not more federal money — and there must be a change in the philosophy that favors "forces of lawlessness over the forces of law."

"Our proposals would aid in deterring the most serious of crimes," Smith told reporters at a Washington news conference on Oct. 22 and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Criminal Law on Oct. 23.

Smith said the battle against crime will focus on administrative and legislative action — not "massive new spending schemes."

Senators Skeptical Of Plan

As he outlined his proposals before the Senate Subcommittee on Criminal Law, Smith ran into skeptical questioning on how he could cut budgets for criminal justice agencies and still expect them to step up the war on crime.

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TRAINING AIDS DIGEST encourages the submission of materials pertaining to education, training courses, workshops, seminars, job listings, training aids, literature, films and other information of interest to professionals in the criminal justice system and security training and operations.

Address all such information to: Editor,
Training Aids Digest, 7620 Little River Turnpike,
Annandale, VA 22003.