

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/police-perspectives/the-supervisors-role-in-promoting-fair-and-impartial-policing>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The efforts of law enforcement agencies to promote fair and impartial policing need to include training for supervisors in identifying bias both explicit and implicit among the officers they supervise. Supervisors need to know when to intervene and take corrective action that enhances an officer's ability to effectively protect and serve the community.

An officer who displays *explicit* biases, such as racist behavior, through his or her behavior on the job must be held accountable. If formal processes will not produce accountability (e.g., there is not sufficient evidence to sustain a complaint), the supervisor should still make it clear to this person that biased speech and behavior is unacceptable, and that continued noncompliance will result in appropriate disciplinary action. The supervisor should document all future, relevant observations to produce a record that could allow for more formal intervention.

But even the most well-intentioned officers' behavior can be impacted by *implicit* biases, and supervisors must be attentive to this as well. The federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services invested in the development of a [training program](#) called Fair and Impartial Policing for first-line supervisors. Among other things, the program teaches supervisors how to recognize signs that a subordinate has, for instance, an implicit bias against black men that leads to treating all African American males with suspicion or being more likely to inquire about an African American's probation or parole status or that an officer under their supervision thinks all wealthy individuals are law-abiding and honest.

To identify implicit bias in their subordinates, supervisors can observe them in the field or on video, listen to their radio transmissions, and review external and internal complaints made against them. But *proving* an officer's implicit bias can be challenging, as the supervisor will rarely have definitive information indicating bias. Behavior is biased if the officer's *motivation* involves the inappropriate consideration of race or other demographics. Two officers might exhibit the same behavior, but maybe only one is biased.

This challenge has implications for what supervisors can and should do if they suspect biased behavior. The nature of the intervention must recognize that an officer whose behavior is produced by his or her implicit biases will be better served by guidance and not discipline. The intervention should be viewed as a training opportunity where the supervisor presents collected information to the officer and asks what he or she makes of it. There may, in fact, be a bias-free explanation for what the supervisor has observed. If not, the supervisor should convey his or her concern, highlighting how the potentially biased behavior, even if unintentional, could negatively impact the officer's effectiveness.

This will be uncomfortable and difficult, but engaging in challenging tasks is part of the first-line supervisors' job. Sergeants across the country claim they'll take a bullet for their subordinates; they must also have the courage to have the difficult conversation that could get a subordinate back on track, resulting in a more effective police force and safer communities.

The [Police Perspectives: Building Community Trust](#) blog series explores the importance of and provides guidance on how to build and enhance positive relationships between law enforcement agencies and the diverse communities they serve.

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