

FAQs on Implicit Bias

What is implicit bias?

Over the past several decades, social science research has revealed that even the most well-intentioned people experience some degree of “implicit bias,” the unconscious and often subtle associations we make between groups of people and stereotypes about those groups. This phenomenon is distinct from “explicit bias,” the overt prejudice that most people associate with racism, sexism and other forms of bigotry.

What does the research say about implicit bias?

Implicit bias is, to some extent, a part of human nature and is not limited to law enforcement officers or attorneys. As the research shows, bias starts with our automatic tendency to categorize individuals: we employ mental shortcuts to make sense of the world and this process can involve categorizing people we do not know according to group membership. We then attribute to these individuals the stereotypes associated with their group. This does not require animus; it requires only knowledge of the stereotype.

How does implicit bias training work?

A large body of research indicates that individuals can reduce their implicit biases or mitigate their effects in part simply by acknowledging they exist. In addition, scientists have shown that implicit biases can be reduced through positive contact with stereotyped groups and through counter-stereotyping, whereby individuals are exposed to information that is the opposite of the cultural stereotypes about the group. Moreover, social psychologists have found that with information and motivation, people can implement “controlled” (unbiased) behavioral responses that override automatic associations and biases.

Why is the Department of Justice doing this training?

In recent years, state and local law enforcement agencies across the country have integrated implicit bias education into their training programs, often with financial support from the Justice Department’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office). Given the success of those efforts, department leadership decided to provide similar training to its own law enforcement officers and prosecutors. These trainings serve several purposes: they help officers understand how unconscious and unintentional biases can affect their work; they reinforce the investigative skills that the department’s law enforcement officers already possess; and they reaffirm the department’s commitment to a criminal justice system that is fair, impartial and procedurally just. The department believes that these trainings will make its agents and prosecutors even more effective, both by equipping them with additional skills and by strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and the community.

Who is being trained?

The department will provide implicit bias training to all of its law enforcement agents and prosecutors. In the coming weeks, the department will begin rolling out the training to the more than 23,000 agents employed by the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and U.S. Marshals Service, as well as the approximately 5,800 attorneys working at the 94 U.S. Attorney’s Offices across the country. As the project continues, the department will expand training to others personnel, including agents of the Office of the Inspector General and prosecutors in the department’s litigating components.

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What types of implicit bias does the training address?

The implicit bias trainings will examine the unconscious and unintentional mental shortcuts that human can develop about a wide range of social and demographic groups. Among others, the training will consider issues of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as socioeconomic and professional status.

What does the training involve?

The trainings are customized for different types of work performed across the department. For the department's law enforcement agencies, the trainings are based on the "Fair & Impartial Policing" (FIP) model, which was developed by Dr. Lorie Fridell, former Director of Research for the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF). Dr. Fridell and her team developed three distinct curricula for the department's law enforcement agencies: one tailored for their executive leadership; one for mid-level supervisors and supervisors; and one for line agents and academy recruits. All three curricula include a review of the latest science on implicit bias, an examination of how implicit bias can affect policing decisions and interactive sessions that encourage participants to explore their own potential biases. The trainings are designed to help individuals understand how implicit bias can impact their lives and work, and helps participants make these discoveries in a blame-free environment that recognizes that even the most well intentioned officers and attorneys can experience unconscious biases.

How do the trainings differ between line agents and supervisors?

The curriculum for line agents focuses on the day-to-day operations of law enforcement officers, including interactions with members of the public. The trainings for supervisors cover the same material, as well as other topics relevant to management, such as hiring and promotion decisions.

How long will it take to train everyone at the department?

Given the large number of people involved, the department anticipates it will take a year or more to provide training to all of its law enforcement agents and prosecutors. The first trainings begin the week of June 27, 2016, and will continue throughout the year. To expedite the process, the department is organizing a number of "train the trainer" sessions in the near future to increase the number of instructors at each law enforcement agency.

How does the department support state and local training?

Since 2008, the COPS Office has been working with the University of South Florida to develop, pilot test and implement implicit bias training programs for state and local law enforcement. The program applies the modern science of bias to policing, trains officers on the effect of implicit bias and gives them the information and skills they need to reduce and manage their biases. The curricula addresses the reality of our biases—that is, not just racial/ethnic bias, but biases based on other factors, such as gender, sexual orientation, religion and socioeconomic status. The COPS Office has sponsored implicit bias [training](#) at police departments across the country, from Camden, New Jersey, to Seattle, as well as regional trainings for law enforcement organizations.