

Understanding Deputy Subgroups in Los Angeles County

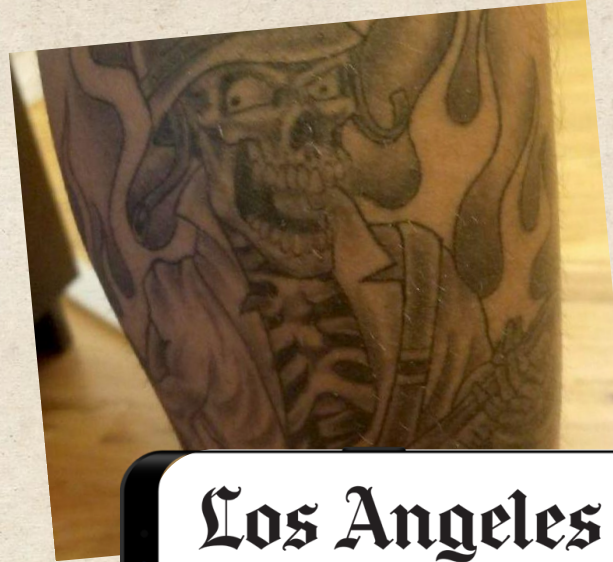


Los Angeles Times

March 24, 1999

The Secret Society Among Lawmen

The somber image of Death's hooded skull and scythe tattooed onto the inside of the deputy's left ankle in 1989 initiated him into a select fraternity called the Grim Reapers



Los Angeles Times

Oct. 6, 2020

'Gang-like' deputy clique
exerts 'undue influence' at
East L.A. station, report says

Los Angeles Times

July 14, 2019

Deputy gangs
have survived
decades of
lawsuits and
probes. Can
the FBI stop
them?

\$55M in judgments awarded since 1990

Hired RAND to better understand subgroups and their impact

How do subgroups affect the community?

Why do subgroups form?

Who is invited to join and what do they do?

How do subgroups affect LASD, other employees?

What should be done about subgroups?

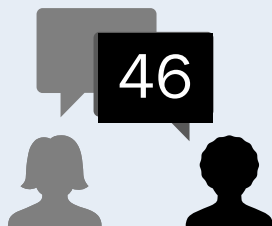


The approach focused on learning stakeholder perspectives

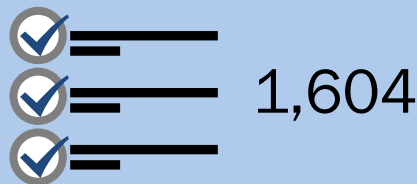
Reports, lawsuits,
investigations, and
existing research



Community
leaders and
members



LASD deputies,
supervisors,
and leadership



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Community perceptions of LASD are coupled with perceptions of subgroups

- Lack of transparency, trust, and a culture of aggressive policing
- Other law enforcement agencies better engage with the community
- History of strained relations in North and Central patrol Divisions
- Range of perspectives

“

[I] watched [deputies] torment a girl whose son got killed by a ricochet bullet ...they were outside in front doing donuts in their sheriff's cars trying to intimidate us and make us leave...

--Community member

”

Community perceptions of subgroups are based on interpretations of deputies' behavior

Hazing, excluding, harassing, and covering up for fellow deputies

Targeting former jail inmates, particularly people of color

Harassing community residents (e.g., aggressive behavior, excessive force, intimidation, illicit behavior)

Subgroups were perceived as detrimental to the community

- Us vs. Them
- Independent investigations and disciplinary action

“

You have to be willing to do certain things – beat people up, use excessive force, shoot people. A lot of illegal things. It's not like joining the Boy Scouts...if you're celebrating people getting killed with tattoos, it's out of hand

--Community member

”

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Where you work in LASD has important implications for reputation, training, experience, and loyalty

- Unit independence
- Reputation

“

Like you want to work 2000/3000 to build your reputation as a hard charger and can handle ghetto.

— Line-level

”

Justifications for the forming of subgroups include peer acceptance, recognizing performance, and unit pride

- Gain and confirm acceptance from peers
- Recognize competency
- May become socially defined

“

There is a bond that occurs with people who face death together. If we're all in this together, I know the A-players will be there, but maybe the C-players won't...They have their blinders on. A-players look for the crime that is occurring. It takes a certain person to pursue the criminal down the alley.

— Line-level

”

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Invitees tend to be seen as hard-charging

“

If you get involved in a shooting or a fight, that's it. You're in... — Line-level

To be a member of those groups, you couldn't be a 'glad-hander' or a slug. The people who are getting the tattoos are seizing drugs, finding shot-caller gang members, putting people in prison and getting those who are trying to kill us.
— Command-level

”

- Hard working, hard-charging deputies
- Non-work-related actions
- Reasons for not joining

Subgroups may provide guidance and social support but are often exclusionary

“

This job, especially patrol, is very stressful. We see and deal with crazy shit every day...We see the worst in humanity, and there needs to be a way to destress and decompress from all of this. — Survey respondent with a long tenure

”

- Guidance, mentorship, and security
- Provide social connection and support (even if unhealthy)
- Give a sense of exclusivity and superiority

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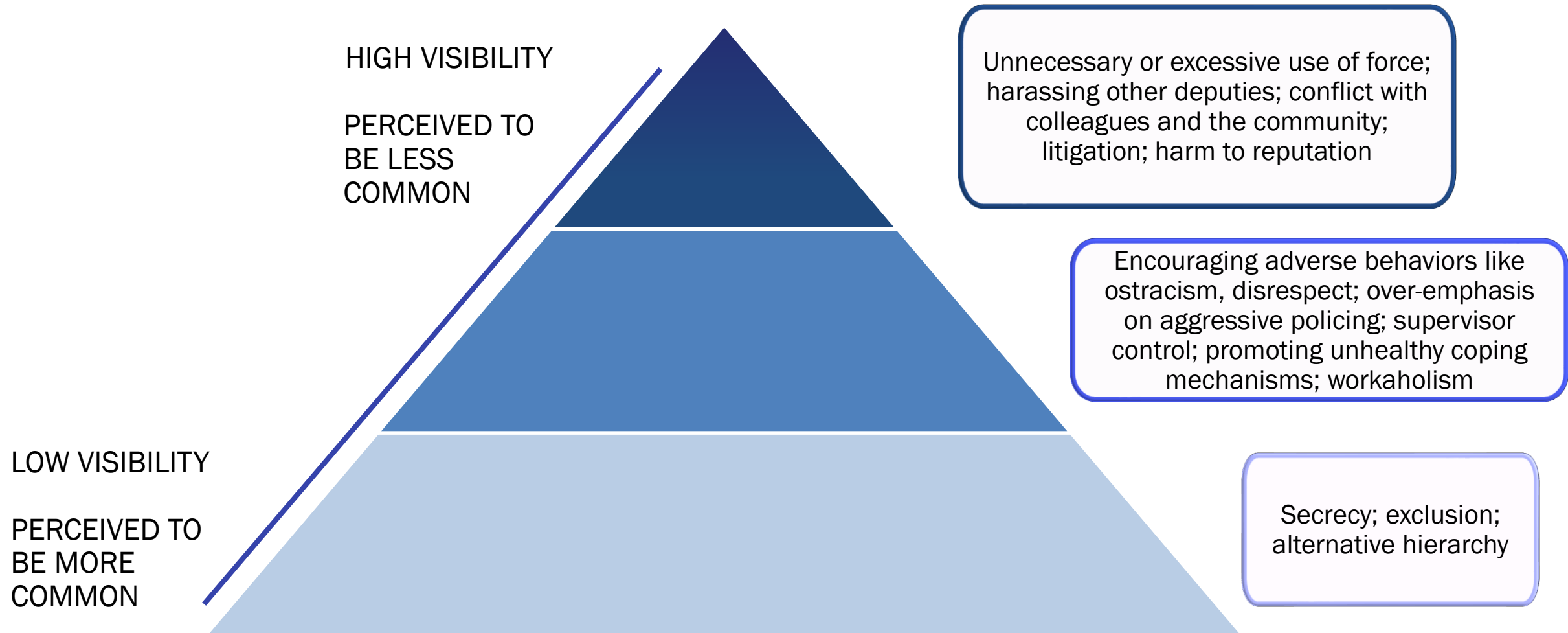
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Subgroups exist across a continuum, with varying risks for LASD and individual deputies



Negative outcomes seem to stem from a combination of group dynamics, poor supervision, and self-perpetuating history

- Us vs. Us vs. Them
- Incivility, bullying, workplace violence

“

Unfortunately, you'll always have a couple of people who are problems or bullies. When that started to surface, the bullies weren't checked. If you don't check a bully, it will spread. The supervision was lacking...The two or three [bullies] who were extremely loud and powerful, they created chaos. –Command-level

”

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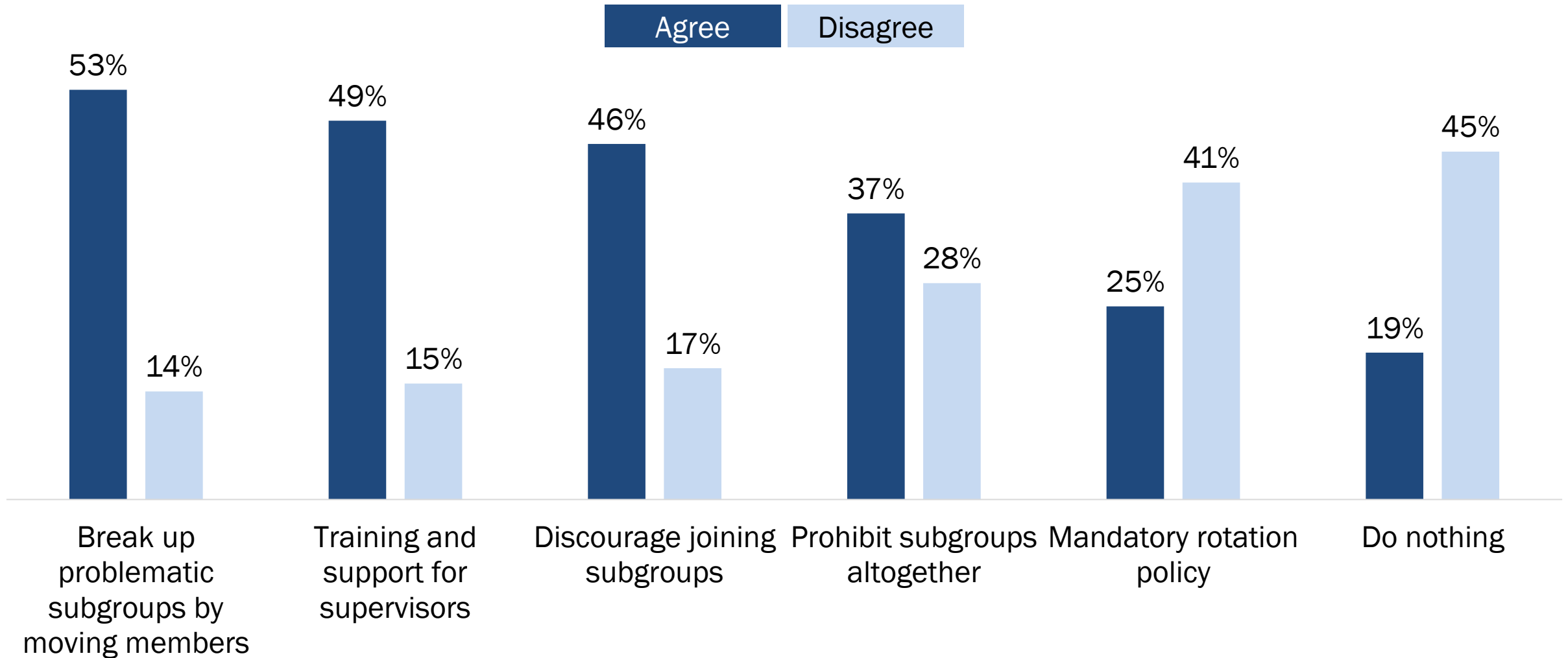
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Most prefer doing something, but any response may be divisive internally



What RAND recommends

Make joining and sustaining subgroups less attractive, and blunt the impact of subgroups on LASD, deputies, and the community

POLICY

VISION AND COMMUNICATION

UNIT COMMANDERS

REPORTING AND INVESTIGATIONS

TRAINING

ACCOUNTABILITY



Policy – to clarify expectations and set a vision

- Add clear language prohibiting subgroups
- Explain prohibited activities, specific consequences, and alignment with core values
- Related challenges: favoritism, bullying, harassment, retaliation

Training – to be able to identify issues and foster change

- Training for sergeants
- Peer intervention
- Institutionalize procedural justice
- Identify other training deficits

Accountability – to identify and address issues

- Support and hold command staff accountable for subgroup behavior
- Engage in efforts to give the community a greater voice and understand issues
- Reconciliation



Complex, long-term challenge
Requires coordination

Questions?

