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The Benefits, Challenges, and Lessons of Evidence- Based Policing

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Department*



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The Benefits, Challenges, and Lessons of Evidence-Based Policing

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Evidence-Based Policing (EBP)

Law enforcement is a blue-collar vocation, let's face it, a majority of us in American policing still wear nametags to work. Policing a bar fight is typically the same today, as it was 100 years ago, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't pay attention to data and research to prove what works and what may not. Because many practitioners choose to rely on anecdotal experiences, traditions, and instincts while being reluctant to embrace research, the challenges are significant. However, just as the medical field was resistant to science and research for years, there are some shifts that signal law enforcement has begun to embrace research (Sherman, 2013). The acceptance of research-based policing in the U.S. is progressing with positive examples in the Philadelphia, Rialto, and Sacramento Police Departments, all of whom successfully conducted randomized controlled trials (RCTs) aimed at evaluating policing strategies. Empirical data (e.g., hot spots policing and the effectiveness of body-worn cameras) showed their methods were effective in reducing crime and bolstering legitimacy, for example, body-worn camera usage reduced complaints and use of force in the Rialto study (Sherman, 2013). In spite of the benefits and challenges, we must realize the nuanced interplay of policing and research and how traditions, cultures, and cynicism can limit progress. We can learn many lessons from medical research as well, which this paper will discuss. Finally, I draw on my experiences as a police practitioner, and some exposure to academia, to highlight the efforts and benefits that have been made toward evidence-based policing in American law enforcement.



Research does not have to be lengthy or complicated. BetaGov, a non-profit research organization, led by Dr. Angela Hawken, has shown that short, randomized police experiments can be completed in three to four months. These efficient

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experiments can show what works and what doesn't while improving policy solutions for today's pressing policing challenges (BetaGov, 2016). For example, the Vallejo Police Department is in the early stages of a three-month automatic license plate reader (ALPR) experiment with BetaGov, which will attempt to measure the effectiveness of the ALPR "3M" technology and the potential behavior changes for officers on patrol. Also, another seemingly uncomplicated four-month experiment that BetaGov conducted illustrated the importance of aromatherapy in Pennsylvania correctional facilities and the potential for alternative solutions to address problems such as reducing violence and improving mental health in inmate populations (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, 2016).

Today's young law enforcement officers are primed to embrace research especially as it becomes more accepted and less cumbersome. They tend to be better educated, open-minded, and more than ever, capable of re-engineering the profession through data and science, but we still must transform our cultures. Josh Young (2014), a former Ventura Police Officer, and founding member of ASEBP addressed these questions in a published Cambridge University thesis. In his study, he stressed the "importance of realigning incentives and performance appraisals to encourage managers in an evidence-based policing philosophy - one built into the cultural structure through training" (p.38).

Challenges of Research-Based Policing

The animosity between police practitioners and some academics seems fixed with terms such as procedural justice and fair and impartial policing training (Honey, 2014; Mitchell, 2016). Fair and impartial police training stresses through their research that we all have biases. The training asserts, both implicit and, less commonly explicit, can be managed and reduced if police are aware of them (Fair & Impartial Policing, 2016). Yet, there is limited research to show fair and impartial policing training works, or if implemented, does more harm? It is not that both concepts lack value to law enforcement – because they do. It is that they seemingly assert fixes to the complexities and challenges of policing in an almost broad brush solution to what may arguably be, a larger set of social problems placed at the feet of the occasional cynical or even defensive patrol cop whom must also navigate the daily stresses of police work. Therein lies both the benefits (e.g., to prove or refute) and challenges (e.g., to convince cynical police what works and what doesn't) in research. Police officers want to be trusted while rising to the challenge to come to sound decisions through discretion – not second-guessed. Nonetheless, it is the perception of some that introducing this training does just that (Mitchell, 2016). Research may refute or prove otherwise.

The importance of discretion in policing shouldn't be lost on any of us. Dynamic demands necessitate shifting priorities and sound decision making rooted in discretion. In spite of this importance, some have called for police to have less discretion, and it this "deskilling" -- aptly described as the "McDonaldization" of policing – which is contrary to a professional research-based approach. It is this ineffectual policing, in accordance with four main principles by sociologist George Ritzer that are overly stressed in some police organizations: calculability (quantity over quality and the excessive focus on measurements), efficiency (streamlined processes that lack relationship building and

ownership), predictability (overly bureaucratic and risk averse) and excessive controls (limiting discretion) that hinder progress (Heslop, 2011). The hope is data, science, continued sound discretion, leadership, and research will counter these limiting values by motivating and empowering police.

Leadership is critical because the implementation of evidence-based policing (EBP) is most successful when established at the operational level (Lum, 2014). However, challenges abound due to an unclear understanding of EBP that may occur between chiefs, captains, commanders, and first-line supervisors. Furthering the challenges is that policing has persuasive cultures with strong traditions and even higher expectations to conform early on by recruits. It is this deep-rooted conformity to culture, tradition and an over-emphasis on street smarts and instincts that seem to hinder the progress of evidence-based policing concepts — all of which are vital -- but so is a diversity of thought and experience, data and research informed decisions, and sound leadership (Johnson, 2016). It is our first line police supervisors that have the greatest influence on culture at the operational level (Engel & Worden, 2003).

However, this conformity to culture has its roots in a firmly held belief that policing is the responsibility of local control. American culture expects our local governments and municipalities to police their communities (Stone & Travis, 2013). There are 18,000 police departments and almost 750,000 police officers in America. The difficulty being many have different cultures, educational, and training requirements and to complicate things further, most have 10 or fewer members, coupled with significant budgetary and resource limitations (Bureau Justice Statistics, 2016).

Defining policing as a profession requires national coherence (Stone & Travis, 2013). Stone and Travis (2013) provide us with a simple example of the term professional. “Doctors, lawyers, and engineers have a body of universal knowledge and educational requirements that allow them to move across varying jurisdictions and national boundaries” (p. 18). However, municipal policing is unique in that each community often has specific demographics and challenges. Still, policing as a profession has a long road ahead before similar universal standards are put into practice. Embracing national research is a start.

It is no surprise then that there are challenges in conformity. We in policing are frequently unable to agree on the techniques that we conduct on a high-risk felony car stop (Smith, 2013). Additionally, SWAT tactics vary from team to team and state to state with dynamic entries versus surround and call out tactics debated ad nauseam (French, 2010). How we process mentally unstable subjects, or even the method in which we put handcuffs on an arrestee— all of which vary, despite attempts at standardized training by various policing associations.

In conclusion, research may also better inform by shifting our police cultures from a focus on outputs (e.g., arrests and citations) toward measuring and working towards positive outcomes (e.g., police legitimacy, perceived safety, and lower crime). In other words, what gets measured gets done (see Moore and Braga, 2003). However, implementing outcomes and measuring community relationship building at the police officer patrol level will continue to be elusive if institutionalized thinking is entrenched, change resisted, and short-term goals via outputs the predominant focus. Of course, increased budgets and staffing would also help.

Lessons Learned from Medical Research

From the battlefields of Operation Enduring Freedom in Iraq, we see the benefits of empirical data and research toward the application of tourniquets for controlling blood hemorrhaging (Gerhardt, Mabry, Butler & DeLorenzo, 2012; Greer, 2016). Rather than the resistance to the use of tourniquets because of concerns for collateral damage to limbs, research has enabled medics to apply them as a first response to controlling profuse bleeding. As a result, Army medics and other first responders, including those at the Boston Marathon terrorist event saved many lives (Greer, 2016). However, for years civilian first responders had been improperly trained to apply tourniquets as a last resort while emphasizing C-Spine precautions, but in the process occasionally ignored other potential complications, i.e., bleeding or respiratory concerns (Morrissey, 2013).

Again, medical research influenced policing research. This time with neuroscience related to victims of sexual assault investigations. Data and science illustrated the manner in which memory is encoded under extreme fear and stress. For example, neuroscience has shown memory subjected to a traumatic experience is fragmented and not recalled in a linear way (Lisak, 2002). Before the research, an untrained first responder may have chalked up memory irregularities to a deceptive victim. The fact a victim remembers details not expressed earlier to a police officer is not proof they are fabricating the event (Lisak, 2002). For instance, Dr. Lisak (2002) asserted “victims are often able to recall the texture of a rapist’s shirt before they can remember they may have been wearing a hat,” is a profound illustration on memory research during a traumatic event (p.3).

Partly because of this research, a focus on improved training has informed detectives and agents during the interview process to effectively elicit more details, resulting in improved police legitimacy and increased prosecutions – all accomplished by doing less harm, and providing the victims control while understanding the root causes of victim behavior and “avoiding secondary victimization” (Fisher & Geiselman, 2010; Campbell, 2013). Termed “therapeutic jurisprudence,” these interview methods have empowered victims (Fisher & Geiselman, 2010). It is this practice that allows victims to regain some control, trust, and normalcy. The Army has tremendous success training their agents in what they call Forensic Experiential Trauma Interviewing (FETI) – similar to cognitive interviewing (Strand, 2015). Finally, Dr. Lisak (2002) provides a simple analogy to understanding the neuroscience some experience after a traumatic event. It is akin to a zebra going back to a watering hole where a lion may have previously attacked. The difference is zebras have to return for survival. Some of these victims (police and sexual assault) make a conscious and deliberate, but no less difficult choice, when navigating interviews and court testimony while trying to regain normalcy in a post hyper-vigilant world (Lisak, 2002).

These memory anomalies are found in police officer-involved shootings where research has shown additional sleep cycles increase recall (Lewinsky, 2014). For instance, officers remember what was important to them at the time, and other memories not crucial to survival are ignored. The trauma may leave them with frustration at the inability to recall details and the resulting feeling they could have done something better. Yet, research on memory recall has shown that those exposed to cognitive interviewing techniques have

better memory retrieval. Cognitive interview seems to help combat memory blocks for those exposed to excessive fear, stress, and trauma (Geiselman, 2010).

Left to our own devices, practitioners come up with facts based on anecdotal experiences – evident too in the medical field with over 100 treatments for urinary tract infections (Sherman, 1998). Going back even further, bloodletting — a long-trusted remedy for many ailments, was used for years in the medical field, regardless of whether it worked. Credit claimed when it worked and excuses the patient was far too gone when it didn't (Syed, 2015; Mitchell, 2016). A more recent medical research example revealed immediately cutting the umbilical cord off a baby after birth was not beneficial to the infant's health. After birth, a baby receives a surge of well-oxygenated blood from the mother. Despite benefits of leaving the umbilical cord intact a few extra minutes, decades ago, doctors stopped. They were not sure why, other than "that was how it was always done" (Ansari, 2015).

We also see the benefit of EBP to refute many areas of policing touted by training profiteers. Few police departments employ experts on their staff able to evaluate the newest technology, strategies or research accurately. As a result, police work is vulnerable to quick solutions and fads. One glaring example is neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) which claims in training police can tell someone is lying if they look down and to the left or right, or even hesitate before answering. Research has shown that much of this was junk science, anecdotal and not based on evidence (Roderique-Davies, 2009).

Conclusion

Creating environments in American policing that embrace evidence-based practices to reduce not only crime rates but also job satisfaction and legitimacy are possible. However, policing and research is highly nuanced and not a one size fits all proposition (Lum, 2011). For example, procedural justice and de-escalation are policing strategies commonly used as a cure for many of our policing, community-relationship woes. Nevertheless, we should embrace the concepts mentioned above, as research has proven they work by also demonstrating we can operate in a world of transparency, fairness, and proportionality; with the realization little we do in policing is done in absolutes. First line police supervisors should continue to create environments that ensure adaptability, so our police are empowered. Continuously learning, communicating to our communities, and adopting best-known practices advances the policing profession and maximizes the talents of our officers. For instance, some have called for the demilitarization of our SWAT teams along with stripping them of Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAP) and other armored vehicles. Surround and call out tactics, are now the preferred method for many SWAT teams, but they too are dependent on the situation, shifting priorities and triggering events. Police administrators must communicate the importance of utilizing armored vehicles and MRAPs, so police are safe when sitting on close perimeter operations with potentially armed subjects. The results are more reliable SWAT teams that are truly able to slow conditions down through containment - the preferred method to deal with many policing tactics today (PERF, 2016).

There is an expectation through research and science that policing can learn from its mistakes and thus become more efficient (Syed, 2015). Moreover, that is the essence of science and research – learning through trial and error. Those research examples are apparent in the medical and airline industry, with every surgery complication, or air mishap that results in a near miss or tragedy, as an opportunity to improve through error (Syed, 2015). The same can be done in policing.

Finally, Dr. Lum (2009) asserted in an article with the Police Foundation that policing can evolve. This evolution can occur if policing shifts from an overreliance on “emotions, hunches, political pressures, moral panics, police cynicism, traditions, strong cultural norms, and best practices by a consensus of individuals” to a focus on more evidence-based decision-making (p.3). As criminogenic research is written in digestible forms, and part of the training curriculum, with outcome incentives realigned, there is a belief that our front-line police will discover the benefits of research to successfully target, test, and track incoming data (Sherman, 2013).

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