

Evidence-based police education and training in the United States

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Abstract:

The achievement of evidence-based policing is presumably dependent on a foundation of evidence-based education and training. This paper considers whether that foundation is in place in the United States. The extremely fragmented structure of American policing makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions but the picture is mixed. On the higher education side there is a strong commitment to research and academic values, but it is spread all across criminal justice without much focus on policing, and there is little commitment to pedagogical effectiveness. On the training side there is more focus on effective teaching and learning methods, but less commitment to making sure that the content that is taught conforms to the best available scientific evidence.

Keywords: Evidence-based policing, Police education, Police training, United States

If there is any global trend in policing right now, it must be evidenced-based policing (Sherman, 2013). Thus it was no surprise that many papers and presentations at the 2016 CEPOL conference considered the possibility that the training and education of law enforcement personnel might be evidence-based ⁽¹⁾.

Answers to the basic question 'is police education and training evidence-based?' might reasonably be 'of course it is,' or 'not at all,' or anything in between ⁽²⁾. On the positive side, presumably all curriculum designers and instructors adhere to what they believe to be the best way to do policing. However, on the sceptical side, a strict assessment of the scientific basis of best practice beliefs would likely conclude that the emperor is nearly naked.

There is a lively debate around the pros and cons of the evidence-based policing movement and its impli-

cations for both police practice (Sparrow, 2011; Tilley and Laycock, 2016) and police scholarship (Greene, 2014). This paper will leave that debate to another day and dive head-long into the question of whether police education and training in the United States is evidence-based. First, though, some description of the decentralized US system is necessary.

Police education and training in the United States

Police education and training in the United States is nothing if not fragmented. There is no national police college or university, plus there is a strong tendency to draw a clear line of demarcation between education and training. On the education side, there are nearly 2 000 degree programs in law enforcement or criminal justice offered by schools, colleges, and universities ⁽³⁾.

⁽¹⁾ The terms 'police' and 'law enforcement' are used interchangeably in this paper.

⁽²⁾ Opinions and conclusions in this paper are the author's and do not represent the official position of the National Institute of Justice or the U.S. Department of Justice.

⁽³⁾ Traditionally there have been few such programs at the secondary school level. There are about 1 000 programs at 2-year colleges, which are typically called community colleges or technical colleges in the U.S. There are about 800 programs at 4-year colleges and universities. (In the modern U.S. vernacular, the distinction between 'college' and 'university' is essentially meaningless).

On the training side, there are almost 700 police academies that provide what is typically called 'basic' or 'recruit' training (Reaves, 2016). These training academies serve 18 000 separate law enforcement agencies, most of which are not nearly large enough to justify having their own police academy. Typically, the largest agencies operate their own training academies while over 95 % rely on regional or state-level academies.

There are no national standards that govern all these providers of police education and training. Regarding police education, basic standards applicable to educational institutions are set and enforced through state-level education departments and regional accrediting bodies, but there are no widely-accepted standards specific to law enforcement or criminal justice education at the secondary, college, or university levels ⁽⁴⁾. As a practical matter, the content and format of police education programs is governed by the faculty who teach in them and the schools that offer them. That said, a degree of similarity among programs has evolved over the last 50 years, mainly through the efforts of a scholarly society, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) ⁽⁵⁾.

On the training front, minimum standards are established in each of the states by what are generically termed POSTs — Police Officer Standards and Training Commissions. Most of these state-level regulatory bodies were created since the 1970s. In recent years, despite the reality of 50 separate administrative systems, police training curricula have substantially converged and cooperation between the states has been achieved through the professional network of POSTs, known as the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST) ⁽⁶⁾.

The end product of the extremely fragmented American system is not as dreadful as it might sound. First, it should be understood that most police agencies hire applicants at age 21. Since secondary school typically ends at age 18, young people interested in policing usually enrol in college, join the military, or work at some other occupation for a few years before they can begin their police career. Consequently, while few po-

lice departments require applicants to have completed a higher education degree, a surprising number do so anyway. National data are sketchy, but three recent multi-agency studies found that almost all police personnel have at least some post-secondary education and roughly one-half have a 4-year university degree (Hilal and Densley, 2013; Paoline et al., 2014) ⁽⁷⁾.

The average length of basic police academy training in the United States is about 20 weeks (Reaves, 2016). At first glance this seems short by international standards, but again, most police have had some college or even a 4-year degree before entering this training phase. Also, after graduating from basic training, police are required to satisfactorily complete a formal field training phase that averages about 12 weeks, during which they get additional coaching and have to demonstrate competence in the skills they learned in the academy. In sum, therefore, the total average accumulation of education and training of beginning police in the United States is probably comparable to most other western countries. It should be noted that this refers to all police in the United States — that is, not just new lieutenants as in some countries, but every new police person, all of whom begin their careers as front-line first responders ⁽⁸⁾.

Recent trends and issues

In the realm of US police training, two well-established trends can be identified along with one critical issue of more recent vintage:

1. Requiring aspiring police to complete their basic police training before being hired has become increasingly common over the past 10-20 years. Under this model, a person interested in a police career applies for admission to a police academy and, if accepted, attends the academy at personal expense, that is, they pay the tuition cost and earn no salary as they are not yet an employee of a law enforcement agency. Upon graduation, they are then 'certified' and can seek employment, without any guar-

⁽⁴⁾ Some programs are now labeled 'criminal justice and criminology' or vice versa.

⁽⁵⁾ See <http://www.acjs.org>, including a set of voluntary standards at <http://www.acjs.org/page/Certification>

⁽⁶⁾ See <http://iadlest.org/>. Links to each of the 50 state POSTs are at <http://iadlest.org/POSTPortal.aspx>

⁽⁷⁾ The third study is this author's analysis of LEO C survey data collected from 89 agencies by the National Police Research Platform between October 2014 and February 2015. Information about the Platform project is available at <http://www.nationalpoliceresearch.org/>

⁽⁸⁾ The term 'police officer' is commonly used in the U.S. but it refers to every police person, that is, not just lieutenants and above, but police of every rank including the lowest.

antee that they will get hired into a police position. The main impetus behind this system is financial — the individual bears the cost of initial police training rather than the police agency (i.e. the taxpayer). In states that have adopted this model, larger agencies often still operate their own academies, despite the expense, but smaller agencies usually hire only those officers who are already certified, at a significant cost savings.

2. Also over the last 10-20 years, police training has increasingly adopted teaching methods associated with adult learning and problem-based learning. Many police academies have reduced their reliance on the lecture method of teaching, instead using more scenarios, problem situations, case studies, role playing and similar techniques. This shift is based on a better understanding of how adults learn, as well as a desire to put more emphasis on integrating and applying knowledge and skills, rather than memorization and regurgitation of massive amounts of information.
3. Most recently in the United States, a stronger focus on conflict management, crisis intervention, de-escalation, procedural justice, and implicit bias has swept into police training curricula in response to heightened public concern following police shootings and accusations of racial discrimination. Along with body-worn camera technology, enhanced training is widely seen as a key method for achieving greater police accountability and transparency, instilling a guardian rather than warrior mentality, reducing use of force, and easing the current crisis of police legitimacy (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015; Police Executive Research Forum, 2016a; 2016b).

In the realm of police education, trends are less clear since the education system is so fragmented and not particularly responsive to influence by the law enforcement community. Three observations can be made:

1. Since the 1960s, criminal justice has grown to become one of the most popular university degree programs in the United States. It is the most common program of study for college and university students interested in police careers. Curricula, though, tend to be very broad with a mainly social-science orientation, rather than focused on law or police science. The recent adoption in Australia,

the United Kingdom, and some other countries of a more police-specific university curriculum has not been widely emulated in the United States.

2. The domination of the criminal justice model at the undergraduate level is also seen at the graduate level. Many mid-career police personnel pursue master's degrees for professional development and to position themselves for promotions and desirable assignments. Some migrate to programs in public administration or business administration, but most enrol in master's degree programs in criminal justice. At this graduate level, especially, it can be argued that the typical broad-based criminal justice curriculum fails to educate mid-career police in the scientific body of knowledge of their own profession (Cordner, 2016).
3. One clear trend in American higher education has been the proliferation of online degree programs, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, including ones in criminal justice. While quality issues are debated, the reality is that many students with an interest in policing are now obtaining educational credentials through online learning. Many of the online criminal justice degrees are offered by smaller and more obscure universities, but several of the leading providers are major universities already well-known for their on-campus criminal justice programs.

The evidence-based question

The question is, to what extent is all this police education and training in the United States evidence-based? Authoritatively answering that question would require a detailed assessment of the practices of some 2 700 police education and training providers, a mammoth effort that has not been undertaken. Instead we have to rely on piecemeal information and the impressions of knowledgeable observers, which admittedly is not the most evidence-based way to assess the evidence-based status of the enterprise, but it is the only option at present.

Before jumping into the fire, one consideration that seems necessary is to draw a distinction between the (1) content and (2) methods incorporated in police education and training. In other words, assessing the evidence-basis should look at both 'what is taught' and 'how it is taught.' In principle, what is taught might or

might not correspond to the best available evidence about what works in policing, and, as a separate issue, instructional methods might or might not be based on the best evidence concerning effective teaching and learning. The end result or outcome of police education and training is presumably dependent on both of these components, content and methods. To put it simplistically, if police are presented with the wrong

information, or taught in such a way that they do not learn, then police education and training cannot be said to be evidence-based.

Table 1 incorporates these two components, content and methods, and summarizes the author's sense of the evidence-based status of police education and training in the United States.

Table 1

Evidence-base of US police education and training

	Content	Methods	Overall
Education	Mixed: high academic standards for faculty; governed by scholarly values; little regulation or accountability over what is taught; dominated by the criminal justice model but limited focus on police	Weak: emphasis on lecture and knowledge accumulation; more teacher-focused than learner-focused; faculty are content experts but rarely have any expertise in teaching and learning methods	Weak: implementation of program assessment has been resisted; faculty decry 'objectification' and 'corporatization' of higher education and resist accountability as a threat to academic freedom
Training	Weak: pseudo-scientific content validation; slow to incorporate research results; influenced by traditional cultural beliefs as well as external pressures including the latest crisis or fad; deference shown to specialist instructors	Mixed: substantial adoption of problem-based learning and other hands-on, experiential learning models; but many still rely heavily on lecture and memorization as well as the stress/boot camp style of academy	Mixed: some commitment to instructional system design principles; standardized measurement of trainee reaction and learning are common with some feedback loops to assess impact on behaviour; but little or no effort to gauge impact on organizational outcomes

Education content. As noted earlier, most police education in the United States is provided by criminal justice programs located in colleges and universities. The academic credentials of faculty are quite strong, with terminal degrees normally required and with more and more Ph.D. programs producing new scholars focused on crime and justice. For this reason, even absent any data, we can be reasonably confident that the content of university courses reflects the latest and best knowledge in the field. Three factors give some reason for pause, however. One is that university faculty members typically have nearly complete control over what they teach in their assigned classes, with little or no consequences for the choices they make. This is great for creativity, diversity, and academic freedom, but it provides no assurance that a professor or a class actually covers the best available evidence pertinent to the subject at hand.

An exception to this fundamental feature of professorial independence is when a part-time instructor or adjunct instructor is assigned to teach a course. In this situation the institution is more likely to impose a syllabus and required textbook, establishing a degree of

control over what is taught, but at the same time the instructor is far less likely to be an expert on the evidence applicable to the course⁽⁹⁾. Since some criminal justice programs rely very heavily on adjunct instructors, this can be a significant factor affecting the content that is taught and learned.

A third factor is that, as criminal justice curricula have evolved over the last 50 years, they have gotten broader and broader, which can be viewed as a positive development, but one result has been fewer and fewer courses specifically focused on policing⁽¹⁰⁾. In concert with this broadening of the academic field, the proportion of new faculty members who are specialized in policing has become relatively small. The net effect of this evolution has arguably been beneficial for criminal justice higher education, since it now includes something of interest for nearly everyone, but it has occurred at the expense of police education, which

⁽⁹⁾ Part-time and adjunct instructors tend to be practitioners with some graduate-level education.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The evolution of police education in the U.S. is described in more detail in Cordner (2016).

has been confined to an ever-smaller corner of the field and the curriculum.

Education methods. There is less reason to be positive about the extent to which the instructional methods used in police education are evidence-based. The professors who teach criminal justice usually have little or no training in the science of teaching and learning, since the focus of doctoral programs is on creating researchers and content experts, not effective teachers. Also, the reward system in American higher education generally prioritizes publishing over teaching, so faculty members are encouraged to be efficient in their teaching, in order to leave more time for research. This tends to lead to lecture-style classes and machine-gradable testing, neither of which correlate positively with higher-level student learning or the development of skills in critical thinking, problem solving, and written communication ⁽¹¹⁾.

A related factor is the bright line between police education and police training in the United States. There is an understandable historical reason for this division — when police education first got started in the early to middle 1900s, systematic police training had not yet developed, so the original university programs in police science and police administration often included classes on firearms, arrest techniques, traffic enforcement, evidence collection, interviewing, and so forth. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s when police training began to achieve its own independent institutional standing, and the educational arena shifted to criminal justice, anything remotely associated with the practical aspects of policing was relegated to the training category. Today, therefore, even though it might be true that learning occurs best when knowledge and practice are integrated, a relatively impenetrable wall separates the two worlds of police education and police training.

Police education overall. An overall review of the degree to which US police education is evidence-based has to conclude pessimistically. One very high-level indicator is that studies of police attitudes and behaviour rarely find much difference between those with a college degree and those without (Paoline et al., 2014). While conclusions from this large body of research are difficult to draw because of methodological deficiencies, one can only imagine the consternation that

would arise if we had a similar set of studies showing no differences between those who had completed police training and those who had no training.

One potentially positive trend is a growing emphasis on program assessment in higher education generally, thanks to pressure from accrediting bodies. Criminal justice programs, however, like others in the social sciences and liberal arts, have so far struggled to define and measure what they are supposed to accomplish, how well they are doing, and what changes would make them more effective. In essence this movement toward program assessment is intended to make higher education more evidence-based, but it is yet to be seen whether it will have any impact on the actual practice of criminal justice or police education.

Moreover, many university faculty members, including those in criminal justice, resist program assessment because they view it as representative of a narrow vocational or corporate approach to education that is antithetical to the traditional intellectual and humanist values of academia. To others, however, this resistance to assessment just seems like an effort to avoid accountability. The cultural and philosophical gap between the call for an evidence-based approach to higher education and how some criminal justice professors see their role is quite substantial and seems likely to constrain any impact that program assessment might otherwise have ⁽¹²⁾.

Training content. Police trainers and training institutions operate with much less autonomy compared to higher education. Police academy curricula, learning objectives, and standardized tests are typically mandated through state regulation, ideally based on systematic job-task analyses. Trainers are expected to teach the curriculum and ensure that learning objectives are met, leaving them with much less discretion in deciding what to teach, in contrast to university professors.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons to doubt the extent to which police training content really is evidence-based. One is that the job-task analysis methodology designed to ensure a valid connection between training content and the police job is rather superficial and has never successfully penetrated the core elements of policing. Job-task studies, based on

⁽¹¹⁾ Which are exactly the skills that U.S. police executives say they look for when hiring new police (Cordner & Cordner, 2014).

⁽¹²⁾ The irony that many academics feel justified in criticizing the police for lacking of accountability is discussed by Bayley (2011).

questionnaires completed by job incumbents, have been useful in determining how often police actually scale a 5-foot wall, chase a suspect on foot, or push a vehicle out of the roadway. But those kinds of studies seem to consistently miss the fact that the two most frequent behaviours police engage in with the public are talking and listening — we only know that from social science research, not from job-task analyses, and consequently it is not usually reflected in police training curricula. Similarly, we know from research that the most frequent decisions that police make are whether to stop a vehicle, whether to stop a person, and whether to intervene in a possibly suspicious situation — but training tends to focus much more on how to conduct those actions, rather than on how to observe and interpret public behaviour in the first place, and then decide whether to act or not.

Along this line, most training academies and state-level training directorates lack any mechanism or capacity for ensuring that their curricula and courses are evidence-based. While the national government, professional associations, think tanks, and others in the United States make some effort to compile and update the state of knowledge about policing, practitioners, including trainers, complain that much of the research is irrelevant, inaccessible, or incomprehensible to them. Training instructors are expected to have expertise in the subjects they teach, but that usually refers to current practices, not necessarily best practices or the empirical evidence about what works. Also, those who serve as full-time trainers are often ‘in the classroom’ nearly every working hour, so they have little time to enhance their own knowledge and awareness of evidence, even if they are inclined to try. Part-time trainers are even less likely to have opportunities to master the scientific evidence-base of the subjects they teach, since they generally fill some full-time police job except when they are called in to teach a particular segment of a course.

Another impediment to evidence-based content is that police training curricula are influenced by strong external forces. Probably the strongest is civil litigation — government lawyers push hard for training, or longer training, on topics associated with the potential for lawsuits. Their objective is to strengthen their hand in the event of a lawsuit against the police alleging misconduct. Whether there is any scientific evidence underlying the training does not particularly matter. Another external force is politics and public opinion.

Particular training topics are sometimes legislatively mandated, and even repeated annually for years and years, because elected officials or pressure groups believe that they are important and will fix some deficit in police performance. Naturally, these kinds of externally-imposed training mandates sometimes address real needs but just as often are merely symbolic or reactionary. What they generally are not is evidence based.

A final factor affecting the evidence base of training content is that instructors of key technical subjects are often shown considerable deference, especially on those subjects related to use of force and police officer safety. Ironically, in some respects these particular subjects are most amenable to an evidence-based approach, since they involve discrete events and behaviours that are regularly scrutinized by researchers. However, they also go to the heart of police values, culture, and tradition. Police leaders have typically left the details of self-defence and weapons training to ‘the experts’ (their trainers) whose beliefs tend to be based more on experience and personal preference than on in-depth analysis or evidence about what works best (Morrison and Garner, 2011; Hundesmarck et al., 2016).

Training methods. As noted earlier, US police training has been quicker than universities and professors to adopt adult-learning and problem-based methods. An important push in this direction came in the 1990s when officials became aware of changes that had been implemented at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) academy which significantly enhanced the skill levels of graduating trainees (Himelfarb, 1997). The US Office of Community Oriented Policing Services subsequently encouraged police agencies and academies to adopt adult-learning methods (Cleveland and Saville, 2007) and later a Police Society for Problem Based Learning was established ⁽¹³⁾.

Although many academies have implemented these adult-learning methods on the premise that they lead to higher-level learning and more integration of knowledge and practice, adoption has been far from universal. Instructors who have grown comfortable with Powerpoint-aided lecture and discussion frequently resist making the shift to a student-centred, discovery-learning, teacher-as-facilitator model. Risk-averse training administrators (and their lawyers) may also be reluctant to implement a model that seems less structured and predictable. In addition, nearly half of

⁽¹³⁾ See <http://www.pspbl.org/>

US police academies still lean in the direction of the military-style stress format (Reaves, 2016) which is, in some respects, contradictory to the student-centred discovery-learning model. This continuing influence of stress-based training is not based on any scientific evidence but rather on strongly-held and longstanding beliefs and traditions.

Police training overall: At the very least, US police training seems to try harder than police education to be evidence based. As described above, curricula are generally informed by a detailed analysis of the work for which trainees are preparing. Many training institutions formally utilize the instructional systems design (ISD) model to systematically structure training, assess courses, and make changes based on feedback. Staff almost always assess student reaction to the training (were they engaged, was it interesting, how useful do they think it was) using standard instruments, as well as test to measure student learning, so that instructors and courses can be compared and tracked over time. Less common, unfortunately, is follow-up assessment to determine the impact of the training on individuals' subsequent behaviour and performance on the job (Lum et al., 2016: 34-38). The gold standard of training evaluation — did the training result in improved organizational effectiveness, and if so, did the benefit exceed the cost — is rarely even contemplated, much less attempted.

Conclusion

While we do not really have a measure of the extent to which US police education and training are evidence based, there is clearly a lot of room for improvement. But there are also some positive signs. For example, training on fair and impartial policing, which is directly based on the science of unconscious and implicit bias, is currently being delivered all over the country (James et al., 2016). In response to the problem of false confessions and also the misguided use of 'enhanced interrogation' of terrorism suspects, more scientifically-sound techniques for interviewing and interrogation have been developed and are being adopted in police training (Johnson, 2015). And the President's 21st Century Task Force (2015: 51-60) offered 13 training and education recommendations, including a research agenda to support police academy curricula, establishment of training innovation hubs, and creation of a national postgraduate institute of policing. If these recommendations are implemented, and if the momentum behind evidence-based policing continues, a more positive assessment of the rationale and science underlying police education and training in the United States should be possible in the near future.

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