



WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN POLICING? ⁽¹⁾



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Abstract: This article examines the methodology of evidence-based policing, the political context promoting its adoption and its diffusion within the police organisation. Running through it there are three themes which have coloured my recent work and publications with my Dutch colleagues, Auke van Dijk and Frank Hoogewoning. Firstly, that 70 years of police research has produced a body of knowledge drawing on multiple methods — observation, interviews, surveys, historical work — which also provides diverse forms of ‘evidence’: it may be viewed as ‘useless knowledge’ regarding direct utility but it is vital to understanding policing. Secondly, policing is complex and demanding, and we should look at what police actually do and what public expectations of them are and then focus on competences to develop confident officers and leaders at all levels. A fixation on crime reduction in political circles and research agendas threatens to distort the relationship with the public and to diminish the skills of officers trying to cope with multiple demands. The Dutch officers dealing with the MH17 crash in the Ukraine as a result of a rocket attack in a conflict zone with much loss of life, for example, were instantly faced with unprecedented challenges. ‘What works’ had to be constructed pragmatically, daily and on the hoof; crime reduction was far from their minds unless it referred to the Kremlin. What drove them were prior learned skills, an institutional capacity to adapt and a philosophy of a caring and compassionate duty of care to the families and friends of the victims: that was what really mattered. And thirdly, and finally, policing is inextricably tied to issues of rights, diversity, equity, justice and use of force and is laden with significance in the vital relationship of the citizen to the state. In brief, ‘what works’ is clearly important and valuable but — given the nature of policing — it always remains subordinate to the pivotal issue, ‘what really matters’.

Keywords: policing; what works and really matters in policing; evidence-based policing; research methodology and research styles.

CONTEXT

‘If it works in New York it will work anywhere’ — Bill Bratton, former and current Commissioner of the New York City Police Department (NYPD), in Bratton and Knobler, 1998.

The topic of this article is highly complex. As background context there is the need to address the history of policing and of police research; the current drivers of change; and the implications of all this for police research and practice. In turn there needs to be attention to system change, organisational and management development and diffusion of innovations. The transfer of knowledge and practice also has to be related

to different police cultures and sociopolitical structures (Newburn and Sparks, 2004).

The trends that I see — and this may largely be a northern European perspective — are: centralisation (new national forces in Scotland and the Netherlands, economies of scale in Scandinavia); the narrowing of the police mandate to one dominating goal — cut crime; a strong emphasis on combatting organised crime and terrorism; the continued dominance of ‘new public management’ (NPM) in public services, including tough austerity measures (especially in the United Kingdom: Leishman et al., 2000); and significant alterations in accountability and governance (Fyfe, 2014).

⁽¹⁾ I would like to thank Paul Rock, Ben Bowling, Auke van Dijk, Frank Hoogewoning, Steve Tong and Eduardo Manuel Ferreira for their useful comments relating to this paper.



In 'UK' policing in particular — with its three constituent parts of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and England and Wales ⁽²⁾ — there has been a search for professional status. Like medicine this means pursuing a body of knowledge and a code of ethics that in England and Wales is being promoted within the new overarching College of Policing (College of Policing, 2013). At a strategic level, moreover, the UK government has adopted the requirement that public services should be driven by 'evidence-based research' (EBR). In turn the Home Office, which is responsible for policing in England and Wales, is demanding that criminal justice policy should be based on EBR, leading in the case of policing to 'evidence-based policing' (EBP). The mantra derived from this thrust, with the college coordinating the effort, is 'what works'. And there is a 'what works' initiative within the College, some academic research institutes and a number of police forces. For example, the newsletter of the Scottish Institute for Policing Research speaks of 'Driving forward evidence-based policing by focusing on 'what works' (Issue 6, September 2013) and 'what works' figures prominently on the website of the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy at George Mason University.

Much depends on what is meant by EBR and EBP. Some speak of 'experimental' research within a 'police science' whereby the ideal is the 'random controlled trial' (RCT) (Sherman, 2013). The roots of this effort to use science in running organisations can be traced to early efforts in management science in the 19th century to control behaviour and enhance productivity in industrial corporations. Then there were later developments in medical research, in laboratories and also in the double-blind testing of new medical products, with a group of patients receiving the new product along with a control group receiving a placebo under conditions kept as stable as possible.

Then in the 1960s in the United States there was wide political and societal concern about the state of policing, with both rising crime and with police being viewed as brutal, corrupt and racist. The President's Crime Commission (1967) is seen as the major stimulus to starting police research in the United States, but then with a 'problem-solving' and 'policy-relevant' slant. But research of a qualitative nature had already been started by

a few lone-wolf pioneers in the United States and the United Kingdom — namely Westley, Bittner, Skolnick and Banton (Reiner, 2015). Indeed, much of the police research in the next 50 or so years has been of a 'fundamental', knowledge-seeking sort using a range of methods both quantitative and qualitative.

In the United States, however, there was in contrast to that stream of research an alternative, pioneering effort to base police reform and practice on an experimental research basis. This was at the Police Foundation in Washington DC, which with substantial financing from the Ford Foundation promoted experimental projects in the 1970s. These included the renowned Kansas City random patrol study (Kelling et al., 1974). This introduced three different styles of patrol and then examined the public's perception and the impact on crime rates in those areas. In brief, the public hardly noticed the changes in patrol patterns and these also scarcely affected crime rates. But with such large-scale experiments the Police Foundation had started to mine an alternative seam of experimental research, which set a trend and which produced an influential bevy of academics, many of whom are still active. In fact, police research seems to induce longevity, because many of the early researchers of diverse plumage are still active.

This 'experimental' stream of work has undoubtedly enriched police research and practice. Some of the leading players have been Larry Sherman (now at Cambridge University), Gloria Laycock (University College London), David Weisburd (George Mason University) and Lorraine Mazerolle (University of Queensland). Sherman and Weisburd have both been closely involved with the Police Foundation, where an early stalwart was George Kelling (now at Rutgers University), who became deeply associated with Police Commissioner Bill Bratton and the 'broken-windows' policing strategy within the NYPD in the mid 1990s and also later. The latter is often associated with EBP, with regard to the intelligence-driven 'Compstat' model, but many purists would not see this as based on an experimental evidence base (Punch, 2007).

Even among the exponents above and others there are, then, doubtless differences of emphasis (Heaton and Tong, 2015). The approaches of

⁽²⁾ Scotland has its own police and police educational systems while Northern Ireland has come closer to England and Wales in recent years.



Nick Fyfe (University of Dundee) and of Jenny Fleming (University of Southampton) are clearly based on a broader interpretation of EBR than 'pure' RCT projects. Peter Neyroud — a former British chief constable and head of the former National Police Improvement Agency ⁽³⁾ — has, since retiring from the police, become involved with experimental research projects and RCTs at Cambridge with Sherman and others within the Jerry Lee Centre for Experimental Criminology (Sherman, 2013).

Furthermore, there are a number of methodological and ethical issues surrounding EBP. There are limits to constructing control groups in the messy and conflictual world of criminal justice and of depriving a group of something beneficial that is offered to others. A promising and fruitful area of experimental research has been and remains situational crime control, where it is much easier to create control conditions.

There are three other factors worthy of mention. Firstly, there is occasionally a degree of professional friction when proponents of EBR and EBP claim primacy for these as 'real science' and appear to define fundamental and qualitative work as somehow inferior. In return there is a concern among others that EBP is in danger of being co-opted by the crime control lobby, with the skewing of research funding exclusively towards crime control.

Secondly, there is something contradictory in that the government's strong promotion of EBR in the United Kingdom is not always matched by a willingness to accept its findings. This is not unusual in politicians but the Home Secretary (Theresa May) seems to have a particularly one-sided, ideological fixation on crime reduction as the *sole* function of policing (van Dijk, Hoogewoning and Punch, 2015, p. 1). Yet this is despite the fact that there is an overwhelming body of evidence that police cannot do a great deal about crime because the origins of crime lie largely outside their control in the wider society. The work of Reiner (Reiner, 2007 and 2010) and Brodeur (2010), and the exhaustive overview by Skogan and Frydl (2004), demonstrate this convincingly.

Thirdly, it is questionable if the typical police organisation and occupational culture is readily open to the findings of EBR and the implementation of EBP. Much policing is highly contextual, incident driven and geared to the 'here and now', with an antipathy even to research and with a negative stereotype of academics. This despite the fact that there are now more better-educated officers with an understanding of research. For example, a recent PhD thesis at Portsmouth University by Honey (2014), who had served in the Metropolitan Police Service (Met) of London, argues that most senior officers in the Met did not use research findings; that in-house research by serving officers pursuing master's degrees was ignored; and that the research-based Strategic Research and Analysis Unit, run by Betsy Stanko and unique in the United Kingdom, was kept marginal to operational strategy and policy. It is difficult to know how general this tendency is in policing and it may well be true of other organisations as well. Indeed, Sherman (1998) gives examples of how professions tend to neglect much of the academic knowledge being published and rely on tacit knowledge in decision-making.

'EVIDENCE' AND RESEARCH STYLES

As mentioned above it all depends on what one means by 'evidence'. It is, for instance, clear that most police research has not been conducted on EBR lines but has been produced using diverse methods, often of a qualitative nature. There is, then, a need for a sociology-of-knowledge overview of the police field — who conducted it, what areas did they study, what were their findings and what has been their contribution to knowledge?

Police studies is, for instance, a relatively young discipline — about 60 years old — which can be traced to the 1960s in the United States and United Kingdom. Much early work following Bittner, Skolnick, Banton and Westley was conducted through fieldwork using observation as a prime method. They followed the adage

⁽³⁾ The National Police Improvement Agency was a non-departmental public body, established to support police by providing expertise in areas as information technology, information sharing and recruitment. Since 2012 it has been wound down and its tasks have been transferred to other government organisations.



of the Chicago School to go out in society and get 'the seat of your pants dirty by real research' (Robert Park, quoted in Punch, 1986). To learn about policing, for instance, you rode along with the patrol cops and went out with the detectives. Indeed, for a time early on much research was based on ethnographic participant observation. There were diverse studies by Manning (1977), Rubinstein (1973), Cain (1973), Waddington (1991), Holdaway (1979) and Reiner (1978). Van Maanen (1973), for instance, went through police training and spent a year on patrol as an armed observer. Others, using mixed methods including observation, drawing on interviews and surveys, included Reiss (1971), Black (1976) and Sherman (1978).

The key insight from that early work was that police officers learned their craft from experience out on the streets while patrolling and from the tacit knowledge of the occupational culture passed on by the seasoned officers. The patrolman (then always a 'he') delivered a highly specific local order by 'keeping the peace', which meant knowing his 'patch' and its characters and by using a palette of discretionary options (Bittner, 1967). The researcher was meant to experience at first hand the primary processes by sharing that patrolman's world in order to understand the essence of policing. Fortunately there has been an increasing number of female researchers in recent decades as well as an expanding number of female officers and ancillary workers in policing, which has helped to enrich police research (Hoogenboom and Punch, 2012).

There are doubtless political, social and intellectual reasons as to why police research started at that time and primarily in two countries. Social science in continental Europe was typically more theoretical than in Anglo-American academia and was highly sceptical of observational studies. Furthermore, the social sciences became associated in several countries, particularly Germany and Italy, with radicalism and even terrorism, which meant that access for criminal justice research became highly restricted. It still remains the case that much police research emanates from the United States, United Kingdom, British Commonwealth countries and northern European countries, and we know less about southern and eastern European, African, Latin American and Asian countries, although that is changing.

A major development was the founding from the 1970s onwards of government research units that both conducted and sponsored research, such as the Home Office Research Unit in London, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in the United States and their equivalents elsewhere. They sometimes acted as gatekeepers, limiting access for research, but also tended to sponsor quantitative research with policy implications. In the Netherlands, for instance, the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) within the Ministry of Justice became not only the largest employer of criminal justice researchers in the country but also the major funder of research. It favoured surveys and quantitative work, including some pioneering work in victimisation studies. In contrast, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior had a fund called Police and Science (Politie en Wetenschap) that sponsored a more diverse range of projects using various methodologies. In short, most police research in the Netherlands became sponsored by the two ministries, which in turn raises debate about the dominance of 'government criminology' in relation to limiting access, defining research topics and determining publication.

One result of these and other developments has been the widening of the range of research methods. These include the following.

- Historical studies: with some excellent material in the United Kingdom, United States, Germany and the Netherlands (Meershoek, 2011; Miller, 1977; Emsley, 1996 and 2009).
- Surveys and statistical studies: a major methodology on a wide range of topics, with important work done on crime surveys and in victimisation studies (British crime survey, Netherlands police monitor).
- Interviews: individual and group and within policing and relevant groups such as the public, stakeholders and criminals — see below on 'repeat burglary' project: (Reiner, 1991; Caless, 2011).
- Psychological testing: within policing and with external groups, in relation to trauma and post-traumatic stress syndrome (Brown, 2014).



- Comparative studies: within a society and cross-national research. Bayley (1967) was an early exponent of comparative studies, but with ease of travel and with new academics from other societies — increasingly with language skills — there is fresh research being conducted in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Hinton, 2006; Hinton and Newburn, 2009).
- Policy transfer: in recent decades considerable effort and funds have been expended on exporting Western policing models to developing societies and to countries coping with regime change and/or emerging from conflict (Bayley, 2006; Bayley and Perito, 2010).
- Participant observation: fieldwork employing observation remains a major research technique, although it is largely confined to the lower levels of the organisation and then more often in uniformed work than in detective work. The observation can be combined with interviews and documentary research (Manning, 1977; Punch, 1979).
- Case studies: major incidents, policy development and organisational change lend themselves to case studies. In the Netherlands the 'Crisis Research Team' (known as the 'COT' from Crisis Onderzoekteam) conducts investigations on assignment from central and local government into disasters, civil emergencies, scandals and public order incidents, with appraisals of the official handling of these by ministers, mayors, officials, judicial authorities and police officers. The researchers draw on documents, interviews and audiovisual material. They are academics but working on assignment, which raises the issue of research carried out on financed assignment, with in some areas commercial companies increasingly vying for the assignments (Rosenthal, Charles and 't Hart, 1989).
- Mixed methods: a good example of this is the 'Policing for London study' (PFLS) (Fitzgerald et al., 2002). The PFLS data draws on a representative sample of the adult London population, weighted to contain more black and Asian respondents, case studies of three 'boroughs' (police and local government districts), focus groups and interviews, and some statistical material (including the London sub-sample of the 2000 British crime survey).
- Technology and surveillance: a major topic with swift changes in technology and increasing awareness of the possibilities, and dangers, of new surveillance and *sousveillance* (Goldsmith, 2010).
- Experimental: this covers a range of approaches from experiments and quasi-experiments to RCTs. It has been employed fruitfully in analysing crime patterns leading to new police deployment around 'hotspots'. As mentioned, this approach has been promoted in a number of countries as the way forward in giving a scientific basis to police behaviour and policy on the basis of 'what works' (Sherman, 2013).

KEY ISSUES

In the social sciences, however, there are always issues of validity and reliability, while there are no 'laws' as in the natural sciences. There is often no consensus on key concepts (there are as many definitions of leadership as there are authors: Alison and Crego, 2008); most projects are never subject to replication; and replication studies frequently lead to other results. Experimental research does, however, carry the promise of more reliable findings. To a large extent the experimental approach has been confined to areas around crime control, including situational crime control, police deployment patterns and restricted areas of enforcement. There are difficulties as to how far one can go in experiments with human subjects, and particularly in the criminal justice area when dealing with sensitive matters relating to victims and offenders.

Indeed, the shifting complexity of some forms of police work does not always promise a stable environment that can be 'frozen' and kept confined to simple variables over time. From a construction-of-reality perspective, moreover, one has to be sceptical about police data, crime reports and verbal statements. Police officers, not unlike other workers but perhaps more so, can be manipulative and devious and play suitable roles for outsiders, collude on acceptable group answers for surveys and cynically doctor data.





For example, the fall in reported crime in New York during the 'zero tolerance/broken windows' era from the mid 1990s onwards — which brought worldwide attention and led to much copying of its practices — was partly generated by intimidation from above, non-reporting or downgrading of offences and massively manipulating the data (Eterno and Silverman, 2012). This fabrication of data does not fit well with the export of the New York model abroad as 'best practice'. Again, like mandatory arrest for domestic violence (see below), this supposedly police-generated fall in crime became a resilient policy myth which bypassed other explanations (Bowling, 1999) and was aggressively marketed abroad. Both the Labour and Conservative factions in British politics continued to maintain that Bratton's policies had brought down crime in New York and both feted him as a possible commissioner of the Met.

Another key factor is that EBR is not amenable to researching certain complex areas of policing with multiple factors and shifting parameters that do not readily allow for an experimental approach. These include public order, police use of force, corruption, senior officer abuse of power, undercover work, sieges and regime change, which are replete with dilemmas, tough choices, hidden processes and unanticipated consequences (Punch, 1985 and 2003). There are also the intangibles of policing in a post-modern society regarding legitimacy, trust, rights, diversity, oversight, accountability and governance (Manning, 2012).

A graphic example of a case that could not be tackled within the experimental approach is the historical police investigation in Britain of the alleged sexual abuse of young children during several decades. There are more than 260 suspects including media celebrities (e.g. the entertainer Jimmy Saville who may have been a serial abuser) and establishment figures, including a former prime minister (now deceased). The contours of the investigation are that it is highly complex, wide ranging, absorbing considerable resources, highly sensitive politically and attracting intense media scrutiny, with major problems of garnering evidence, tracing victims and having reliable witnesses who, after a long period of time since

the incidents, can be relied on in court (Gray and Watt, 2013). Next to these factors there are issues of project management — shifts in personnel and loss of expertise — as well as having to face accusations of institutional bias, incompetence and bending to political pressure ⁽⁴⁾.

Another example of a convoluted, multivariable investigation is the Amsterdam case where a paedophile from the Baltic region abused babies and young children in three daycare centres and put pornographic material of that abuse on the internet. A case in the United States led to the FBI placing material with Interpol, which in turn alerted Dutch officers to the location. A massive operation was mounted that involved interviewing some 500 parents for victim identification purposes, which was a harrowing process for parents — and for the investigators — and intense, daily cooperation with the prosecution service, health service, media and mayor's office (the mayor is the head of the police in the Netherlands). It is difficult to convey the panic that gripped the city and also the immense effort made by the police, not least by the family liaison officers who were the prime contact with the families. This case led to two convictions — of the prime suspect and his Dutch husband — and it comprised victims who could not talk about their victimisation (he stopped when they started to speak); parents as surrogate victims; transnational policing, with cooperation with numerous forces abroad leading to 47 arrests; cybercrime, in that the material was fed into a global, commercial network of child pornography sites; and weaknesses in information exchange, in that the suspect had a previous conviction in Germany but that database was not linked to other databases (van Dijk, Hoogewoning and Punch, 2015, pp. 102-103).

I am trying to convey that policing can be complex, multifaceted and challenging, while demanding huge resources over a long period of time. This implies that certain topics are simply not amenable to an EBR approach but are best approached through a multidisciplinary case methodology. This does frequently happen but not in a systematic manner, and there should be a consistent effort by practitioners and academics to analyse cases systematically with

⁽⁴⁾ It is difficult to convey the scale and impact of the cases. Saville was a folk hero as an entertainer and fundraiser, but behind that image he is alleged to have abused some 500 young people, including the very young and those with a limitation, and some offences occurred in BBC studios, hospitals and care homes. A number of high-profile figures in entertainment have received jail sentences and others from the sociopolitical establishment are under investigation (Gray and Watt, 2013).



a 'lessons-learned' approach. These could also include successes, as there is a tendency to dwell on failures. What is absent in policing, however, is a case-teaching tradition. All the leading business schools — notably Harvard, Insead, MIT, Wharton, Cambridge, IESE and IMD — produce cases and use them as a key didactic device in teaching. It requires a specific teaching style but it should be possible to adapt this for policing.

Yet another limiting factor to be taken into account with regard to EBR is the unanticipated consequences of policy adoption. The classic example is the 'Minneapolis domestic violence experiment' (Sherman and Berk, 1982). The study concluded that there should be the routine arrest of the offender (almost exclusively male) in inter-partner violence cases in order to reduce the chance of repeat victimisation. Those findings and recommendations led to the widespread adoption of mandatory arrest of the offender in the United States and abroad.

There have been criticisms about the project implementation by the police officers in administering the research instruments (Bowling, 2006), while the data referred primarily to the less serious cases of violence. For in practice it turned out that in the more serious cases the mandatory arrest policy led to *more* partner victimisation and not less. Indeed, Sherman has since stated that the original policy implication is not sound and that mandatory arrest laws are 'unwise and should be repealed' (quoted in Bowling, 2006). Of interest here is that the caution about interpreting the data is present in the academic report, but the supposition that mandatory arrest would lessen victimisation seems to have taken off as a policy myth leading a life of its own and spreading globally as taken-for-granted best practice (Davis, 2008).

There is no doubt, however, that EBR and EBP are valuable contributions to our research arsenal and that a 'what works' approach can be of great utility to practitioners. I simply wish to convey that EBR has limitations with regard to the more complex and 'fuzzy' areas of policing and there needs to be the usual measure of critical caution about methods, project implementation, findings and policy implications over time. This is tied to the realisation that much police research does not meet standards of validity and reliability and that it is a commendable effort by RBR exponents to construct research that conforms closely to those criteria.

CONCLUSION

Finally, I maintain that we should welcome *all* forms of research. And we should not resort to divisiveness based on a schism around how 'scientific' a certain method claims to be. Rather I would strongly support cooperation between practice, education and police science. That is the path ahead for us, but with a palette of methods that should produce better data if several methods are employed in a form of 'triangulation'.

Furthermore, another important insight is that the acceptance of research would be enhanced if police officers would be involved throughout in setting up a project and disseminating its findings. For example, the 'Repeat burglary project' in Britain was based on interviews with detectives and with imprisoned burglars on how burglars set about their trade (Anderson, Chenery and Pease, 1995). In short, their targets were not chosen at random but followed a pattern. The findings led to a change in enforcement, a fall in burglary and an increase in arrests. This used criminological methods and insights to co-produce with officers operational guidelines that fostered positive results. It was academically sound and showed 'what works' operationally.

What we do not want, however, is one style of research being seen as superior to another with an exclusiveness as if only 'true believers' are welcome. Yet that is what the UK government is pursuing in its obsession with effectiveness and efficiency and with 'what works'. This brings with it the danger of both excluding other forms of research and also of an instrumental approach that overlooks the real-life complexity of policing, which cannot be reduced to standard solutions and simplistic check-lists. This is not to say that these tools are of no value, but rather that they form a guideline rather than a rigid protocol.

There also appears at times to be an underlying paradigm of absolute control. Sherman (1998), for instance, writes of the possibility of placing a 'certified police criminologist' in police stations with access to computerised information on crime patterns, meaning that teams could be dispatched and their performances evaluated. This sounds rather like a digital 'big brother', reducing cops to near robots under constant scrutiny. This reflects a belief in technology and a faith in control that would eradicate discretion. This flies in the face of decades of police research



on the highly contingent nature of everyday policing and its interactional construction on the basis of the craft-based discretion of front-line professionals (Chan, 2003). There is also the danger of a 'McDonaldisation' of policing and the infantilisation of the policing task as if 'one size fits all' — as Bratton was promoting for the New York model of crime control — and as if 'anyone can do it'.

In contrast, van Dijk, Hoogewoning and Punch (2015) maintain that 'what works' is clearly important — and we should pursue that forcefully in order to support practitioners — but that it is

always superseded by 'what matters'. For policing is essentially about the relationship between the state and the citizen in relation to justice, diversity, equity, rights, integrity, accountability and governance. The legacy of some 70 years of research informs us that policing is complex and demanding and touches on some of the most vital elements in society. The implication of this paper is that police research — at a time of significant change in policing — should always pursue 'what works' but that research simply has to take into account the fundamental and overriding issue — *what matters*.

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