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Agency-Based Police Research

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Agency-Based Police Research

Where does research fit in modern policing?

The idea that research and science can benefit policing is not new. Scientific criminal investigation got underway in the 1800s, and by the early 1900s Berkeley police chief August Vollmer was promoting the practical value of the social and physical sciences. In the mid-1900s, in the second edition of *Police Planning* (1957), his protégé O.W. Wilson observed that “research is needed before the relative merits of many alternative police procedures may be accurately appraised. Controlled experiments will provide basic data from which sound conclusions may be drawn.”¹

Wilson’s call for research and experimentation has become widely accepted and incorporated in the concept of evidence-based policing.² In addition, there is now strong support for a more robust view of police science³ and a “new professionalism” based, in large part, on

The National Institute of Justice created the Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science Agencies (LEADS Agencies) program in 2016 to encourage law enforcement agencies to develop and enhance the internal capacity to use data, analysis, research, and evidence for the purpose of improving police effectiveness. The initiative complements NIJ’s LEADS Scholars program, started in 2014, which recognizes and supports mid-career personnel who have demonstrated an aptitude and appreciation for research. It also complements NIJ’s longstanding support of partnerships between researchers and police organizations.

This paper is part of a series of articles, briefs, and other publications designed to provide a practical understanding of the role of data, analysis, research, and evidence in modern policing and police administration.

¹ Orlando W. Wilson, *Police Planning* (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 2nd ed., 1957), 7.

² Lawrence W. Sherman, “Evidence-Based Policing,” *Ideas in American Policing* (Washington, DC: Police Foundation, July 1998).

³ David Weisburd and Peter Neyroud, *Police Science: Toward a New Paradigm*, New Perspectives in Policing, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, January 2011, NCJ 228922, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/228922.pdf>.

research and science.⁴ Confirming the desire for more scientifically grounded knowledge, evidence-based policing societies have recently been created in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

To be sure, science is not the only source of policing knowledge or “evidence.” It has long been argued that police work is mainly a craft rather than a profession⁵ and that knowledge based on experience is often more credible and useful than knowledge derived from formal research.⁶ Nevertheless, it is hard to dispute the logic that research has at least some role to play in helping police “work smarter, not harder.”⁷

What do we mean by research?

One impediment to research within police agencies is that it can seem overly demanding. But, in practice, research does not need to be complex, complicated, mathematical, or statistical. It is simply a process of systematic inquiry, generally aimed at either increasing knowledge (basic research) or solving problems and improving practices (applied research).

Research that might immediately be useful to police practitioners is mainly applied research. Since the 1970s, a substantial amount of applied research has been conducted within and on behalf of the policing field on a host of topics, including operational effectiveness, community relations, officer stress and safety, and

use of force. Despite the fact that policing studies have become rather common, some of us still misunderstand research because we equate it to completing a “research” paper in high school or college, which typically involved summarizing information published in articles and books or found on the internet. Although integrating existing information and consuming research are very important skills, they are not what we usually mean by *doing* research.

The *doing* part entails using research methods — the techniques for conducting systematic inquiry — such as observations, interviews, surveys, sampling, and experiments. All research methods have their strengths and weaknesses. None is inherently the best; rather, they work best when they are well-suited for the research topic at hand. As a general rule, the more systematic and scientific the methods, the more confidence we have in the findings and conclusions.

It is always important to keep in mind, “What is the question?”

Research is conducted in order to answer a research question — something that is not fully known or understood and that cannot simply be looked up or “Googled.” An example research question is “Does assigning a school resource officer (SRO) to a high school result in fewer crimes being committed in the school?” In the more formal version of the scientific method, this might be restated as the hypothesis, “High

⁴ Christopher Stone and Jeremy Travis, *Toward a New Professionalism in Policing*, New Perspectives in Policing, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, March 2011, NCJ 232359, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/232359.pdf>.

⁵ James Q. Wilson, *Varieties of Police Behavior: The Management of Law and Order in Eight Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁶ Malcolm K. Sparrow, *Governing Science*, New Perspectives in Policing, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, January 2011, NCJ 232179, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/232179.pdf>.

⁷ James K. Stewart, “Research and the Police Administrator: Working Smarter, Not Harder,” in *Police Leadership in America: Crisis and Opportunity*, ed. W.A. Geller (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1985), 371-382.

schools with SROs will have fewer reported Part I crimes than high schools without SROs.” Hypotheses and research questions serve the same purpose; however, for most people, research questions are a more natural way of expressing something that we would like to know.

Types of agency-based police research

Most of the better known policing studies have been done by academics or organizations such as the Police Foundation, the Police Executive Research Forum, and the Rand Corporation. These studies often had the goal of discovering something that would be beneficial to the entire police field, as opposed to serving the needs of one specific agency. In this paper, though, we are particularly interested in research that an individual police agency might do primarily for the purpose of addressing its own needs and problems.

One dimension of agency-based police research pertains to focus: Research might be focused *internally* on administration, management, supervision, leadership, human resources, policies, procedures, training, and similar matters; or research might be focused *externally* on crime, disorder, safety, fear, public trust, and

related issues associated with the missions and functions of policing.

A second dimension of applied research undertaken by police agencies pertains to purpose: Some research aims to identify, measure, and analyze problems and conditions to better understand the challenges faced by the agency (often called *descriptive* research); other research evaluates, tests, and experiments to determine and improve the effectiveness of agency practices (often called *explanatory* or *causal* research).

The table below combines these two dimensions to highlight four domains of agency-based police research.

Within police agencies, descriptive research (domains A and C) is probably more common than explanatory research (domains B and D). This is likely because descriptive studies are easier and less complicated to conduct, but it has also been noted that decision-makers often attach the greatest value to research that helps them understand the problems and conditions faced by their organizations.^{8,9}

Another observation about these four domains is that the focus of police research seems to have changed over time. Prior to the 1980s, agency-based police research was mainly internally focused on

	Research focused <i>internally</i> within the police organization.	Research focused <i>externally</i> on crime, disorder, legitimacy.
Descriptive research identifies, describes, measures, and analyzes problems and conditions.	A. Organizational analysis, systems analysis	C. Problem analysis (e.g., crime analysis, intelligence analysis, traffic analysis)
Explanatory research evaluates, tests, and experiments to determine and improve the effectiveness of agency practices.	B. Management science, continuous improvement	D. Evidence-based policing

⁸ Alice Rivlin, *Systematic Thinking for Social Action* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1971).

⁹ William Ascher, *Forecasting: An Appraisal for Policy-Makers and Planners* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

administration, management, allocation of resources, and related areas (domains A and, to some extent, B). Since the 1990s, however, police research seems to have dramatically shifted toward an external focus (domains C and, to some extent, D).

One final note relates to the current emphasis on evidence-based policing (domain D). It can certainly be argued that evidence-based policing is ultimately the most important because it is directly focused on improving the outcomes of policing. However, one can also argue that successful implementation of evidence-based practices is dependent on research that focuses on improving the inner workings of police organizations, and that effective targeting of evidence-based practices is dependent on careful analysis of crime, disorder, and community relations issues. In other words, learning what works in reducing crime and enhancing police legitimacy will not lead to more effective policing unless the organization's members actually change their behavior, nor will progress be achieved if new strategies are applied to the wrong problems or in the wrong places.

Models for conducting agency-based police research

From time to time, police agencies have adopted several different models to enhance their capacity to conduct research:

- **Contract research.** A police agency might enter into a contract with an

individual or firm to provide a specific research service or product. Contracts are sometimes used to conduct an evaluation in conjunction with a grant, to meet some particular technical requirement, or to satisfy demands for an independent and objective external review.

- **Research partner.** A police agency might enter into a partnership, typically with a local college or university, for the provision of research services. Although this may often involve a contract, it is generally thought to be somewhat more of a relationship than strictly a business deal. Recent studies have found that about one-third of larger police agencies have had some kind of research partnership, but most are short term rather than long term.¹⁰
- **Embedded researcher.** A few police agencies have hired researchers, either full or part time, not simply to conduct one study but also to provide an ongoing, high-level research capacity.^{11,12} Police departments taking this approach have included Indianapolis, Boston, and Redlands, California. An alternative, “flipped” approach has been to embed police practitioners into research organizations.¹³
- **Research unit.** A police agency might have a unit staffed with sworn officers or civilian personnel, or both, that is assigned the task of conducting research. At one time, planning and research units were considered critical

¹⁰ Geoffrey P. Alpert, Jeff Rojek, and Andrew Hansen, “Building Bridges Between Police Researchers and Practitioners: Agents of Change in a Complex World,” Final report to the National Institute of Justice, grant number 2009-IJ-CX-0204, December 2013, NCJ 244345, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/244345.pdf>.

¹¹ Anthony A. Braga, “Embedded Criminologists in Police Departments,” *Ideas in American Policing* no. 17 (Washington, DC: Police Foundation, 2003).

¹² Travis Taniguchi and Jim Bueermann, “The Embedded Criminologist: Leveraging the Community’s Investment in the Police,” *Ideas in American Policing* (Washington, DC: Police Foundation, 2012).

¹³ Jeff Rojek, Peter Martin, and Geoffrey P. Alpert, *Developing and Maintaining Police-Researcher Partnerships to Facilitate Research Use: A Comparative Analysis* (New York, NY: Springer, 2015).

indicators of professionalism in larger police agencies. However, as a result of dramatic developments in information technology, along with the introduction of the crime analysis and intelligence analysis functions, the word “research” seems to have become less popular among police units. It is not clear whether this indicates that less research is being done within agencies, or if it is simply a change in semantics.

- **Researchers in the ranks.** A current phenomenon associated with evidence-based policing is experiments conducted by working police officers, often in conjunction with the officers’ graduate education. This is not an entirely new practice. Police personnel completing master’s theses and even

doctoral dissertations have been relatively common since the 1970s, but it is suspected that some of the studies being done by police officers today have a higher profile and may have a more immediate impact.¹⁴ Not unlike their predecessors, though, these officers are sometimes “prophets without honor in their own lands” — that is, their research is frequently recognized elsewhere but not within their own police departments.

Helping police agencies become better equipped to pose and answer their own research questions is NIJ’s goal over the next few years. This will bring the promises of evidence-based policing, police science, and new police professionalism closer to reality.

¹⁴Danielle Ouellette, “A Hot Spots Experiment: Sacramento Police Department,” *Community Policing Dispatch* 5 no. 6 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, June 2012).



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