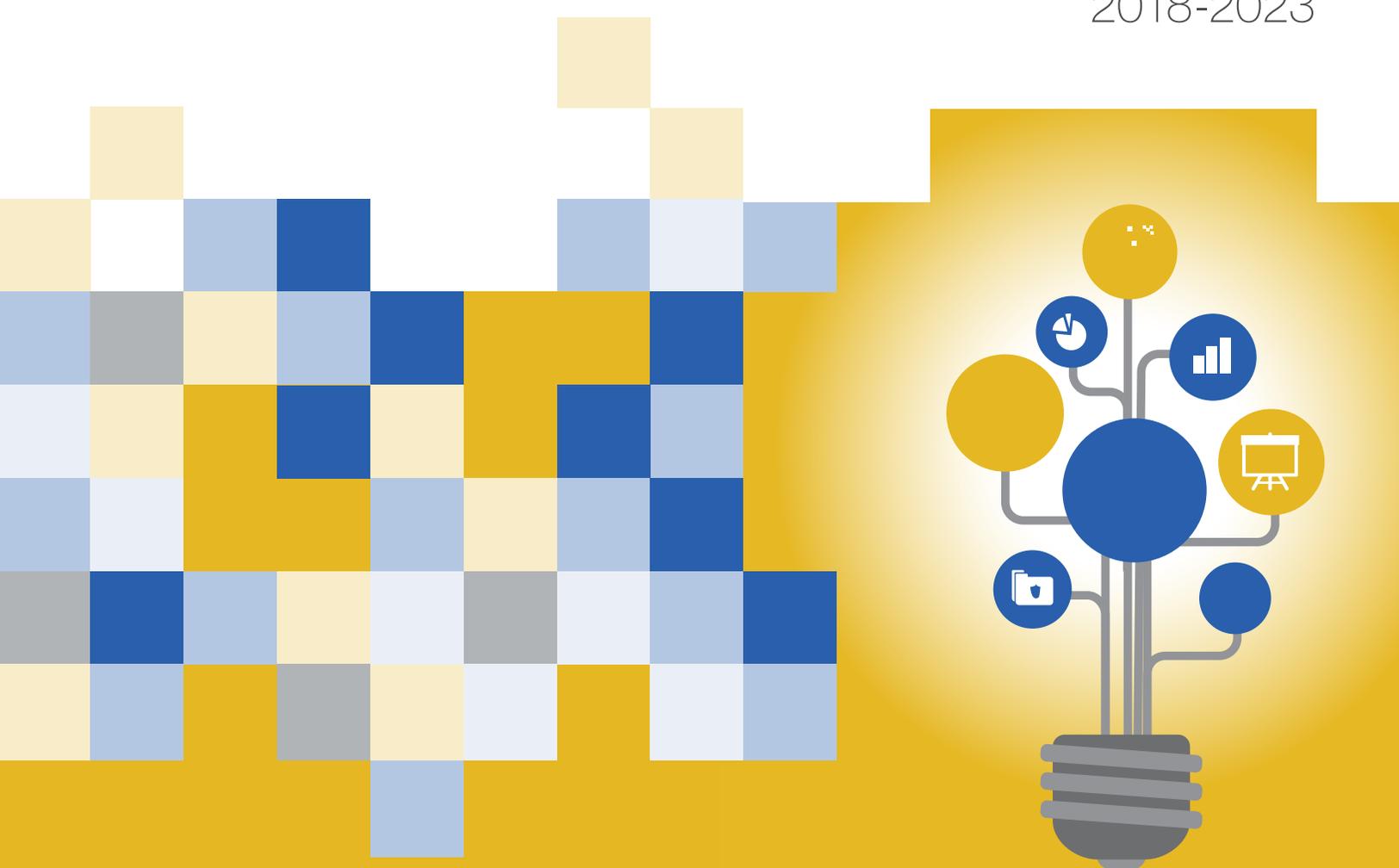




NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE

# Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Initiative Strategic Plan

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**U.S. Department of Justice**  
**Office of Justice Programs**  
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**Washington, DC 20531**

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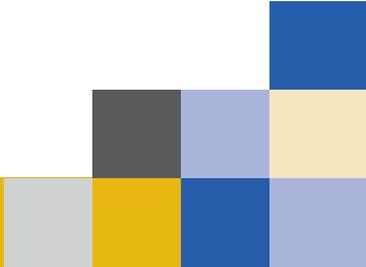
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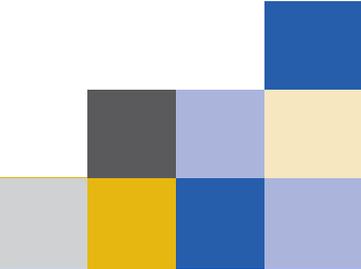
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## Message From the Director

Through the Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Initiative, the National Institute of Justice supports law enforcement using data and research to inform effective policies and practices.

Police-led research has never been more important. Increasingly, law enforcement agencies are expected to implement evidence-based practices to improve policing in a safe and just manner. As budget constraints force departments to invest wisely in courses of action that have proven effective — or, at the very least, promising — American law enforcement has moved toward evidence-based policing. Historically, there has been minimal support for officers and agencies to identify and access relevant research, let alone integrate this research into day-to-day activities. This is compounded by the fact that much of the relevant research is published almost exclusively in academic journals, and written for an academic audience, without regard for how practitioners will locate the work and gain access to it through a paywall, or what role the findings could or should play in practice.

Furthermore, law enforcement-relevant research has traditionally occurred in larger departments in urban areas because of the benefits of larger sample sizes. While incredibly important to the field, these projects do not always produce results that are relevant to the smaller, rural agencies that comprise the majority of law enforcement departments in the United States. These large-scale research projects often take years to answer what police agencies identify as high-priority questions. For departments reacting to the day-to-day realities on America's streets, waiting for research results to be peer reviewed and published is not always possible.

NIJ's goals with the LEADS Initiative are clear: Build the capacity for law enforcement to access and integrate existing research in their agencies, and empower law enforcement to answer their own high-priority research questions, where practicable. We support this work to ensure that law enforcement actions and decisions are informed by the best available evidence. By creating a robust community of research-minded law enforcement officers and agencies, we hope to galvanize the efforts of early adopters and promote an industrywide commitment to evidence-based practices. Police-driven research doesn't eliminate the need for outside research and partnerships, but for law enforcement to be a profession grounded in science, officers must be empowered to drive the research.



Through this strategic plan, NIJ outlines our vision for the LEADS Initiative and highlights areas for partnership. We are one of a number of entities working to advance the police profession through science, and we welcome collaboration for sustainable progress forward. As outlined in this document, we are also laying the groundwork to expand the LEADS Initiative into other criminal justice disciplines. We look forward to working with our partners toward our shared vision of a law enforcement system in which policies and practices are grounded in scientific data, research, and evidence.

David Muhlhausen, Ph.D.

Director, National Institute of Justice

# Introduction

## About the National Institute of Justice

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is the research, development, and evaluation agency in the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) at the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). NIJ is dedicated to improving knowledge and understanding of crime and justice issues through science. NIJ provides objective and independent knowledge and tools to reduce crime and promote justice, particularly at the state and local levels.

## LEADS Initiative: History

Traditionally, law enforcement training has been largely informed by anecdotes passed down from one generation of officers to the next. Although the value of experience cannot be ignored, this has perpetuated a policing<sup>1</sup> culture in which best policies and practices are not based on science. Over time, law enforcement has shifted toward increased professionalism with a focus on efficient and just policing methods. Today, law enforcement agencies continuously strive toward a higher standard of professionalism and effectiveness by adopting policies and practices that are supported by the best available scientific evidence. However, while the expectation of evidence-based<sup>2</sup> policing continues to grow, support for law enforcement to conduct internal research has been limited. The complexity and obscurity of how research is conducted and disseminated in academic venues doesn't meet the field's need for immediate, accessible answers to high-priority research questions. With this disconnect in mind, NIJ founded the LEADS Initiative.

## LEADS Scholars Program

In 2014, NIJ partnered with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to launch the LEADS Scholars program. NIJ and IACP both believe strongly that investment in mid-rank officers will support a broader cultural change toward evidence-based policing. These individuals are senior enough in their organizations to inform policies and are close enough to the ground to understand their impact. They are also the next generation of law

<sup>1</sup> The terms “police” and “law enforcement” are used interchangeably and include police and sheriffs’ departments as well as other public agents who perform policing functions.

<sup>2</sup> The term “evidence-based” refers to policies, practices, and decisions that are informed by the best available scientific evidence in conjunction with other valid considerations, such as law, experience, professional judgment, craft, and ethics.

enforcement leaders. The LEADS Scholars program was designed to support the professional development of research-minded<sup>3</sup> officers in particular. Dubbed “pracademics,”<sup>4</sup> these practitioner-academics have been taking it upon themselves to advance both policing and research through practical application.

The LEADS Scholars program quickly grew, based on strong interest and immensely talented applicants. Initially designed to support 10 scholars per year, the program now supports 30 scholars at a time; each scholar participates for a three-year term. The program funds attendance at the IACP annual conference and a summer symposium on policing research in Washington, D.C. One of the most valuable aspects of the program is the community it creates by connecting officers with like-minded peers, many of whom face similar challenges in advancing evidence-based policing in their departments.

The program now includes ad hoc support for research led by the LEADS scholars; support for scholars to attend academic conferences and present their research; opportunities for scholars to serve as peer reviewers on scientific proposals; publishing opportunities; connectivity to other OJP and IACP resources, such as the OJP Diagnostic Center, for officers’ professional development and their home agencies’ benefit; research assistance; inclusion in national subject matter expert working groups; and training in evidence-based policing. Although these activities are valuable, there is room to do more to support this talented group of motivated and committed officers through professional development, connectivity to resources, and research support.

### LEADS Agencies Program

Officers’ ability to effect change in their agencies and promote evidence-based policing is dependent on support from the leadership and broader agency culture. In the LEADS Scholars program, it became clear that to advance sustainable, evidence-based policing, NIJ needed to engage more broadly with the agencies themselves. In 2017, NIJ launched the LEADS Agencies program to increase agency effectiveness. The program is still in its initial stages and has partnered with nine pilot sites across the country to explore how NIJ’s LEADS Initiative can support agencies committed to evidence-based policing. The LEADS Agencies program is tailored to agencies’ needs: capacity building and assistance along a continuum that includes data collection and analysis, integration of existing evidence into policies and practices, and development of in-house research capabilities.

<sup>3</sup> “Research-minded” includes individuals who have successfully integrated existing research into policies and practices; individuals who have partnered with researchers to conduct research in their agency; and in some cases, individuals who have independently conducted research.

<sup>4</sup> See Laura Huey and Renee J. Mitchell, “Unearthing Hidden Keys: Why Pracademics Are an Invaluable (If Underutilized) Resource in Policing Research,” *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 10 no. 3 (September 1, 2016): 300-307, <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paw029>.

## LEADS Programs: Mission

The mission of the LEADS programs is to increase the extent to which law enforcement actions and decisions are informed by the best available evidence and to support research driven by policing practitioners. This overarching mission goes beyond traditional policing outcomes — increasing public safety and reducing crime — to include outcomes such as improving the public’s trust in law enforcement, enhancing operational efficiency, and maximizing officers’ health, safety, and wellness. This mission requires a sustained commitment to fostering “researchers in the ranks” wherein law enforcement officers and agencies routinely conduct studies and consider scientific evidence in all aspects of the policing profession. The long-term goal of this mission requires building a sustainable community of evidence-based practice so that law enforcement officers and executives can find, share, and produce the evidence-based practices that best meet the needs of their jurisdictions.

## Strategic Plan: Purpose

NIJ developed the LEADS Strategic Plan to describe its current and projected efforts to increase the use of evidence and science in law enforcement and to support practitioner-led research.

This document will be of interest to researchers (academia, government, and law enforcement), federal, state, and local government partners, and stakeholders in the justice system. It offers a roadmap for NIJ’s plans for expanding the LEADS Initiative. As with all federal programs, this expansion is dependent on funding availability and strategic partnerships. Lessons learned from the activities that fall within this strategic plan will be disseminated among its constituents and partners.

## Call for Collaboration

NIJ’s LEADS Initiative is one of many efforts to advance the police profession through science. We envision that program development will require interdisciplinary collaboration and partnerships. NIJ will seek partnerships with other federal agencies, professional associations, and private institutions that support the development and adoption of LEADS Scholars, LEADS Agencies, and other evidence-based law enforcement mechanisms. These partnerships may include support for expanded funding; establishing public-private partnerships to support program implementation and evaluation; co-sponsoring research awards; convening meetings to bring key players together; establishing a LEADS Consortium; and shaping the national discourse on increasing the use of science and research in policing.

## Strategic Priorities

NIJ's strategic priorities for the LEADS Initiative are as follows:

- I. Advance evidence-based policing, which is the concept of using the best available scientific evidence to inform police actions and decisions, where practicable and appropriate.
- II. Improve law enforcement capacity to collect and analyze data, integrate evidence into policies and practices, and conduct research.
- III. Support the next generation of research-minded law enforcement leaders.
- IV. Build and sustain a community of practice to support evidence-based policing.

## Strategic Priority I: Advance evidence-based policing, which is the concept of using the best available evidence to inform police actions and decisions, where practicable and appropriate.

The use of scientific evidence in policing is not a novel concept but has often been discussed in an abstract sense that fails to demonstrate its practical value to law enforcement practitioners. For police officers and agencies to broadly adopt evidence-based practices, they need to understand the commonsense, compelling benefits of doing so. NIJ is committed to educating criminal justice stakeholders and community partners on how evidence-based policing can help their jurisdictions as well as identifying early adopters and credible messengers of this approach.



### Objectives

- *Objective I.1:* Encourage understanding of evidence-based practice among law enforcement agencies and personnel.
- *Objective I.2:* Build sustainable partnerships with professional organizations, federal partners, legislative bodies, and program advocates who can serve as credible messengers for evidence-based policing.

# Strategic Priority I Action Plan

The objectives supporting Strategic Priority I build on NIJ's prior efforts to spread the concept of evidence-based practice through its LEADS Scholars and Agencies programs as well as advancing the integration and applicability of research through researcher-practitioner partnerships.<sup>5</sup> NIJ will continue to work with partners, including other federal agencies, to encourage law enforcement to use scientific evidence to inform actions and decisions.

## OBJECTIVES

### **Objective I.1: Encourage understanding of evidence-based practice among law enforcement agencies and personnel.**

- Develop and implement a strategic communications plan to share broadly the benefits of evidence-based policing.
- Support panels and plenary sessions at practitioner conferences; provide opportunities for LEADS participants to communicate their research and experiences at conferences and events, including to nontraditional audiences such as data science, public health, and technology conferences.
- Sponsor and host NIJ events related to evidence-based policing and the LEADS Initiative.
- Promote integration of the concept of evidence-based practice into existing law enforcement trainings and accreditation programs.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Geoffrey P. Alpert, Jeff Rojek, and J. 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>.

## OBJECTIVES (CONTINUED)

**Objective 1.2: Build sustainable partnerships with professional organizations, federal partners, legislative bodies, and program advocates who can serve as credible messengers for evidence-based policing.**

- Educate national, state, and local policymakers on the benefits of evidence-based policing, highlighting promising practices and opportunities for support.
  - Strengthen existing efforts to coordinate LEADS activities across analogous programs aimed at advancing evidence integration in policing.
  - Empower LEADS scholars and alumni to serve as ambassadors of evidence-based policing and establish local, regional, and cross-agency partnerships.
  - Identify and develop new strategic connections with law enforcement professional organizations and academic associations to secure buy-in and encourage joint messaging.
  - Establish and maintain international collaborations to learn from evidence-based policing practices in Canada, England, Australia, and other countries.
-

## Strategic Priority II: Improve law enforcement capacity to collect and analyze data, integrate evidence into policies and practices, and conduct research.

The LEADS Scholars and LEADS Agencies programs have provided a basic understanding of the challenges that law enforcement practitioners face in consuming and producing data and research. However, more work is necessary to identify and promote promising practices in varying contexts, such as police agencies of various sizes, capacities, cultures, and resources.

### Objectives

- *Objective II.1:* Provide tools for law enforcement agencies to assess and improve their current capacity for evidence integration and production.
- *Objective II.2:* Enhance law enforcement capacity to collect and analyze data.
- *Objective II.3:* Enhance the capacity of law enforcement personnel and agencies to conduct their own research.
- *Objective II.4:* Enhance law enforcement access to and utilization of existing research and evidence-based practices.



# Strategic Priority II

## Action Plan

The objectives in Strategic Priority II build upon previous NIJ investments to support practitioner-led research, enhance the capabilities of research-minded law enforcement officers and agencies, and facilitate the communication and sharing of practitioner-led efforts to collect, analyze, and interpret data.

### OBJECTIVES

***Objective II.1: Provide tools for law enforcement agencies to assess and improve their current capacity for evidence integration and production.***

- Develop a self-assessment tool to assist law enforcement organizations in identifying data, analysis, and research gaps within their agencies and in understanding the extent to which evidence currently informs practice, as well as assessing their organizational maturity with regard to implementation of evidence-based policing.
- Publish a guide, based on lessons learned from LEADS Agencies pilot sites, to help law enforcement personnel and agencies use data and science to inform their policies and practices.
- Develop mechanisms to connect interested law enforcement agencies and co-located researchers to support sustainable partnerships.

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***Objective II.2: Enhance law enforcement capacity to collect and analyze data.***

- Support training and workshop initiatives designed to facilitate practitioner data-collection efforts.
  - Work with partner organizations to increase the training and capacity of non-sworn law enforcement personnel who specialize in data collection and analysis (e.g., crime analysts).
  - Connect LEADS Initiative participants with relevant resources, including OJP and external resources, to augment internal data and analysis capacities.
-

## OBJECTIVES (CONTINUED)

### **Objective II.3: Enhance the capacity of law enforcement personnel and agencies to conduct their own research.**

- Create flexible frameworks and mechanisms, through NIJ solicitations or in concert with partner organizations, for funding law enforcement-initiated research projects designed to meet agencies where they are with regard to capacity and maturity of evidence-based practices.
- Expand funding and support for LEADS scholars engaging in research projects (e.g., travel for site visits, additional research assistance) and promote multisite research projects across LEADS scholars and agencies.
- Provide communications and publications support to scholars and agencies for publicizing and promoting research projects initiated through or during involvement in the LEADS Initiative.
- Formally integrate the LEADS Scholars and LEADS Agencies programs to allow scholars to serve as ad hoc subject matter experts and provide technical assistance for LEADS agencies.
- Provide evaluation training for LEADS scholars and their agencies' crime analysts.
- Connect LEADS scholars with additional research resources.

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### **Objective II.4: Enhance law enforcement access to and utilization of existing research and evidence-based practices.**

- Establish partnerships to promote evidence-based research findings in practitioner-friendly venues (e.g., blogs, podcasts, and videos).
  - Encourage use of state- and region-based models for disseminating relevant research and promoting evidence-based practices (e.g., the Oregon Center for Policing Excellence).
  - Promote opportunities for law enforcement-initiated data-sharing efforts and develop a repository for LEADS Scholars and LEADS Agencies data to support multisite analyses.
-

## Strategic Priority III: Support the next generation of research-minded law enforcement leaders.

The LEADS Initiative is a mechanism for NIJ to support research-minded law enforcement by recruiting new scholars and by continuing to engage program alumni. Under this strategic priority, NIJ will expand opportunities for LEADS scholars to acquire professional development and mentorship for their research interests and career aspirations.

### Objectives

- *Objective III.1:* Expand opportunities for law enforcement personnel to engage with the LEADS Initiative.
- *Objective III.2:* Enhance professional development opportunities for LEADS program participants.



# Strategic Priority III

## Action Plan

The objectives supporting Strategic Priority III build on ongoing efforts and create new professional development and mentoring opportunities for officers participating in the LEADS Initiative.

### OBJECTIVES

**Objective III.1: Expand opportunities for law enforcement personnel to engage with the LEADS Initiative.**

- Build on existing LEADS Scholars and LEADS Agencies efforts, and work with relevant partners to increase the number of police personnel participating in the LEADS programs.
- Encourage and provide support for LEADS agencies to provide mentorship and training opportunities to members of neighboring state and local law enforcement organizations that are interested in evidence-based policing practices.
- Strategically integrate some LEADS Scholars and LEADS Agencies sites with relevant OJP programs.

**Objective III.2: Enhance professional development opportunities for LEADS program participants.**

- Work with third-year LEADS scholars and alumni to provide mentorship to first-year scholars.
- Work with relevant partners to provide training and educational opportunities to program participants in research techniques (e.g., research design, data analysis, and data collection) and professional development (e.g., leadership skills, mentoring, and second-career discussions), focusing on local academic partnerships when practicable.
- Develop a forum for LEADS program participants to come together, present their research, and engage with the broader criminal justice research community.
- Facilitate networking opportunities for LEADS scholars to grow their professional networks of fellow practitioner-researchers, evidence-minded leaders, current and future academic researchers (e.g., NIJ graduate research fellows), and civilian staff.
- Develop mechanisms for communicating the importance and impact of the LEADS Initiative to NIJ, OJP, and DOJ leadership, with an eye toward growing internal support for scholars' development and advancement.
- Develop opportunities for LEADS scholars to engage substantially with OJP, DOJ, and IACP leadership.

## Strategic Priority IV: Build and sustain a community of practice to support evidence-based policing.

A current gap in the policing profession is the lack of a robust network or system for police to find evidence-based recommendations for a given policing problem or educational opportunities in evidence-based practices and procedures. There is also a need for a platform to highlight the research of “pracademic” pioneers in evidence-based policing. NIJ seeks to facilitate the development of this community of practice around evidence-based policing and to explore bringing the concept of evidence-based practice to other areas of the criminal justice system.



### Objectives

- *Objective IV.1:* Develop opportunities for former and potential LEADS program participants to engage with evidence-based policing.
- *Objective IV.2:* Expand LEADS program concepts to encompass non-sworn law enforcement staff and other aspects of the criminal justice system.
- *Objective IV.3:* Institutionalize the LEADS framework through a Consortium or Center of Excellence, supported by multiple funding sources.

# Strategic Priority IV Action Plan

The objectives supporting Strategic Priority IV leverage the successes of current and former LEADS program participants to build a community of practice around evidence-based policing. These objectives also seek to provide law enforcement personnel in all jurisdictions with the opportunity to engage in a broader community of evidence-based policing, with the ultimate goal of increasing police effectiveness. These objectives further explore taking the lessons and ideas of the LEADS program to other facets of the criminal justice system.

## OBJECTIVES

***Objective IV.1: Develop opportunities for former and potential LEADS program participants to engage with evidence-based policing.***

- Establish an Alumni Council to formally maintain connectivity with alumni of the LEADS Scholars program.
- Support a law enforcement practitioner-in-residence at NIJ to develop and disseminate evidence-based policing projects and engage meaningfully with NIJ scientific staff and policy discussions.
- Work with LEADS program alumni, partners, and stakeholders to identify mechanisms for continued engagement with the LEADS Initiative and evidence-based policing.
- Provide competitive travel and professional development scholarships for LEADS scholars to attend relevant conferences where evidence-based policing practices are discussed.
- Establish an award to honor law enforcement practitioners who are pioneers in evidence-based policing policy and practice within their agencies.

## OBJECTIVES (CONTINUED)

**Objective IV.2: Expand LEADS program concepts to encompass non-sworn law enforcement staff and other aspects of the criminal justice system.**

- Explore partnerships to build evidence-based practice communities among non-sworn law enforcement personnel (e.g., crime analysts, law enforcement planners), including formal integration into the LEADS Agencies program.
- Explore the feasibility of using the LEADS program model with other facets of the criminal justice system, including corrections, prosecutors' offices, and courts.

**Objective IV.3: Institutionalize the LEADS framework through a Consortium or Center of Excellence, supported by multiple funding sources.**

- Move the management of the LEADS programs to an external body with national reach, including full-time management and program development by subject matter experts, in close coordination with NIJ program staff.
- Continue to drive progress on strategic development and implementation through NIJ, including maintaining in-house advisors and subject matter experts to support program growth.



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