

# RESEARCH IN THE RANKS: EMPOWERING LAW ENFORCEMENT TO DRIVE THEIR OWN SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY

BY MAUREEN Q. MCGOUGH

NIJ seeks to advance the law enforcement profession through science with its innovative LEADS Scholars and LEADS Agencies programs.



Law enforcement is increasingly expected to ground policies and practices in evidence, and evidence-based policing is rightfully encouraged as the new gold standard of practice. Somewhat absent from the discussion, however, has been the reality that most law enforcement agencies lack the capacity to identify and incorporate research results into policy and practice. Policy-relevant research results are often published only in academic journals (many of which are behind a paywall) that are written for an academic audience. As such, research articles are often full of jargon and fail to consider the relevance of the findings for on-the-ground application.

Although the relatively recent trend toward translational criminology has put a spotlight on the importance of collaboration between researchers and practitioners, much work remains to ensure that research is relevant to law enforcement practitioners, timely, accessible, and communicated effectively. Further, much of the existing research on policing focuses on larger departments in urban areas (due largely to the benefits of a large sample size), with limited applicability to most of the agencies in this country. This leaves a large number of law enforcement agencies underserved and ill-equipped to ground their practices in relevant evidence.

NIJ has noted an increasing number of law enforcement officers — from those who are self-taught to those who pursue advanced degrees — who are taking matters into their own hands and self-producing the research needed to answer their agencies' high-priority questions about what works and what matters in policing. These efforts are often nimbly responsive to current priorities and narrowly tailored to specific agencies, negating many of the limitations of traditional research noted above.

**The goal of the innovative LEADS Scholars and LEADS Agencies programs is to empower law enforcement officers throughout the country to answer many of their own high-priority research questions and proactively integrate existing research into their agencies' policies and practices.**

To support these officers and acknowledge their unique role in advancing the law enforcement profession, NIJ has partnered with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to create the Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Scholars program and the LEADS Agencies program. The goal of both programs is to empower law enforcement officers throughout the country to answer many of their own research questions and proactively integrate existing research into their agencies' policies and practices.

The LEADS Scholars program works directly with law enforcement officers to create a community where research-minded officers can interact with like-minded professionals and jointly pursue research interests. Through this program, NIJ supports scholars' attendance at the annual IACP Conference, an NIJ policing research symposium in Washington, D.C., and the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy's annual symposium. NIJ also provides scholars with technical and substantive support for research projects, literature reviews, and connectivity to subject matter experts across a wide range of law enforcement issues. The program specifically aims to develop mid-rank officers, with the goal of supporting tomorrow's law enforcement leaders. (Hear from a current LEADS scholar in "Using Officer-Driven Research to Meet Policing Challenges," on page 3.)

Inspired by the dedication of the scholars and their significant impact within their departments and beyond, NIJ launched the LEADS Agencies program in 2017 to help agencies increase their effectiveness by improving internal capacity to collect and analyze data, conduct research, and use evidence to inform policies and practices. Currently in its first phase, the program is supporting evidence production and integration in eight police departments of varying sizes, capacities, and geographic locations. NIJ aims to integrate lessons learned and promising practices from these efforts into a practical guide for evidence-based policing later this year.

NIJ acknowledges that even practitioner-driven research has limits in applicability and suitability, and it is just one of many relevant factors to consider when developing policy and practice. However, there are no better judges of whether and how best to apply research to practice than the practitioners themselves, and NIJ is committed to ensuring that law enforcement has both the capacity and ability to make these crucial decisions moving forward.

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### About the Author

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### For More Information

Learn more about the LEADS programs and the work of LEADS scholars over the years at [NIJ.ojp.gov](https://www.nij.gov), keyword: LEADS.

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## Using Officer-Driven Research to Meet Policing Challenges

by **Lt. Jason Potts**

The challenges of implementing evidence-based policing are immense. Policing is a career in which relationship building and sound emotional intelligence are critical to success — but these elements are not necessarily scientifically based.

Policing is also highly nuanced and varies by agency based on the demographics it serves, its internal culture, and criminogenic issues particular to the agency's location.<sup>1</sup> The

United States has 18,000 police departments, and many of them have fewer than 10 officers as well as significant budgetary and resource limitations.<sup>2</sup> Given the variety in size, culture, and demographics among agencies, many law enforcement practices are based on traditions, experiences, and instincts that are indoctrinated through police academy and field training programs — these traditions are not typically based on data or research. This indoctrination is problematic, not only for its lack of empirical evidence but also because training may occur in unorganized, chaotic environments, with little standardization across the United States. A significant challenge in bringing research into the ranks of policing is addressing the anecdotal tradition of policing practices while still recognizing the significance of officer discretion.

Also, a distinct disconnect often exists between the policing research of academic researchers and the experiences of frontline officers.<sup>3</sup> This researcher-practitioner disconnect is worsened by the slow pace of university research and the academic writing style scholars use in journals — journals that are rarely accessible to the broader law enforcement community. Further, officers typically do not have the time or interest to sift through lengthy academic articles full of theory and regression analysis. They want to know how the data may make them more efficient and effective.

Research partners from academia are not always accepted by the broader law enforcement community, so their advocacy of research findings is not heeded in the same way that it might be if it came from an officer within a department. If research-minded law enforcement officers arrive at and disseminate the benefits of research, other officers will likely be more willing to apply these evidence-based policies and best practices and perhaps see the value of engaging in research themselves.

To help bridge this divide, NIJ and the frontline officers of the newly formed American Society of Evidence-Based Policing (ASEBP) are leading practitioner-driven efforts to support research from within the ranks of policing. Now in its fourth year, NIJ's Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Scholars program has supported 40 research-oriented officers. NIJ also recently launched the LEADS Agencies program to provide research support to entire agencies. Meanwhile, ASEBP, which held its second conference in May 2018, has 250 members and more than 3,000 followers on Twitter — proof that the evidence-based policing movement is ready to grow exponentially. The NIJ LEADS scholars



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and members of ASEBP are actively involved in research at their departments; they are looking to transform the law enforcement culture into one that accepts and uses evidence-based practices.

For example, I recently completed a randomized controlled trial — in partnership with BetaGov, a nonprofit organization based at New York University that emphasizes homegrown practitioner-led trials — to test the effectiveness of automatic license plate readers (LPRs).<sup>4</sup> The results indicated that patrol cars equipped with automatic LPRs (the treatment group) had a 140-percent improvement in ability to detect stolen cars versus patrol cars in which the automatic LPR technology was turned off (the control group). Further analysis of the data revealed, however, that the LPR technology identified more lost or stolen plates than the controls — as many as eight times more. Many of these were duplicates that desensitized officers to legitimate hits. The data also showed that fixed LPRs were much more efficient in making arrests than mobile LPRs. Finally, the control data showed that 35 percent of all hits were misreads.

The power of this randomized controlled trial was the simplicity of its design to inform policy; other law enforcement agencies can replicate it for future comparison. In fact, as part of this work we conducted an officer survey, which had a 75-percent response rate. Of note was that only one out of 37 officers stated that he would *not* participate in a similar study in the future.

Fellow NIJ LEADS scholar and founding ASEBP member Sgt. Greg Stewart (Portland Police Department) recently completed another randomized controlled trial to ascertain what patrol dosage in a particular hotspot area is needed for crime prevention and police legitimacy efforts. The results indicated that treatment areas did not experience any difference in crime or calls for service when compared with controls.<sup>5</sup>

Law enforcement officers want to be trusted while coming to sound decisions through their own discretion — they do not want to be second-guessed. Some officers seem to perceive emerging technologies like body-worn cameras as doing just that. Change in any profession is difficult, but discretion and the autonomy of policing continue to be important. By allowing for discretion, we empower and show trust in our officers. This is vital because much of what they do is constrained by time, and these time constraints are often uncertain and rapidly evolving. These dynamic demands require law enforcement to shift priorities, using discretion paired with informed, sound policy.<sup>6</sup> Much of what law enforcement does is rooted in training, anecdotal experiences, and good instincts. However, research should play a large part in responding to the day-to-day challenges of policing. The hope is that data and science, coupled with the craft of policing and leadership support for evidence-based policing, will empower officers with the evidence to be more effective.<sup>7</sup>

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### About the Author

**Jason Potts** is a lieutenant with the Vallejo (CA) Police Department, an NIJ LEADS scholar, an ASEBP board member, a Police Foundation Fellow, and a reserve special agent with the Coast Guard Investigative Service. He earned a master of advanced studies degree in criminology, law, and society from the University of California, Irvine.

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## Notes

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