Evidence-Based Policing Is Here to Stay: Innovative Research, Meaningful Practice, and Global Reach

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Abstract

Research Question In the context of important advances as well as global reach, what more is needed for evidence-based policing to bridge the divide between academic research and police practice?
Data We draw on 18 case studies reported in The Globalization of Evidence-Based Policing: Innovations in Bridging the Research-Practice Divide (Piza and Welsh, 2022). These accounts of innovations provide a range of qualitative evidence on the integration of scientific research in contemporary policing.
Findings The case studies describe some plausible causal links in four key processes: (a) transferring scientific knowledge to the practice community, (b) empowering officers to conduct police-led science, (c) aligning the work of researchers and practitioners, and (d) incorporating evidence-based policing in daily police functions.
Conclusions While there is much work to do to achieve population-level impacts, many innovative efforts at bridging the research-practice divide in policing are becoming embedded enough to make that happen.

Keywords Evidence-based policing · Research-practice divide · Pracademic · Globalization · Public policy

Introduction

The title of this article is neither hyperbole nor wishful thinking on our part. After almost three decades of thinking, writing, research, and practice, the idea of EBP is very much a reality. For sure, there is much work to do: overcoming institutional resistance, bridging the research-practice divide, and furnishing police leaders and practitioners with the tools necessary to adopt an evidence-based approach in their
day-to-day operations. In all these tasks, the key challenge, as Millenson (2021) astutely observes, remains whether EBP can make a real, lasting difference for citizens as well as the police institution.

We think EBP is on the road to making such a difference. It is certainly not happening at the pace that many would like, and there have been setbacks and failures along the way (see Lum & Koper, 2017; Millenson, 2021). Like other disciplines or professions purporting to embrace the evidence-based paradigm, failure is to be expected. Just as accepting the principle that failure is at the core of advancing science (Firestein, 2016), it is what is done with these failures that is crucial to advancement of knowledge. As a pioneering historian of evidence-based medicine, Millenson (2021) is still not convinced that either medical doctors or police officers have sufficiently embraced this view of failure as indispensable to success: to “learn from our errors and misadventures” (p. 148). At least in some circumstances, however, we think otherwise. The present article profiles some innovations in helping to make this happen.

Demonstrating that EBP is making a difference for citizens and law enforcement is going to take some time, inasmuch as the goal is to transform policing into a “totally evidenced” profession (Sherman, 2015) to achieve “population-level” impacts (Dodge, 2020) across a majority of police agencies or officers. Part of getting there involves overcoming the divide that exists between academic research and police practice (or between scholars and police practitioners). That divide is the main focus of the article. Aiding this effort is an emerging globalization or global reach of EBP. Again, there is work to do on this front, especially in countries in transition and developing countries. The good news is that no longer is the real-world practice of EBP limited to a handful of developed countries.

The purpose of this article is to summarize the evidence for that claim from the main findings of a new book on the subject: The Globalization of Evidence-Based Policing: Innovations in Bridging the Research-Practice Divide (Piza and Welsh, 2022). The article is organized around four themes that are central to advancing EBP: (a) transferring scientific knowledge to the practice community, (b) empowering officers to conduct police-led science, (c) aligning the work of researchers and practitioners, and (d) incorporating EBP in daily police functions. The article ends with some concluding remarks and directions for the future.

Transferring Scientific Knowledge to the Practice Community

Evidence-based policing is an active process requiring reciprocity between research and practice for maximum benefits to be achieved (Huey & Mitchell, 2019). The generation of scientific knowledge by academic researchers must be consulted by police practitioners in order for EBP to realize its full potential. Unfortunately, EBP remains a foreign concept to millions of police officers and leaders around the world (Sherman, 2015). While higher-ranking officers exhibit more knowledge of EBP than lower-ranking officers, they tend to define it in a way that is different from the intended meaning (Telep & Bottema, 2020).
Key to navigating such impediments is the design of research projects that stand to directly benefit police agencies. This process could be further assisted by involving police practitioners directly in the interpretation of findings and discussion of their implications for policy and practice. In our book, Neyroud (2022) connects such active research processes to Rogers’ (2003) diffusion of innovation theory, by which the acquisition of knowledge leads an institution to be persuaded to adopt a given innovation. Neyroud demonstrates this process through case studies on police-led diversion models, the global implementation of community policing, and the use of EBP to support police reform in India. Neyroud was personally involved in each case as both a police professional and academic, providing insight into the institutional processes driving the diffusion of policing innovations. Key across his case studies is the increased engagement of police personnel with research evidence, largely made possible by such developments as the investment in and dissemination of systematic reviews, increased willingness on the part of local governments to fund primary research, and technical assistance in program implementation offered by international bodies like the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime.

A key impediment to the wide-scale adoption of EBP pertains to lack of training opportunities in police departments. Despite education levels of police leaders substantially increasing since the 1970s, less progress has been made in the application of scientific knowledge to practice (Sherman, 2013). Furthermore, education and training have typically focused on police leaders rather than mid-managers who directly oversee daily operations (Ratcliffe, 2019). This creates a situation where police have access to evidence on “what works,” but are given little capacity to implement such strategies in a manner that maximizes the likelihood of success (Johnson et al., 2015).

Ratcliffe’s (2022) evidence discusses the development and delivery of an EBP training program for mid-level command staff. As argued by Ratcliffe, while police agencies often view tactical operations as hard skills requiring constant training, setting crime reduction strategy and policy is often considered a skill one can learn “on the job.” Ratcliffe’s police commander crime reduction course enhances the SARA (Scanning, Analysis, Response, and Assessment) model popularized by problem-oriented policing through specific practices and checklists to introduce more structured working practices into command work function. Building on SARA, the PANDA model has been developed: Problem scan, Analyze problem, Nominate strategy, Deploy strategy, and Assess outcomes. PANDA retains aspects of SARA while adding more specificity to the articulation and deployment of a response. Each stage of the PANDA model has an accompanying checklist to foster a structured approach to decision-making to enhance the existing skillset of police leaders.

La Vigne’s (2022) evidence provides a retrospective accounting of efforts to translate research findings for lay audiences to inform policing policy and practice. Her interviews with American policymakers and criminal justice influencers show that in the latter half of the twentieth century, criminology had a tenuous (at best) tie to policy relevance and media engagement. The interviews demonstrate how policing’s advancement towards more policy relevance and media impact developed within a complex ecosystem of actors in the criminal justice and policing space. That ecosystem, in the USA, consists of academic researchers and research centers...
within universities; scholars housed in non-academic research institutes; the academy, as represented primarily by the two most prominent criminology associations; the federal government; and philanthropy.

Dissemination represents a key aspect of police research translation (Lum & Koper, 2017). The College of Policing (UK), founded in 2012, is one example, which communicates research evidence through its What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (WWCCR). Sidebottom and Tilley (2022) discuss the work of the WWCCR and its Crime Reduction Toolkit (https://www.college.police.uk/research/crime-reduction-toolkit), which is used as its primary research translation tool—measuring the quality of systematic reviews of crime and justice interventions. For example, the authors discuss how well the programmatic needs of policymakers are addressed by systematic reviews on a range of crime prevention approaches (e.g., alley gating, CCTV, hot spots policing, focused deterrence), diversion (e.g., drug substitutes, mentoring), and reoffending programs (e.g., domestic abuse sanctions, electronic tagging). The authors report that most systematic reviews provide rich data on program effects, but provide less information on monetary costs and benefits, mechanisms and moderators, and implementation challenges.

Empowering Officers to Conduct Police-Led Science

Piza et al. (2021) argue that the institutionalization of evidence-based policing requires understanding how scientific knowledge is produced. Knowledge internalization, where academics draw from generalizable knowledge to inform the narrower, specific actions of practitioners (Nonaka, 1994), has been the predominant model in policing since the professional era starting in the mid-1900s (Sherman, 2011: 531). There are a number of inherent limitations in such an approach, including the typically slow-moving process of research not fitting an expedited timeline needed to inform policy and practice, and academic researchers lacking the skill to help with specific problems facing practitioners. For such reasons, Sherman (2011) proposes a move towards a model of police-led science, which puts police officers at the forefront of generating evidence, with agencies empowering their officers to develop and test research questions.

Four chapters in Piza and Welsh (2022) focus on efforts to foster police-led science. Smith (2022), for example, recounts his lived experience of higher education as a mechanism for securing greater influence and autonomy as a senior police officer of the Metropolitan Police Service of London. Smith concludes that many problems of the police profession are not due to a lack of credible scientific evidence, but rather to an organizational behavior that is unable to readily apply such evidence in practice. Smith demonstrates how police reform requires leaders highly skilled in change management who can develop critical insights on how their organization functions—and simultaneously secure new knowledge from academic partners who seek to shape policing practice. Smith argues that such a context transforms EBP from something that is “done to the police service” by those on the outside looking in, to something driven by the police service itself.
The empowerment necessary to support police-led science can also be fostered by professional societies, two of which are profiled in the book. Prince et al. (2022) recount the formation of the American Society of Evidence-Based Policing (ASEBP) and its organizational activities. Huey and Ferguson (2022) do likewise for the Canadian Society of Evidence-Based Policing (Can-SEBP). Both organizations were developed out of unique needs in the two countries, and they now form part of a much larger global network of EBP societies.

Prince et al. (2022) demonstrate the evolution of ASEBP as a series of “starts and stops” that allowed the organization to organically find its purpose. Over its first 6 years, ASEBP has grown from a group of 10 to over 350 members, offering an annual research conference that attracts attendees from around the world and from which applied research projects often emerge. Huey and Ferguson (2022) discuss how Can-SEBP resulted from a distinct need of the Canadian government to better foster evidence-based approaches to public safety, with the objective of rebuilding Canada’s capacity for applied policing research.

Perhaps the most promising direction for developing police-led science is by enabling police officers to directly generate their own scientific research evidence through designing and implementing field experiments. Doing so requires a departure from standard procedure, as policing primarily relies on police academies to provide initial and ongoing training for officers in legal frameworks guiding the policing profession and the proper use of law enforcement tactics (Ratcliffe, 2022). Mazerolle et al. (2022), however, describe supplemental EBP workshops developed and offered by the University of Queensland for the purpose of empowering police to drive for themselves the reform agenda around EBP.

These EBP workshops are intentionally designed to promote meaningful academic-practitioner partnerships for research production. The police participants come to a workshop with a specific problem facing their agency and draw upon their operational knowledge and experience to design an innovative response. The academic facilitator supplies research methodology to develop the idea and generate evidence of effectiveness. Police then use this information to lead field experiments. The field experiments emerging from the EBP workshops have explored a range of contemporary policing issues, including the capacity of third-party policing to disrupt the sale of illicit drugs from hotel rooms, the effect of procedural justice principles on routine encounters with citizens, and the long-term effect of diversion on repeat offending (see also Cowan et al., 2019).

**Aligning the Work of Researchers and Practitioners**

Researcher-practitioner partnerships can provide an environment that fosters evidence-based policing, especially when both parties contribute to problem identification, strategy development, and strategy implementation (Mock, 2010). A partnership environment helps both sides to navigate the competing interests and incentive structures of academia and policing. Todak et al. (2022), for example, draw upon their experiences with the inaugural cohort of the National Institute of Justice’s Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Academics program. This
program has contributed to the development of many productive research collaborations between practitioners and academics, including the design, deployment, and evaluation of the effect of foot patrols in Dayton, Ohio (Haberman & Stiver, 2019).

Action-research partnerships can be improved through the involvement of embedded criminologists who take an active role in the day-to-day routine of police agencies. The presence of an in-house academic can provide police agencies with uninhibited access to rigorously trained, scientifically objective scholars in support of agency operations. The integration of embedded criminologists in policing follows the successful application of the model in corrections (Petersilia, 2008), and has thus far involved academics working in close concert with command-staff police personnel. Gerell (2022) provides an account of his work with the intelligence unit of Sweden’s National Police, which expanded the embedded criminologist model into the field of crime analysis.

The potential of embedded criminologists and police “pracademics” to accelerate these partnerships is taken up by Douglas and Braga (2022) who describe their role in promoting the adoption of EBP within police agencies. In the past, academic partnerships with police departments have largely been project-based enterprises that rarely continued beyond the project’s end (Rojek et al., 2012). Embedded criminologists help create a more lasting effect by their continuing presence, while pracademics — police officers who have received academic training in research and evaluation — can act as knowledge “brokers” in their organizations, who can align perspectives across multiple constituencies (Posner, 2009: 16). These capacities may make pracademics the most likely mechanism for successfully integrating the “craft” of police work and the “hard science” of empirical research (Willis & Mastrofski, 2018).

Gimenez-Santana et al. (2022) present their work with a Newark public safety initiative developed at the Rutgers-Newark School of Criminal Justice. The project uses a model of data-informed community engagement (DICE) to assist a working group of community partner organizations in identifying crime problems and developing evidence-based solutions. DICE involves the public presentation and discussions of data analysis findings at community meetings attended by all stakeholder agencies. Risk-Terrain Modeling (RTM) for spatial analysis of crime is at the heart of DICE by identifying the risks that come from the physical environment’s crime attractors and generators (Brantingham & Brantingham, 1995), and models how they co-locate to create unique behavior settings for crime.

Piza et al. (2022) present a proposal for police technology research to be guided by Community Technology Oversight Boards (CTOBs), to better inform the design, implementation, and evaluation of police technology interventions, emphasizing active collaboration and continuous feedback. The authors propose CTOBs following a critical assessment of Piza’s experience in analyzing closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras in Newark, New Jersey (see, e.g., Piza et al., 2014, 2015). The purpose of CTOBs is to formalize community-focused partnerships to inform police surveillance technologies. They should comprise practitioners, researchers, and community stakeholders to encourage the adoption of sound science and efficient, effective, and equitable technology interventions. For best results, these stakeholders would work collaboratively to identify and analyze problems, consider and select specific technology for deployment, conduct in-depth assessments to understand the potential community impact, and conduct rigorous process and outcome evaluations.
to determine whether technology interventions should be adjusted. While this model can be readily applied to contemporary police technologies, such as CCTV, it holds particular promise for emerging surveillance technologies such as facial recognition and aerial drones. Given the rapidly expanding popularity of these tools, as well as their potentially enhanced intrusiveness and the general controversy surrounding their use, a CTOB provides a platform for consultation and negotiation.

**Incorporating Evidence-Based Policing in Daily Police Functions**

A wide range of innovative approaches have been carried out in recent years as part of a growing effort to embed evidence-based policing principles in daily police functions. Our book (Piza and Welsh, 2022) profiles five such approaches. In the early 2010s, Lum et al. (2011) launched an innovative and user-friendly tool known as the Evidence-Based Policing Matrix. Viewed at the time as the “next phase of evidence-based policing,” the Matrix was designed to aid police agencies in using scientific evidence in a strategic manner. It did so by “developing generalizations or principles on the nature of effective police strategies and translating the field of police evaluation research into digestible forms that can be used to alter police tactics, strategies, accountability systems, and training” (Lum et al., 2011: 3). The first test of the Matrix reaffirmed some of the scientific evidence on police effectiveness in reducing crime. It continues to serve as a key resource for updating the evidence base in a timely manner and tailoring the evidence to the needs of police agencies.

In the next phase of the Matrix, known as the Matrix Demonstration Projects (MDP), Lum and Koper (2022) illustrate how the MDP facilitates three activities that are essential to achieving EBP: translation, receptivity, and institutionalization. These core activities come with the added benefit of contributing to the development of high-quality research evidence. The authors discuss in detail the creation of tools to support the application of EBP in the field (e.g., the Evidence-Based Policing Playbook) and the communication of EBP principles to police management and leadership.

Another innovative approach is the CompStat360 platform, which harnesses the benefits of both the traditional CompStat model and community policing perspectives. Neusteter and Magnus (2022) describe how CompStat360 was piloted and developed through a practitioner-researcher partnership in Tucson, Arizona. The platform consists of planned connections or feedback loops among three overlapping dimensions: (a) prevention, intervention, and clearance of crimes; (b) maximization of organizational effectiveness; and (c) integration of community support and involvement. Key lessons from CompStat360 include these:

- not all projects required crime analysis resources or the use of a “rigid” problem-solving structure;
- the importance of targeting micro-problem areas or places (e.g., a motel generating a high volume of 911 calls); and
- police commanders going beyond “siloed” problem solving to establishing ad hoc multidisciplinary teams.
As an example of the global reach of EBP, O’Brien and Evans (2022) describe the development, early initiatives, and current scope of the New Zealand Police Service’s Evidence-Based Policing Centre (EBPC). Established in early 2019, the Centre is dedicated to institutionalizing EBP in day-to-day operations of the police service. The EBPC strategy is structured around four key functions: (a) data science; (b) performance, research, and insights; (c) delivery and improvements; and (d) implementation and evaluation. Teams assigned to each of these functions combine police practitioners, researchers, and other stakeholders to carry out these functions. At the time of writing, there were more than 50 active projects in these four functions, with another 100 projects in the scoping and development phase. In recognition of the many challenges of embedding EBP in operational policing and sustaining it over time, the Centre’s efforts are guided by a number of “success criteria.” These include meeting specific targets, including making New Zealand the safest country in the world, fostering a culture of learning and innovation, and forming strong partnerships with others who aspire to similar goals.

Turning back to the USA, Green and Bates (2022) profile a state-wide initiative (in the state of New York) that relies on EBP practices to reduce urban gun violence at the local level. Facilitated by technical support, training, and assistance in data collection from the New York Division of Criminal Justice Services (DCJS), the initiative leverages a network of crime analysis centers (as a way to bolster the analytical capacity of local police agencies), an innovative street outreach program, a tested gun violence prevention program, and efforts to improve clearance rates for non-fatal gun crimes. By embracing a more active role than most traditional state grant-awarding systems, DCJS has also been in a position to help agencies respond to changing conditions on the ground, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, and address implementation challenges.

The final innovative approach profiled in the book for embedding EBP principles in daily police functions concerns the Cambridge Police Executive Programme (CPEP). Building on a program for certifying police leaders launched at Cambridge University’s Institute of Criminology in 1996 and directed by Lawrence Sherman with an EBP curriculum since 2008, the Programme offers a part-time master’s degree to mid-career police officers. Its aim is training “pracademics” in policing both to do research and lead its application. Its diverse student body enables its effort to institutionalize EBP across the world.

Two main perspectives guide this Programme’s approach to EBP: (a) EBP should serve as a “general framework for making decisions” and (b) EBP is a “strategy for organizing police activities around a holistic mission of reducing total harm from crimes” (Sherman, 2022: 301). Undergirding these views has been the mission of getting research into practice, culminating in scores of applied research projects by the student pracademics, in collaboration with their faculty thesis advisors, and leading to scientific discoveries and changes in police practices. The Cambridge Programme shows how academic training can directly, and in short order, impact police agency operations. It also serves as a proof of concept for replication in other top-tier universities, as a way to get more pracademics in policing and help institutionalize EBP.
Conclusions and Future Directions

Our conclusion from these 18 case studies is that the evidence-based policing movement has expanded rapidly across the world. It has gained a foothold in a large number of police agencies. It has become part of the institutional landscape of policing, through international, regional, and country-level professional societies dedicated to its advancement.

At the same time, and undergirding some of the movement’s success, there has been a growing body of scientific research. From experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations (many published in this journal) to Campbell Collaboration reviews of the highest quality studies, research has demonstrated the effectiveness of a diverse range of proactive policing strategies (Lum & Koper, 2017; Telep & Weisburd, 2016; Weisburd and Majmundar, 2018; Welsh, 2019). In parallel to this work has been a growing body of survey research that has documented the receptivity of police to evidence-based policing (see, e.g., Lum & Koper, 2017; Telep, 2017; Telep & Lum, 2014).

These case studies of EBP innovations from across the world have had a particular focus on bridging the research-practice divide. They demonstrate just how far the movement has advanced in the last three decades. They also provide us with greater insights and, in many cases, research evidence on how to bring about more effective and fair policing through an evidence-based approach. This is no less than a major achievement.

Building on this work and advancing the body of knowledge that we now have calls attention to several key priorities for the years ahead. One priority for global expansion of EBP is moving beyond rich, industrialized countries. Practitioner and researcher outreach with resources at-hand, on-site, and university/college training, and building capacity with regional partners will go a long way to making this happen. The Cambridge Police Executive Programme may provide a framework for how these objectives can be accomplished on a large scale, even fostering the ability to achieve population-level impacts.

Another priority is police-led and researcher-supported innovations, with a clear focus on sustainable change. This calls for moving beyond one-off, short-term projects, and in some cases attending to the underlying causes of crime rather than its symptoms alone. EBP could be a leader on this front.

A key priority remains the need for an unrelenting focus on evaluation of all dimensions of policing. As shown in Pizza and Welsh (2022), almost every element of policing is testable. Creativity and ingenuity, along with an unwavering commitment to do no harm, are the engines driving EBP innovations. These qualities also need to be harnessed for experimentation. With a rich and deep supply of police practitioners and researchers who exhibit these qualities, we think EBP is up to the challenge.

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