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Research for Police: Who Needs It?

Gloria Laycock

This Trends and Issues paper argues that the time is now right for a more intimate relationship between practitioners and researchers in general, and the police and researchers in particular. The growing emphasis on reducing crime—an outcome focus—highlights the need for an evidence base to crime reduction practices.

Some examples are provided of what research might have to offer Australian police services in the area of police problem-solving. The paper also stresses the importance of being clear on the “mechanism” through which any initiative might be expected to exert its effect. This is a particularly important point if the many new ideas being introduced are to be effectively evaluated and thus contribute to our growing knowledge base.

This paper is in part abstracted from a fellowship report prepared for the United States’ National Institute of Justice (NIJ) on the relationship between research, policy and practice (or perhaps more accurately, the lack of it). The report to NIJ was based on more than 30 years of frustration on the part of the author in trying to get policy-makers and practitioners in the United Kingdom to pay more attention to research. It was also based on research literature and on many conversations with academics and police practitioners.

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This paper encourages the development of police–research partnerships with a focus on the development of ways to reduce crime. In the first section, the traditionally remote relationship between research and practice is described, and the case made that it needs to change. The drivers for this change include an increasing focus on the delivery of “outcomes”, a more professional police service and an increase in the analysis of data. The second section outlines some examples of what research has to offer, bearing in mind the need to reduce crime. In the final section, some thoughts are set out as to how this agenda might be developed—what needs to change in both the police world and the academic world if productive relationships are to be developed and sustained.

The Traditional But Changing Relationship

Practitioners and researchers have operated in different universes for a long time. Researchers study police practices and criticise what they find, because that is what researchers are trained to do. They publish their work in journals and worry about tenure, their next grant, the number of citations they have amassed and the purity of their methodology. Contributing to the development of

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policing is not always top of the list. The police complain and ignore the research; their perspective is that they do not need the hassle it causes and they can carry out the tasks required of them without any help from researchers.

So, despite huge expenditure by some governments (the United States Federal Government spent US\$44 million on policing research related to the Crime Act from 1994 to 2000), research is not currently central to the police. At the 1999 American Society of Criminology meeting, Peter Kinsinger of the International Community Corrections Association asked:

How can it be that we have spent millions of dollars on research and nobody can tell me how to reduce sex offending in the community?

Good question.

We currently find research influencing policing where:

- local relationships are particularly good (sometimes researchers involved in such relationships are referred to as “tame” researchers);
- there is a slow, steady, unrelenting build-up of evidence of a problem, which leads to improvements in police responsiveness or accountability;
- extraordinary tenacity over decades, such as Herman Goldstein’s efforts on problem-oriented policing, means the research message is hard to ignore; and
- there is a major single incident that focuses minds on a particular problem, like poor police–minority relations.

Some fundamental changes are now underway that will change what I call the “deep structure” of both the research community and the police. The changes should mean that research, or the techniques associated with it, will become far more central to policing than ever before. The police will need good research, and they will, therefore, have to become more assertive in making sure that they get it.

What Has Changed?

First, there is a demand for “outcomes” in most advanced Western democracies. It is no longer enough to say that x-thousand tickets were issued or y-thousand offenders arrested. There is a demand that crime goes down and stays down. Of course, some police chiefs believe they know how to reduce crime. Crime has been falling across the United States for over a decade, but the debate continues as to the reasons. In New York, the police version of events is that crime went down because of COMPSTAT¹ and zero tolerance. In San Diego, crime dropped because of problem-oriented policing. In Chicago, the community policing program made the difference, and so on. There are two things we can infer from this: either what the police do is irrelevant and crime was going down anyway; or, what they do does matter but there are lots of ways of reducing crime. The sad fact is that we do not know, and the researchers and police have spent years arguing about it. If there had been an ongoing relationship between the police and academics then maybe some of those questions could have been answered with rather more confidence.

Second, there is increased public scepticism that the “professionals”—teachers, lawyers, doctors, politicians—know what they are doing. The police understandably want to be seen as professionals, not service providers. The difference between a professional and a service provider, as I am using the term here, relates essentially to the extent to which the work is knowledge- or evidence-based and to the existence of a strong ethical work context. We treat doctors as professionals because they draw on a body of well established knowledge as they provide the care we need, and we expect them to behave with integrity. Medical ethics is an industry in itself. But there are no

comparable bodies in policing—no “ethics police” with the power to strike off offending officers. And while there are lots of books published each year on policing, there is no published knowledge base on what works and what does not work in the profession. The only way to establish a real body of knowledge is through systematic and prolonged investment in research.

Finally, we have seen a massive shift to community policing in the United States and elsewhere, which encompasses problem-solving or problem-oriented policing; that is, data-driven processes. If problem-oriented policing is to become embedded in routine police work, then the researcher’s skills will need to be developed in police agencies. Data need to be analysed, interpreted and acted upon, and the police have not been trained to do this.

So, there are three reasons why the police may now need good research:

- the outcome focus and the need to demonstrate that police action can affect crime rates;
- the professionalisation of policing—the need for a body of knowledge on what works within an ethical framework; and
- the shift to data-driven problem-solving.

What Does Research Have to Offer?

Currently, the research literature is awash with:

- conceptual frameworks within which to develop new approaches;
- expertise in handling complex data sets and deriving agendas for action from them; and
- ideas on what works, where and why.

But these ideas are not always well communicated to practitioners; they are not readily accessible to busy police managers. In this section we take from the research literature some

examples of the conceptual ideas which have proved useful in developing new initiatives, and outline how they have been used to generate knowledge of what works, where and why.

Mechanisms and Contexts

The importance of being clear on the “mechanisms” and “contexts” in developing crime prevention initiatives has been discussed by Pawson and Tilley in their book *Realistic Evaluation* (1997). Mechanisms describe *how* a program might exert its effect. Describing the mechanism means going inside the “black box”. As Pawson and Tilley say, we can never understand how a clock works by looking at its hands and face, rather, we need to go inside the works and understand the mechanism. It is through the process of understanding or hypothesising about mechanisms that we move from evaluating whether a program works or not, to understanding why it works.

The context describes the place within which the mechanism is to be applied. It is important because some mechanisms will only work in a particular context. Their effect is context-dependent. To take an extreme example, does closed-circuit television (CCTV) work? Let us assume that the mechanism invoked is deterrence—when potential offenders see the CCTV camera they think, “Better not do this. I might get caught on camera”. Suppose we put the camera outside a rowdy pub on a Saturday night and hope that it will reduce drunk and disorderly behaviour. In such a context it might not work. Drunks do not characteristically think hard before they become rowdy! So does CCTV work? In that context, with that supposed mechanism, it probably does not.

These ideas are very helpful in thinking about what works because they encourage us to add on “where” and “why”. Let us take Neighbourhood Watch as an example. Does it work? If

Neighbourhood Watch were to reduce crime, how would it do so? What is the “mechanism”? And how is it related to the context within which it may be introduced? The bottom line seems to be that residents agree to “watch out” in their neighbourhood and call the police if they see anything unusual, particularly an offence in progress. The fact that residents are doing this is made clear to potential offenders through the presence of window stickers and street signs. There may, of course, be other reasons for Neighbourhood Watch, with other mechanisms coming into play—perhaps it is going to improve police–public relations for example—but that would be a different outcome measure.

But whether it “works” or not will also depend on the “context” within which it is introduced. We have to ask ourselves to what extent the mechanisms behind Neighbourhood Watch may be operating anyway, whether or not we introduce the scheme in a particular area. For example, in low crime middle class areas, if residents see a crime in progress they already call the police. So what would we be adding? Perhaps the marginal effect of the window decals and street signs. In this case, we are saying that the mechanism is context-dependent.

So the answer to the question “does Neighbourhood Watch work?” has now become quite complex. The question would be better framed as “if Neighbourhood Watch worked, how would it do so, and in what context?” In high crime areas, where residents would not normally call the police, we may need to do some very specific things to make sure they feel comfortable with doing that—providing telephones, for example, and some degree of protection against bullying or threats of retaliation. We also need to take note of the fact that in areas of this kind it is probably

the neighbours who are burgling each other, so looking out for strangers may not be so important as providing a socially acceptable and safe way for residents to call the police. In contrast, in low crime areas, where we are fairly confident that residents do call the police, the purpose of Neighbourhood Watch may be more to reassure the public than to reduce crime.

A strategic framework for Neighbourhood Watch, taking account of mechanisms and contexts, is set out in Table 1. It outlines the different goals of Neighbourhood Watch which are dependent upon the different crime contexts. In low crime areas, for example, the goals of Neighbourhood Watch are not to reduce the already low crime levels, but to maintain them at that low level and to control fear and enhance police–public relations. As a consequence, the characteristics of schemes in such areas will be different and, importantly, there will be less investment of police time—the aim should be to make them self-sustaining. In high crime areas the goals, characteristics and level of police involvement are quite different. In practice, the specific characteristics of any scheme should depend upon the nature of the neighbourhood for which it is intended. There is no “off-the-shelf” solution to crime.

So, by way of summary, how do we answer the question “Does Neighbourhood Watch work?” In high crime areas the key to its effectiveness is proper implementation. For some of the reasons set out above, in such areas it can be very difficult to implement. In low crime areas the mechanism through which it is presumed to operate is already in operation. So, in answer to the question, the mechanism (surveillance) is effective but whether it works in any given context depends upon whether it can be properly implemented there.

Table 1: Policing and Neighbourhood Watch—a strategic framework

Crime level	Goals	Characteristics	Level of police involvement
Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep crime rate low • Maintain public confidence • Guard against vigilantes • Maintain good police–public relations • Reduce fear of crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run by community volunteers • Capable of self-funding • Respond rapidly should the need arise • Emphasis on partnership with the police • Minimal involvement of other agencies • Neighbourhood Watch signs displayed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support on request • Encourage volunteers • “Standard pack” Neighbourhood Watch • Request help from community when need arises
Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce crime rate • Maintain and extend crime-free value system • Increase informal social control • Monitor and respond to minor nuisance and incivilities • Improve police–public relations • Reduce fear of crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce characteristics of low crime areas • Fundraising events and modest subscription • Other agencies involved, e.g. local authorities • High profile activity with tenants’ associations and community groups • Able to deal promptly with vandalism and incivility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage other agencies • Provide crime data • Active encouragement of schemes on high-risk estates • Respond promptly to emerging crime problems • Active contribution for police crime prevention specialists
High	<p>Public housing areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce crime • Increase community control • Decrease tolerance of crime and incivilities • Widen and deepen public confidence in policing • Reduce fear of crime <p>Gentrified areas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce crime • Increase public confidence • Maintain attractiveness of inner city to high-income groups • Reduce fear of crime • Rapid response • Encourage residents to help each other to reduce risks • Encourage installation of burglar alarms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-agency support, e.g. local authority support, probation service input • Strong community coordinators with local support groups in place • Small schemes • Active support for victims/witnesses • Active involvement of young people in crime control <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-financing • Small schemes • Neighbourhood Watch signs displayed • Good police–public communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active encouragement of schemes • “Tailor-made” schemes to reflect local circumstances • Immediate feedback of successes • Engage other agencies • Rapid response policy on intimidation • Detailed crime data provided • Architectural liaison officer work with local authority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active encouragement of schemes • Domestic security surveys offered • Detailed crime data provided

Source: Laycock and Tilley (1995)

Routine Activity Theory

Routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson 1979; Felson 1998) suggests that three conditions must converge in time and space for a direct-contact predatory crime to occur. These are:

- the presence of a likely/motivated offender;
- the presence of a suitable target; and
- the absence of an effective intermediary either capable of

“guarding” (protecting) the victim or “handling” (discouraging) the offender.

A “suitable target” can be a person or product. A car might be a suitable target for theft, but so might a house for burglary or a person for robbery. A suitable guardian might be a bus driver or school teacher, taking on the role of protecting a potential victim, or may be a parent or family member who can act as an

“intimate handler”, in Felson’s terms, and dissuade the potential offender from carrying out the offence.

Routine activity theory stresses that in the absence of any of the three crucial conditions for a crime or problem, it will not exist. In effect, it gives three bites at the preventive or problem-solving cherry. The tactics that might be adopted in a preventive

program all refer to actions that disrupt what Felson (1998) refers to as the “crime chemistry”—the way the crucial ingredients for crime are brought together and generate patterns of crime events. This approach has been used in many different projects as a way of thinking about the development of an effective response to crime. The objective is to disrupt the crime chemistry and make the offence less likely.

In one UK example, which was intended to reduce repeat domestic burglary across a whole police division serving a population of 220,000, the police adopted what became known as the “Olympic model”, as set out in Table 2 (adapted from Chenery, Holt & Pease 1997). A different tactic was adopted depending upon how many times the home had already been burgled. These prior victimisations constituted a changed context. After a first burglary, a “bronze” response was adopted which involved providing fairly standard crime prevention advice to the victim and carrying out routine police activities such as checking known

informants and stolen goods outlets. “Cocoon watch”, as described by Forrester et al. (1988), was also adopted where appropriate. Cocoon watch involves the introduction of “capable guardians” in the form of the immediate neighbours, who are individually approached to keep a watch on a recent burglary victim. A rapid repair policy was also adopted by the local authority owners of the homes, with a security upgrade if appropriate.

If this approach failed and a second burglary was carried out, then a “silver” approach was adopted, which included visits from a police crime prevention expert, targeted police patrols and the installation of a monitored alarm. A further burglary resulted in a “gold” response, which concentrated effort on catching the perpetrator. A tracker device might be installed in high-value portable goods, for example, and other technical solutions aimed at detection might be introduced.

In this project, specific action was directed at reducing the vulnerability of the victim (the home) and at introducing capable

guardians (the immediate neighbours and the police), but there was no action directed specifically at the motivation of the offenders. The focus of the intervention moved, however, from prevention after a first victimisation to detection after a second or more. This project was successful in reducing repeat victimisation and reducing domestic burglary by about 30 per cent over 12 months.

Increasing the Production of Practical Research

There are, as noted above, a number of examples of the police and academics working together to develop effective crime prevention schemes. These are not common, however, and the existing good practice has not penetrated police training or routine police behaviour to any significant extent.

There are, perhaps, a number of reasons for this. First, despite the fact that a lot of research is carried out on crime and policing, it is not as focused on the issue of

Table 2: *Burglary reduction tactics by context*

Bronze—first burglary	Silver—second burglary	Gold—third and subsequent burglaries
Reducing victim suitability		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim letter, property marker pen and crime prevention advice • Discount vouchers for security equipment • Loan of temporary equipment such as timer switches and dummy alarms • Rapid repairs • Security upgrading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit from police crime prevention officer • Installation of monitored alarm • Security equipment loan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further visit from police crime prevention officer
Increasing capable guardians		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cocoon watch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued cocoon watch • Police watch visits twice weekly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued cocoon watch • Police watch daily
Detection approaches		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informants check • Early check on known outlets • Targeting of offenders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Search warrant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority automatic fingerprint search • Installation of high-tech equipment, e.g. covert alarms and cameras • Index solutions • “Tracker” installed in vulnerable equipment

Source: Adapted from Chenery, Holt and Pease (1997).

prevention and problem-solving as it might be. If this situation is to improve, then the police community needs to be clear in its collective mind about what it needs from research. They need to know what works, where and why. By working with researchers to address this agenda, we will all be better able to understand the principles that determine what works, and that will enable the successful replication of effective initiatives in other jurisdictions. COMPSTAT is a good example. If COMPSTAT had a crime-reducing effect in New York, it was not because of anything that happened at 7:30am in a Police Plaza briefing room; it was because of something that may or may not have happened on the streets of New York. Unfortunately we do not know what that was.

Police agencies may also need help to generate testable hypotheses. In other words:

- working together with researchers to say what it is that is going to make crime go down—what the mechanism is; and
- establishing experiments to determine how that mechanism can be tested, in different contexts, and in an empirically valid way, to increase our knowledge base.

These issues are not straightforward, and the methodologies which need to be used to gain knowledge in this more complex system are still being developed. Nevertheless, by approaching the challenges systematically, and in the spirit of partnership, we can make real progress.

Practitioners also need timely research results. In an ideal world, research would be commissioned in anticipation of problems. But we do not live in an ideal world and research often begins in response to a problem. Good research will take time, and the police are understandably impatient for the results, but there is no reason why they cannot have interim results or pre-report briefings from the research team.

Also, those results must be in plain English, not pseudo-academic babble that the police, policy-makers and perhaps even other researchers do not understand.

The police should also have a place at the table when the research agenda is being set, rather than being invited to “host” a project that wings in from somewhere. They know the problems faced in front-line policing. The NIJ’s program of locally initiated research partnerships, in which federal funding was provided to support joint projects from police agencies and local academic institutions, is a good example of what can be done. Schemes such as this, in which the police and researchers are working as partners, help the research team to understand the complexity of the policing environment, and help the police to see the importance of rigorous evaluation in determining what works, where and why. This process also improves the police ability to critically assess the options they have before them for reducing crime.

We live in exciting times for public policy in general. Major changes are occurring in all sectors, including education, health, social services and, of course, policing. We hear a lot about the importance of partnerships in delivering crime reduction. This applies to the relationship between police and researchers as much as it does to the police and their communities. Police practitioners and researchers need a genuine, mutually respectful partnership.

Note

- 1 COMPSTAT is a program that provides “snapshots of preliminary crime statistics to allow tactical planning and deployment of resources to fight crime” (NYPD 2001).

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