

Emerging Issues in American Policing

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Digest

Introduction

Actionable, Evidence-Based Research: The Foundation for Smart Policing Policy

The landscape of American policing is rapidly changing in highly visible ways. Unaddressed social problems such as substance abuse, mental illness, homelessness, and poverty have vastly expanded the demands on rank-and-file police officers. Meanwhile, adequate training and diversion programs lag behind, and each highly publicized use of force, officer-involved shooting, or officer death brings a wave of flared tempers. These displays fuel a widespread view that police-community relations are poor.¹ Amid high tension, many reform-oriented agencies are seeking data-driven practices and solutions to these challenges.

Partnerships between police practitioners and researchers offer many related benefits, both to police departments and to the communities they serve. This includes:

- access to individuals with methodological skills;
- increased credibility;
- increased operating capacity;
- opportunities to learn from additional perspectives on agency issues; and
- Opportunities for researchers to facilitate relationships and communication between community organizations and policing agencies.²

For these reasons, practitioner-researcher partnerships are strongly endorsed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police.³ However, the feasibility and success of these partnerships is dependent on several factors, such as structural characteristics (i.e., funding, geographic proximity, personnel permanency, and institutional demands), shared values, and the interpersonal relationship and trust between partners. By providing policing agencies with knowledge of cutting-edge research that can then be brought to action in their individual jurisdictions, *Emerging Issues in American Policing* provides an easy way to engage in practitioner-researcher relationships.

Emerging Issues in American Policing is a quarterly digest summarizing the latest evidence-based research on policing practices, aimed primarily for practitioners and community members. While

primary source research publications offer tremendous insights into policing best-practices, they often require fee-based subscriptions to access, and/or are riddled with statistical jargon that can make them challenging to interpret. *Emerging Issues in American Policing* gathers publications from academic journals, as well as research institute and governmental reports, and creates accessible, easily consumable, and actionable summaries intended for public consumption.

Topics in the digest may include:

- approaches for strengthening community-police partnerships and community policing programs;
- strategies for building trust with vulnerable communities, such as immigrants, people of color, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people;
- supporting officers' physical, mental, and professional wellness;
- best practices for shifting institutional culture and policy;
- innovative and smart responses to crime; and
- addressing risk factors for crime, such as mental illness, substance abuse, homelessness, and poverty.

Diversion Programs and Recidivism

Research in Seattle, WA demonstrates how employing diversion strategies can save departmental resources, decrease recidivism, and improve employment outcomes for people with histories of repeated minor offenses.

Research increasingly demonstrates that arrests and incarceration alone are not effective in reducing recidivism (the chances that a person with a criminal history will commit a new offense) for vulnerable individuals.¹ As a result, there is a widespread need for programs that address risk factors for recidivism such as housing instability, unemployment, poverty, lack of job skills or training, and substance use, while also maintaining public safety at a low cost. Police diversion programs (alternative, often needs-based programs that officers can assign to individuals who commit certain offenses instead of issuing an arrest) are increasingly described as a promising solution.² Emergent research from the past quarter provides overall recommendations for successful diversion programs and highlights the evidence base of one replicable example.

To gain a better understanding of police-led diversion programs, researchers at the Center for Court Innovation conducted case studies on eight programs selected from a larger national survey of law enforcement agencies.³ Recurring themes and lessons are as follows:

Organizational Transformation

- Diversion maintains officers' power of discretion in assessing criminal responsibility.
- The messenger matters; trainings "by police, for police" maximize officer buy-in.
- Diversion units should be carefully vetted to only include voluntary officer participation.
- Clearly defining the appropriate use of diversion is crucial to success.
- Strong partnerships between law enforcement agencies, community members, and other stakeholders is critical for the success of any diversion program; prosecutors, for example, can consult with officers to determine appropriate diversionary responses.
- Diversion is not "a way out;" program failure results in arrest.
- Police-led diversion is an innovative way to reduce the risks of recidivism exacerbated by justice system involvement.

Researchers from the University of Washington also recently released a study on Seattle's Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program, a prominent collaborative pre-arrest diversion program.⁴ The program offers case management, harm-reduction services, legal assistance, and employment training and placements to people suspected of low-level drug and prostitution offenses. Researchers tracked LEAD participants' housing, employment, income, and benefits before and after program referral and found significant improvements across all outcomes: participants were twice as likely to find shelter; 89 percent more likely to obtain permanent housing; 46 percent more likely to be employed or training for employment; and 33 percent more likely to connect with income and benefits services such as military pensions, unemployment, supplement security income, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Seattle's LEAD program has become a model for agencies looking to implement innovative crime reduction strategies and strengthen communities. Building off the success of Seattle's LEAD program, an additional seven LEAD programs are now being implemented across the country, with dozens of other jurisdictions seeking to follow suit.⁵

Social Contagion and Gun Violence

Research on shootings in Chicago demonstrates that social exposure is a strong predictor of gun violence.

To curb gun violence, there is a broad need to supplement policing initiatives with community-based violence interventions. While more than 200 people are murdered or assaulted with a firearm every day in the United States, limited research exists on the effect of social networks on gun violence.¹ An eight-year study of shootings in Chicago, recently published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, establishes a statistical link between an individual's exposure to gun violence through their social network and a heightened risk that they will become victims of gun violence in the future.² By modeling gun

violence as an epidemic transmitted through social interactions, the study found that ‘social contagion’ accounted for about 61 percent of lethal gun violence incidents and about 63 percent of nonlethal violence incidents. On average, victims of gun violence were shot just over four months after the shooting of their ‘infector’—that is, the person who initially exposed them to gun violence. The study suggests that police and community prevention efforts that take both demographics and the contagion principle into account are more likely to be effective in preventing shootings. The researchers ultimately recommend that efforts to reduce community violence should utilize a public health approach, which features a move away from offender-based responses gun violence and toward initiatives that address risk factors such as educational disadvantage.

Data Analytics and Peer Intervention

New Orleans's enhanced police performance measurement system and peer intervention program offer promising advances in agency management and officer and community wellbeing.

In the wake of a rigorous 2012 consent decree, the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) is a leading national example in police reform. Notably, NOPD recently reengineered its performance management practices, and coupled those efforts with smart programs, such as peer intervention trainings. *Police Quarterly* recently published two detailed studies on their successes, highlighting the NOPD as a model for other police agencies across the country.

NOPD is pioneering a data-driven management framework called MAX (Management Analytics for Excellence)—a comprehensive, community-oriented assessment model.¹ MAX is a dashboard that serves as a departmental hub of performance data, crime maps, frequently used forms, and action items following departmental meetings. Key performance metrics include percent compliance with body-worn camera and suspect line-up protocols, as well as the volume of outstanding forms in need of attention. Four performance auditors assist NOPD in keeping up-to-date performance scorecards, shortening the data feedback loop by months. These efforts produced over 90 percent compliance across all assessed metrics. NOPD publishes this information online for partner organizations and the public, increasing transparency and lending credibility to reform efforts.²

NOPD is also bridging the gap between training and practice regarding de-escalation and use of force. Many well-intentioned officers struggle to effectively take action as bystanders to police misconduct. In response, NOPD created and implemented EPIC (Ethical Policing is Courageous)—a peer intervention program that draws from social psychological research to train officers to intervene in unethical situations. The second article in *Police Quarterly* analyzed the effects of the EPIC program on NOPD's officer conduct and institutional culture.³ Importantly, NOPD implemented multiple reform-

oriented initiatives across the department at the same time as EPIC, which means that more research is necessary before EPIC can be deemed an evidence-based, stand-alone intervention. However, preliminary analyses of body-worn camera, survey, and administrative data demonstrated declines in excessive force, community complaints, and officer discipline cases following EPIC trainings. Qualitative observations over the span of two years also reveal that EPIC-trained officers and supervisors are recounting more stories of successful peer intervention, demonstrating that as peer intervention becomes culturally engrained within a department, it may help to reduce officer resistance to talking openly about issues of misconduct.

Organizational Cynicism

Organizational cynicism affects officers from vulnerable populations most strongly and worsens over time.

Research on American policing shows that rank-and-file officers display varying degrees of organizational cynicism (OC)—that is, mistrust of management, stemming from a perception of unfair treatment—and that this negatively affects organizational health and effectiveness, through impacts on productivity, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, incidents of misconduct, and reform initiatives.¹ To better understand how levels of OC change within police officers over time, Dr. Georgina Enciso and colleagues studied a sample of 760 police recruits across five training academies and found evidence that OC increases from the time officers begin at the academy through at least six months post-graduation. While this increase in OC over time is relatively modest, there is wide range in initial OC amongst police recruits. Specifically, individual levels of OC are related to a range of demographic and individual factors. Recruits with friends in law enforcement generally display higher levels of initial OC, whereas recruits with family in law enforcement display lower levels of initial OC. Female recruits initially exhibit less OC than male recruits and become more cynical over time. High school educated recruits develop OC at a faster rate than those with advanced degrees. While initial levels of OC varied across racial groups, a pattern emerged whereby non-white recruits (e.g., Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and “other-identified” races) developed OC faster than White recruits. OC is among many occupational stresses facing police officers. Given the importance of officer wellbeing for job performance, it is critical to consider ways in which agencies can work to reduce and prevent OC amongst recruits and officers at all stages of their careers.²

Recruitment and Hiring

By rethinking police hiring strategies, agencies can address issues with staff retention, diversity, and effectiveness.

Despite shifting needs in the field of American policing, certain hiring problems are longstanding. In particular, many agencies struggle to fill retirement vacancies and/or retain high-caliber recruits. The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) recently convened a forum of diverse stakeholders to propose innovative solutions to these challenges. Their final report highlighted three resounding recommendations.¹

First, candidates should share the values and vision of the community and department. Agency hiring traditionally focuses on ‘disqualifying the negative’ through aptitude tests and background investigations. Success in hiring, though, requires proactively identifying and ‘hiring the positive.’ Police Officer Standards and Training agencies should consult with their communities in implementing hiring policies that prioritize service and team orientation, communication and human relations skills, a “guardian” orientation (as opposed to a “warrior” one), self-control, empathy, and physical and education standards, which can be assessed through civil service tests and expanded oral interviews.

Second, the hiring process should promote efficiency and quality. Agencies can lose high-caliber candidates to other industries when the hiring process is too cumbersome. Bureaucratic hurdles should be removed wherever possible, by offering more frequent and regular testing, hiring more background investigators, opting for continuous hiring over group hiring, allowing individuals to complete multiple application steps simultaneously, and automating the application. Background investigations and interviews should have consistent, standardized inquiries, and direct services should engage waiting applicants.

Third, agencies should advance diversity and inclusiveness in the hiring process. Many otherwise strong candidates from vulnerable communities are disqualified based on minor infractions of the law from past ‘zero tolerance’ policies, which can be corrected by working with potential applicants to expunge minor violations from their criminal records, and by hiring and training background investigators to ensure value alignment. Agencies should also cultivate and recruit talent from the communities they serve, through cadet programs, high school public safety academies, college internship opportunities, and mentorships—a process referred to as “growing your own.” Agencies with lower educational requirements should offer funding for higher education.

Collectively, the recommendations put forth in this report stand to fundamentally change American policing’s core priorities from the bottom-up, equipping agencies to rise to today’s challenges.

Agency Size and Crime Rates

With inconsistent findings on the relationship between agency size and crime rates, police practitioners should divert their energies to other, more reliable policy solutions to crime.

For decades, police practitioners and social scientists have struggled to determine whether the number of officers in an agency influences crime rates. Past attempts have produced contradictory findings. Researchers from the University of Cincinnati recently reexamined this question through a meta-analysis, through which they examined methodological and statistical trends across all 62 English-language studies of the topic from the past four decades.¹ Ultimately, the researchers concluded that modifying the size of a police force has no consistent, measurable effect on crime rates in either direction.

Despite a great deal of variation in the individual studies' conclusions, the researchers are confident in this finding for several reasons. First, they found that there were no systematic changes in findings over time. Second, they included all existing research, regardless of its findings or ideological leaning. Third, they found that differing research methods did not bias the results. Finally, the researchers' conclusion aligns with the logic that hiring extra workers becomes progressively less useful, as there is less productive work available for each employee.

The researchers argue that the lack of consistent support for increasing agency size to decrease crime means that practitioners can more efficiently spend their resources shifting other agency policies, such as:²

- adopting evidence-based policing strategies shown to impact crime.
- hiring as necessary to meet needs, like increased officer safety or community engagement.
- if agency size shrinks due to budget cuts, rehiring as necessary when tax revenues increase; and
- considering hiring highly-trained civilians for crime and intelligence analyst positions.

Based on the results of this study, these and other alternative policies are likely to yield better effects than altering agency size in helping law enforcement to deter crime in their communities.

To receive *Emerging Issues* digests via email, or to share questions or suggestions, please email EmergingIssuesPolicing@vera.org.

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