

Examining Research-Practice Partnerships in Policing Evaluations

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Background: To produce high-quality research in the context of evidence-based policing, both researchers and practitioners must bring to the table important skills, specialized knowledge, and resources that can generate relevant findings for police operations. Partnerships between the police and researchers are therefore an important aspect of evidence-based policing, and can help foster a positive exchange between science and policing. Studying partnerships is an important part of translational criminology and can provide insight into how to optimize such relationships to further the goals of linking research to practice.

Methods: To study researcher perspectives on collaborations in the context of evidence-based policing, this study examines partnerships contained in the Evidence-Based Policing Matrix.¹ The researchers sought to contact all authors behind each of the Matrix studies to inquire about the partnerships that led to their published study. In total, 83 Matrix studies were used to examine research-practitioner partnerships. A survey instrument was developed, asking respondents to reflect on the specific partnership within a particular study in the Matrix. The survey focuses on four themes of research-practitioner partnerships derived from existing literature: initiation of the research, funding, implementation, and outcomes.

Results: The study found that researchers (as opposed to practitioners) primarily initiate research partnerships, and that this initiation is not ‘out of the blue’: 40% of respondents said they had prior experience conducting research with the particular agency. Funding (often federal funding) is also important in fostering research-practice partnerships; only 14 respondents’ evaluations were unfunded. Regarding implementation, most studies were implemented from the top down; there was very little involvement from first-line supervisors and patrol officers in the facilitation and planning of the study. This was important to note, given that first-line supervisors and officers are most likely the units responsible for the actual day-to-day implementation of research projects.

With regard to how research products are used, the majority of respondents (78%) did present their findings in person to agency representatives, but most written products were academic articles, rather than features in trade magazines or guidebooks. While the vast majority of the respondents felt their study’s findings were useful to the field of policing research and to the agencies involved, when asked if the study led to any change in agency policy at the conclusion of the study, 58% said that the study either had no impact or that they did not know if any impact was made. There was a significant relationship between study outcomes and the state of the partnership at the end of the study: the 19 researchers disclosing an improvement in relations with the evaluating agency all reported on studies that had significant success or mixed success in their outcome.

Conclusions and policy implications: These findings show that researchers offer very positive views regarding the partnerships established over the course of a research evaluation. However, the researchers initiate the majority of policing evaluations in a manner reflecting their personal interests or areas of expertise, not necessarily the demands or needs of the police agency involved. Implementation of rigorous research in a police department was shown to be feasible in the study, and the sample found it possible to overcome implementation issues faced, which supports previous research on the practitioner side that indicates most research designs are compatible with everyday law enforcement. This study and others support the notion that partnerships are an important element in achieving evidence-based policing and contributing to the reciprocal development of both the researcher and the practitioner. Finding out ‘what works’ in terms of effective partnerships between researchers and law enforcement personnel, and then honing and supporting those characteristics in both academic and law enforcement training, may help to increase the demand for research in policing as well as improve the relevance of the research supplied.

¹ <http://cebcp.org/evidence-based-policing/the-matrix/>