

THE ORIGINS OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICING

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Introduction

This paper reviews the origins of evidence-based policing. It highlights the contributions and risks taken by police chiefs who opened up their departments to experimental research at a time when policing was a closed society and outside involvement was viewed as interference. Police officials were particularly skeptical of academics who they believed wanted to obtain police data and information for research purposes so they could then promote themselves as experts in a field in which they had no experience. It was a common view among police administrators and managers that they, like doctors, engineers, and lawyers, were the experts in the field of public safety, the boots on the ground who put their lives on the line every day to protect the public, and they neither required nor desired outsiders who knew little, if anything, about their work to tell them how to do their jobs.

The sensitivity of the police toward outside involvement constituted a major barrier to the professional development of the police because it inhibited the introduction of specialized skills and expertise in important areas such as research methodology, statistics, and data analysis, in which the police needed support but lacked in-house expertise or experience. The introduction of experimental research into policing by the Police Foundation was a major factor in breaking down these barriers and opening the door for criminologists to become actively involved with practitioners in empirical research and the assessment and analysis of data and information to find evidence-based solutions for the problems impacting policing and public safety.

The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment

The first study to impact police operational practices was the Police Foundation's landmark Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment (KCPPE).¹ The KCPPE grew out of discussions between Patrick Murphy, president of the Police Foundation, and Clarence Kelly, chief of the Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department, and their respective representatives regarding staff support, resources, and other considerations related to the implementation of the study and maintenance of the research environment.

¹ Kelling, G., Pate, T., Dieckman, D., and Brown, C. (1974). *The Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment: A Summary Report*. Washington, DC: The Police Foundation.

Conducting scientific research in a field experiment to determine the ability of marked motor patrol units to deter crime required the utilization of empirical methodology that has become the cornerstone of evidence-based policing, providing the scientific basis for producing the best evidence as to what works and what does not work in policing. In the KCPPE, marked motor patrol units assigned to the experimental districts had to comport with scientific standards and function within the areas designated for the research, whereas motor patrol units responding to calls for service in other areas of the city were inhibited from providing services within the experimental districts. This separation of areas of responsibility was established to prevent the introduction of extraneous variables that could contaminate the research environment and undermine the experimental results.

Yet, the responsibility to maintain order and provide for public safety are the highest priorities for police departments and supersede all other considerations, including a commitment by the department to maintain the integrity of the research environment. Police chiefs responsible for balancing these divergent interests face considerable risks, including political difficulty and damage to both the department's as well as their own reputation, when these interests collide and they have to make difficult choices at the expense of one or the other. In urban areas, where emergencies occur frequently and police departments are understaffed, police chiefs will be under tremendous pressure to deploy resources as necessary to respond to emergency calls for service. In the conduct of field experiments, therefore, the strength of character, political savvy, and creativity of the chief can be severely tested. If this condition occurs frequently enough, it could contaminate the experiment and invalidate the findings. The experiment and the time, energy, and resources committed to it would be of little if any value. Some police chiefs, aware of this dilemma and the potential problems that affect experimental research, are therefore reluctant to participate in such projects. They prefer to play it safe and avoid taking unnecessary risks that could damage their reputations and detrimentally affect their careers.

Other chiefs know that the risks in adopting scientific standards and adhering to empirical methodology provide an important foundation for the improvement of policing and its elevation to a professional level. Former Kansas City police chief Clarence Kelley was one such chief, an evidence-based policing pioneer. In 1971, in explaining his readiness to experiment, Kelley said, "Computers, helicopters, a staff planning division, and talented personnel had made the department successful by such conventional measures as response time and crime rates. But the measures were still

only conventional and our thinking still hemmed in by traditional considerations. What more can we do with them? Many of us in the department had the feeling we were training, equipping, and deploying men to do a job neither we, nor anyone else, knew much about.”

The KCPPE was the catalyst for the transformation of the practice of policing from a system driven by tradition and culture to one predicated on the utilization of empirical methodology and scientific standards in order to obtain the facts regarding the efficacy of police strategies and practices. This research, the first of its kind in policing, opened the door for criminologists and other social scientists to gain access to police data and records, and marked the beginning of a period in which academic scholars and criminologists began to work directly with police practitioners to find answers to the problems and challenges impacting policing.

The Newark Police Department

The critical challenge facing police executives in the 1970s and into the 1980s was to do more with less. Fiscal stringency cut a wide swath through the Newark Police Department, as it did many other major American police departments. During my tenure as police director, Newark’s fiscal crisis resulted in the loss of 200 police officers through layoffs, and a reduction in the size of the police force by 25 percent over a six-year period, as a result of a combination of layoffs and attrition. Although the staff reduction provides a window into the difficult challenges of meeting an increase in public demands for police service with significantly fewer personnel, it does not address the complex political issues that attend such events or the intensity of the emotional reactions of officers when they lose their jobs and the ability to support their families. Nothing prepares them for this. There is also a loss of status, prestige, and authority that can create anxiety, tension, and frustration.

The layoffs resulted in labor unrest, political protests, and a series of job actions by police unions to force the city to return all laid-off officers to active duty, including a “fear city” campaign where officers marched through the city with signs saying the city was unsafe and lacked a sufficient number of officers to protect the public; demands that the mayor fire the police director or force him to resign; and a campaign to recall the mayor. Police officers picketed city hall and my home; the door to the mayor’s office was kicked in; the windows in 90 patrol cars were shattered in the police headquarters parking lot.

Nevertheless, it is important for police executives to remember that crises present opportunities as well as challenges. During a crisis, bureaucracy is more adaptable to change because people recognize the necessity of altering circumstances and conditions to lessen the affects of the crisis on their lives. Maintenance of the status quo is simply unacceptable. A police chief is expected to resolve problems confronting the police department to minimize their impact on the ability of the police department to provide the highest quality of service, and to make the tough decisions required to fine tune the department's operations so that it can function as efficiently and effectively as possible. This will not come easy, and politicians will almost certainly exploit these situations in an attempt to enhance their own political capital.

In Newark, after discussions and negotiations with Newark's business administrator, budget director, and mayor had reached a point where the layoffs had become a certainty, I met with the department's divisional commanders to advise them of the situation and the reductions each would have to make, and reported this information to the business administrator.

To fully comprehend the impact of the Department's fiscal dilemma and its subsequent effect upon operations, it is imperative to first consider the shrinkages through attrition that have occurred between 1974 and 1978. The loss of 15.5 percent of personnel represents the total decrease in manpower between 1974 and 1978, or from 1645 sworn personnel to 1390.....

With the demotions and layoffs, there will be a 16.84 percent reduction in personnel. To accommodate the loss of this magnitude, the Police Department has undertaken an assessment of its responsibilities under law, a functional analysis of current services, and an establishment of priorities. This was a precursor to valuing different options in formulating a new organizational structure....

Each division commander was asked to submit a written response with recommendations, and all, except one, presented reasonable recommendations and the projected negative impact that the reductions would have on operations. The deputy chief in charge of the bureau of investigations, the BOI which was responsible for the enforcement of vice, liquor gambling and narcotics laws in the city, however, reported that his division was understaffed and needed more, not fewer personnel. He further

stated that if they were not provided the police department would be in violation of a grand jury presentment handed down under a prior administration because of the failure of the police department to enforce gambling laws. It had been my observation that this particular division based its effectiveness on the quantity of arrests made, as opposed to the quality of those arrests, as it rarely arrested anyone of significance.

Based on this division's history of gambling enforcement and my observations of its performance, it became clear to me that effective enforcement of gambling laws required a new approach. Consequently, I met with the county prosecutor and recommended the establishment of a joint task force to address the problem. Like a giant octopus with its arms wrapped around the city, the mob could never be destroyed by chopping off its tentacles; it would simply grow new ones. The small time gambling arrests being made were simply a cost of doing business; these individuals would be immediately replaced and business would continue as usual. A joint task force of prosecutors and top detectives would target higher level figures within the mob's operations. A week later, the task force was announced and soon thereafter the investigation division was disbanded and its personnel returned to the patrol division to support operations. Three of the Newark Police Detectives assigned to the task force, Detectives Al Spearman, Eddie Jones, and Benny Abruzzio, played a significant role as undercover operatives, in developing the case that led to the arrest and conviction of Frank Lucas (alias Countryboy), and the dismantling of his empire which controlled the heroin markets in New Jersey and New York. The movie American Gangster is about him and the law enforcement task force that brought him down.

The Newark Foot Patrol Experiment

Plagued with a history of abuse and corruption, the Newark Police Department's participation in the foot patrol experiment helped transform its culture and image by opening it up to outside examination and experimentation in which police theory and practice would be subjected to the rigors of scientific analysis to produce the best evidence available as to how well they work.

This study² showed that although foot patrol does not prevent crime, it appears to make people feel safer:

² Police Foundation. (1981). *The Newark Foot Patrol Experiment*. Washington, DC: The Police Foundation.

Thus, the general impression is gained that while foot patrol may not have a significant effect on crime, it does affect citizens' fear of crime, the protective measures they take to avoid crime, and the perceived safety of their neighborhoods in consistent and systematic ways. In general, when foot patrol is added, citizens fear of typical street crimes seem to go down and generalized feelings of personal safety go up.

Although the presence of a uniformed police officer had no deterrent effect on crime, there were clear indications that it made people feel safer. In the development of their broken windows theory, James Q. Wilson and George Kelling drew upon this apparent anomaly to suggest that the police presence affects more than crime rates. It impacts the public's feelings of safety and security. The absence of police can induce fear that inhibits people from using the streets, which can have an indirect affect on crime. Moreover, neighborhood conditions, such as boarded up buildings, abandoned cars, etc., are signals to the criminal element that the area has a low government priority, and a police presence in the neighborhood is unlikely. It also alerts the public to increased safety risks and crime hazards, which increases levels of fear in the community.

As noted in the Police Foundation's report on the foot patrol experiment, the erosion of the police department's budget did not inhibit the department from fully complying with the terms and conditions of the study.

It is a tribute to the courage and the intelligent understanding of the leadership of the Newark Police Department that despite extreme financial strains and turbulent relationships in the city and in the policy agency during the experimental period, the experiment was in fact fully maintained as planned.... The experiment produced a superb example of operational and research collaboration at its best.

The furor over the layoffs of police officers prompted the Newark Chamber of Commerce to request a review of the police department's operations to ascertain its resource requirements and identify any issues that needed to be addressed. Conducted by Touché Ross and Company, the review, released on July 15, 1984, stated:

The Newark Police Department is organized to serve all of the diverse communities that make up Newark.... The Newark Police

Department is flexible and innovative.... The Newark Police Department has continued to provide full police services during a period when police officer staffing has been reduced from 1,441 to 1,089 in six years—a 25 percent decrease. And the reduction pressure continues. Few private or public sector organizations could react as effectively in tailoring services to meet a continuing workload....

The Newark Fear Reduction Study

The foot patrol study findings on the effects of fear on public safety and crime prompted the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to fund the Police Foundation to conduct a study on fear reduction in Newark, New Jersey, and Houston, Texas.³ Policing owes a debt of gratitude to former NIJ director James K. “Chips” Stewart for his vision and tenacity. Chips believed that America’s police should give increased attention to the general quality of life of the citizens they serve, and he never faltered in his commitment to the project, despite media criticism and political pressure.

NIJ set two important conditions for this study, which ensured that its findings could be implemented without additional Federal support:

1. That the strategies would be homegrown, not imported. The police in Houston and Newark would implement fear reduction strategies, which local officers had a hand in devising and which reflected local conditions, and
2. That the strategies be implemented without Federal subsidies and without any increase in local police department budgets. The strategies were to be tried within the framework of existing police resources because most police departments today operate under stringent fiscal restraints. If the lessons learned in Houston and Newark were to be relevant for other urban police agencies, their price tag had to fit the realities of current police budgets....

³ Pate, T., Wycoff, M., Skogan, W., Sherman, L. (1986). *Reducing Fear of Crime in Houston and Newark: A Summary Report*. Washington, DC: The Police Foundation.

Given the loss of personnel within the police department, it was difficult to find the officers required to staff the department's fear reduction program without jeopardizing important departmental interests in other areas. This constituted a major challenge, which caused the police department to seek creative alternatives to the traditional personnel allocation formulas. A review of the available options suggested that if administrative personnel with staff support functions were required to work one day per month in field operations to replace officers booked off sick or injured, officers that would ordinarily be used for that purpose could be reassigned to a personnel pool that would be sufficient to staff the fear reduction program.

One major obstacle to the successful implementation to this plan was the union contract. Obtaining the support of the union for temporarily setting aside a contract provision would be difficult under the best of circumstances; given the tension and friction ensuing from the municipal fiscal crisis, many believed it would be impossibility. Nevertheless, the study was a high priority for the police department, and we vigorously pursued union support for the study. After considerable time and effort, an informal accord was reached: the unions agreed that if there were no objections from any of their members impacted by the personnel changes, they would take no action. The Newark Police Department proceeded to implement the fear reduction study, and there were no complaints from any member of the union related to the study.

The fear reduction experiment in Houston and Newark was the first empirical study of police efforts to reduce fear of crime. The project demonstrated that if police officers work harder at talking and listening to citizens, they can reduce citizen fear of crime and, in some cases, reduce crime itself. And importantly, police departments can initiate these strategies without increasing their budgets. In fact, both Houston Chief Lee Brown and I were so impressed by the findings that we maintained these programs in our departments after the evaluation was completed.

The foot patrol and fear reduction experiments demonstrated the importance of policing tactics that fostered a closer relationship between the police and the community, and served as a major catalyst for an increased focus by both researchers and police practitioners on the specific elements associated with community-oriented policing. Foot patrol and police-community cooperation were integral parts of Herman Goldstein's approach that helped fuse some of the key elements of community policing into a broader and more innovative framework called problem-oriented policing, with its focus on the police capacity to identify and solve neighborhood problems. With its shared emphasis on police-community partnerships, parts of the philosophy of problem-

oriented policing were readily incorporated into ideas about community policing.

The overarching message from these seminal experiments is that “police practices should be based on scientific evidence about what works best,” the paradigm of evidence-based policing.⁴ Police departments now rely more heavily than ever before on information derived from research to guide operational practices and increase efficiencies as society and the nature of crime itself changes over time. That knowledge about how to address police problems has helped inform the field about strategies and practices that work as well as those that do not.

Today, as in the 1970s and 1980s, America’s police agencies are facing serious fiscal challenges. The effect of cutbacks and the increasing need for police services have forced police executives to seek more cost efficient and productive ways of accomplishing the police mission. A key to realizing this mission is to capitalize on the fruits of reliable research. The products of such research are important not only to suggest ways that police departments can be more productive, but also to educate the public on the possibilities and limitations of police service within existing constraints.

Over the last forty years, the risks, sacrifices and commitment of America’s police leaders have produced fundamental and dramatic improvements in policing. Yet, policing constantly faces new challenges, so there is an endless process of discovery and testing, trying new ideas in changing circumstances, and testing them by the most rigorous and objective standards in real-world experiments. Realizing the promise of the evidence-based paradigm in policing will require continued commitment on the part of researchers, practitioners, and funding agencies, not only in building the knowledge base but, as Cynthia Lum suggests, in translating that knowledge into practice.⁵

⁴ Sherman, L. (1998). *Evidence-Based Policing, Ideas in American Policing 2*. Washington, DC: Police Foundation.

⁵ Lum, C. (2009). *Translating Police Research into Practice, Ideas in American Policing 11*, Washington, DC: Police Foundation.