

The Receptivity of Officers to Empirical Research and Evidence-Based Policing: An Examination of Survey Data from Three Agencies

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Background: One important step in moving forward with evidence-based policing is to better understand the views of practitioners and frontline officers and their receptivity to empirical research. Moreover, any effort to make scientific evidence a more important part of police policy and practice requires extensive cooperation and investment from officers in the field. This article addresses questions such as whether police officers are familiar with evidence-based policing, if they are familiar with what the research evidence suggests regarding effective programs for addressing crime and disorder, and if they are willing to incorporate research findings and evaluation into their day-to-day work.

Methods: This study seeks to examine individual officer receptivity to empirical research to both provide an initial assessment of officer beliefs and examine potential variation across agencies. Toward this goal, Lum and Telep developed a receptivity survey¹ with five sections to gauge officer receptivity. The survey was administered to three agencies: Richmond, VA (RPD, n=343), Roanoke County, VA (RCPD, n=94) and Sacramento, CA (SPD, n=523).

Results: The results suggest both similarities and differences across agencies in terms of receptivity. About one quarter of officers (25.1%) in the SPD had heard of the term ‘evidence-based policing’. In the RPD, a slightly higher percentage of employees responded that they had heard of the term (27.8%), and in the RCPD 48.4% of respondents were familiar with the term. Respondents across agencies most commonly did not read any professional or academic journals to learn about the effectiveness of policing strategies. Officers were asked to assess the crime-control effectiveness of policing strategies that have been evaluated as a way to examine their exposure, knowledge, and receptivity to empirical research. Officers in the SPD seem rather skeptical of hot spots policing and much more confident in traditional beat patrol; only 3.5% of officers responded that hot spots policing was very effective and 29.8% responded that the tactic is ineffective. In the RPD, 66.8% of respondents thought hot spots policing was very effective or effective for reducing crime and just 4.3% thought hot spots policing was an ineffective tactic. In the RCPD, a sizable 81.0% of respondents said hot spots policing was very effective or effective. In the SPD, the percentage of officers saying information from research was very useful (21.5%) was substantially higher than in RPD and RCPD, where just 7.7% and 6.1% of respondents, respectively, found research to be very useful. Regarding the balance between scientific knowledge and personal experience in day-to-day decision-making, officers in all three agencies overwhelmingly believed experience should play a greater role than research. Despite this, officers also tended to recognize the necessity of collaboration with researchers to better address crime. More than 70% of officers in all three agencies agreed or strongly agreed that such collaboration is necessary for a police agency to improve its ability to reduce crime (73.7% in the SPD, 79.7% in the RPD, and 89.0% in the RCPD). Finally, questions were posed gauging officer willingness to seek help from a researcher to evaluate a tactic and their willingness to ask someone within the organization for assistance in devising an evaluation method. Survey results show that respondents in all three agencies generally showed at least some level of willingness to evaluate tactics, although they typically were more willing to use less rigorous methodologies and showed greater reluctance to use randomized trials. Officers were also more likely to be willing to seek help from within their department than to ask for outside assistance.

Conclusions and policy implications: These findings on officer-level receptivity to empirical research and the variation and similarities found across diverse agencies add to the growing knowledge base about how research becomes institutionalized into everyday policing practices. This suggests that researchers not only should be careful in how they present and advocate for evidence-based policing but also must think more about effective dissemination channels for research. One effective approach may be to use internal departmental distribution channels to disseminate information about evidence-based policing. Another key finding is that much work continues to be needed to integrate and make central the role of crime analysis in policing.

¹ <http://cebcp.org/evidence-based-policing/the-matrix/matrix-demonstration-project/receptivity-to-research/>