

Receptivity to Research in Policing

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Overview

Evidence-based policing—using research and scientific processes to inform police decisions— is a complex approach to policing that involves various challenges. One primary difficulty is how research can be translated into digestible and familiar forms for practitioners. A central part of successful translation is the receptivity of decision makers to research as well as how research is presented and packaged to increase receptivity. This article reviews research discussing evidence-based policing and the research-practice gap, presents the results of a receptivity survey, and discusses how agencies might improve receptivity to research in practice.

The Lum-Telep Receptivity Survey

This study shows preliminary findings from the Lum and Telep receptivity survey, which is part of the Matrix Demonstration Project (MDP).¹ The MDP is a multi-agency collaboration established to better understand how to implement research findings into daily policing practices (academy and field training, management meetings, deployment, etc.), developing tools and examples towards this goal. This survey gauges officer attitudes, understanding, and use of research, and was designed so that agencies could not only benchmark where they currently stand with regard to receptivity to research findings, but also to compare responses before and after implementing strategies to improve evidence-based policing. This article reports on the results of a pilot study of the survey in Sacramento, California, where 523 officers answered the survey during in-service training.

Results

Only a quarter of surveyed officers had heard of the term ‘evidence-based policing’ (24.9%). Regarding what journals or magazines officers had read in the past 6 months (academic and professional), three-quarters had not read any of the seven well-known publications listed. Officers were much more likely to have read formal or written information provided by their own agency versus information from federal, state, nonprofit, or research organizations. Survey results also revealed that traditional beliefs about the effectiveness of random preventive patrol and rapid response to 911 calls persist. Many felt traditional approaches were effective, and *did not* feel evidence-based strategies to be effective. Officers also displayed lukewarm feelings about the usefulness of products generated by crime analysts and researchers. The deliverers of the research—crime analysts and researchers inside or external to an agency—are still viewed cautiously. More than four fifths (83.4%) of respondents felt their own experience, rather than “expert opinion” was key to determining the most effective strategies to use, although nearly all officers (94.1%) were willing to try new tactics and ideas, and close to two thirds (64.6%) felt that their department uses a mix of innovative and more traditional tactics.

Improving research receptivity in law enforcement agencies

The findings suggest that police agencies and their research partners still have some ways to go to institutionalize findings from research about effective policing into daily practices. Police researchers and agency personnel need to work together to make research more digestible for law enforcement officers. This includes finding ways to translate research into readily digestible forms (for example, using the Evidence-Based Policing Matrix²), or developing familiar and internal mechanisms of information dissemination to present research findings. Academy and in-service training may incorporate modules that support evidence-based approaches such as place-based, problem-oriented, or third party policing. Patrol and investigative deployment models may need to be recalibrated to reflect what is known about geographic patterns of crime as well as situations, opportunities, and activities that contribute to crime (and which can be prevented). Rewards and promotions also have to reflect this new knowledge. Finally, command-level meetings could be reoriented toward a more dynamic problem-solving approach, as well as an opportunity for research learning. A number of specific examples are provided in this article.

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

² <http://cebcp.org/evidence-based-policing/the-matrix/>