



Being Smart on Crime With Evidence-based Policing

by Chief Jim Bueermann (Ret.)

A former police chief reflects on how law enforcement agencies can do a better job of using science to reduce crime.

Cities face a growing number of fiscal challenges, among them balancing the need to combat crime with the cost of policing. Decreases in funding for public safety mean that police departments cannot support an ever-increasing number of law enforcement officers — or, in many cases, even the status quo. Therefore, police officials must shift their attention to the science of controlling crime and disorder. That model is called evidence-based policing, and it represents the field’s “most powerful force for change,”¹ according to criminologist Lawrence Sherman.

In his seminal work on the topic, Sherman defines evidence-based policing as “the use of the best available research on the outcomes of police work to implement guidelines and evaluate agencies, units and officers.”² Evaluation of ongoing police operations is important because it

can link research-based strategies to improved public safety outcomes, allowing police agencies to move beyond a reactive, response-driven approach and get smarter about crime control.³

Evidence-based policing leverages the country’s investment in police and criminal justice research to help develop, implement and evaluate proactive crime-fighting strategies. It is an approach to controlling crime and disorder that promises to be more effective and less expensive than the traditional response-driven models, which cities can no longer afford. With fewer resources available, it simply does not make sense for the police to pursue crime control strategies that science has proven ineffective. As U.S. Associate Attorney General Thomas Perrelli states, “We simply can’t be spending money on what doesn’t work.”⁴



Facing Economic Reality

The cost of policing today has become problematic for cities all across America. Bernard Melekian, Director of the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (the COPS Office), remarked at the 2011 COPS Conference that cities have furloughed and laid off more law enforcement officers, or left more vacancies unfilled, than contemporary police leaders have ever witnessed. At the same time, he said, law enforcement officer salary and benefit reductions are becoming the norm.⁵

Historically, law enforcement officer layoffs and severe police budget reductions have been off-limits for most local politicians. But the recession's dramatic impact on cities, coupled with escalating police personnel costs, has engendered a more pragmatic political view of policing's affordability.

An October 2011 report released by the COPS Office demonstrated the tremendous changes local law enforcement agencies have undergone as a result of strained budgets in the current economy.⁶ The COPS Office found that an estimated 10,000-12,000 law enforcement officers and sheriff's deputies were laid off in 2011; that approximately 30,000 law enforcement jobs were unfilled; and that 53 percent of counties had fewer staff than they had in October 2010. Agencies reported changes in the delivery of law enforcement services, including not responding to motor vehicle thefts, burglar alarms and motor vehicle accidents that do not result in injuries; decreasing investigations of a variety of crimes, including property and white collar crimes; and reducing investments in technology, communications and officer training.

Even officials who have been highly supportive of the police are struggling to maintain their funding level when doing so comes at the expense of other necessary and popular public services. According to Melekian, for many cities, the question of affordability has become the driving force behind what many are referring to as the "new normal" in policing. Melekian believes that reduced public safety budgets will fundamentally change American policing over the next five to 10 years.⁷

Evidence-based policing offers a practical solution to the need to balance public safety, community service needs, available funds and taxpayer expectations. It blends the science of controlling crime and disorder with the principles of community policing and problem solving. It helps communities focus on meaningful, achievable public safety outcomes without breaking their budgets. Evidence-based policing can be implemented without adding law enforcement officers, disrupting police organizations or offending community members. It can also help police departments strengthen their legitimacy with the diverse communities they serve.

The Value of Science in Policing

The science of what really works to control crime can help local officials better craft and implement effective strategies to make their communities safer. But if helping police departments get smarter is such a good idea, why hasn't a science-driven approach to crime control already become commonplace in American policing?

Unlike medicine and food, no governmental standards exist for the "production" of policing services or

public safety. As a result, policing practices are implemented based on organizational culture and political and community expectations rather than scientific findings.⁸ Obviously, legal remedies are available when the police threaten the public's civil rights, but there are no statutes or regulations mandating the use of science to drive crime control strategies. Despite the efforts of the U.S. Department of Justice, professional organizations and a variety of academics, there still is no widespread understanding and agreement about how policing strategies should be crafted and implemented.⁹ Evidence-based policing offers a framework for developing a coherent approach through the application of sound scientific concepts and standards.

One factor that contributes to the lack of agreement about how to design policing strategies is the disconnect between the evidence researchers uncover and the approaches taken by many police departments.¹⁰ This disconnect has varied causes, and it leads many practitioners and policymakers to view science as "a luxury that can be useful but can also be done without."¹¹ Conducting social science research is time-consuming, which runs counter to community demands for a quick response and to political realities facing police chiefs. And sometimes, even after months or years of study, researchers simply do not know why certain crime phenomena occur and their call for further inquiry is common.

However, incomplete answers about crime should not keep police departments from using the best available science to inform their strategies. Mayors and police chiefs should embrace the potential of science and add it to the toolbox they use to solve crime problems.

If the onus for adopting evidence-based approaches to controlling crime is on the police, the responsibility for disseminating evidence-based police practices rests with the research community. Researchers can fulfill this responsibility by producing timely, readable reports of their work. Most researchers author lengthy technical reports full of scientific jargon, more suited for academics than practitioners and policymakers. If they want practitioners to use their findings, they must make their research easier to understand. John Laub, Director of the National Institute of Justice, touched on this point in a presentation to the Office of Justice Programs when he said, "If we want to prevent, reduce and manage crime, scientific discoveries must be translated into policy and practice."¹² If every crime control research effort resulted in a short, readable and accessible summary that was effectively marketed, perhaps local leaders would start to demand that police pursue evidence-based approaches. Each summary could outline the issue studied, the method used in the study, the study's findings, and their application to policing and crime control.

Inherent in connecting science to the development and evaluation of crime control strategies is the understanding that local knowledge and experience counts and must be blended with scientific evidence to create operationally — and politically — realistic strategies. Police and community members' knowledge of local conditions, expectations and social dynamics that contribute to crime and disorder are important and should not be ignored.

Evidence-based policing does not replace community-specific knowledge, and it does not remove a police department's authority or responsibility for crime control

decisions. It is intended to inform decision-makers about the best scientific evidence regarding strategies to realize desired outcomes. This evidence helps them create or refine their approaches and provides structure for evaluating their efforts. It cannot and is not intended to replace the wisdom and judgment of policing officials and those to whom they report.

Putting Evidence-based Policing Into Action

Police chiefs do not have to wait until all questions related to a particular crime topic are answered. Tremendous resources exist today that can help them craft smart policing strategies. Using these resources, they can point to the evidence about what works to help explain to communities why, for example, they are shifting resources and directing officers to focus on problem places,¹³ increasing the number of civilian crime scene technicians,¹⁴ using surveillance cameras,¹⁵ employing foot patrols,¹⁶ or confronting low-level offenders rather than arresting them.¹⁷

Police departments can increase their institutional knowledge about the science of crime control by forming partnerships with local universities or colleges to use the services of professors, graduate students or interns. They can also hire their own in-house criminologists. For about the same cost as a patrol officer, the Redlands (Calif.) Police Department hired a Ph.D.-level criminologist to translate existing research findings, help craft new evidence-based strategies and evaluate existing ones. Departments wanting to replicate this effort but lacking the financial resources to do it on their own can form partnerships with other police departments and academic institutions to minimize the

costs and maximize the benefits of having a criminologist "embedded" within their organization.

The police departments in Boston, Mass., High Point, N.C., Redlands, Calif., Philadelphia, Pa., and Sacramento, Calif., and the FBI National Academy are promising examples of organizations adopting some aspect of science-based approaches to controlling crime and evaluating strategies.¹⁸

A shift of the "ownership" of the science of crime control from academic

Resources for Practitioners

- Center for Problem-Oriented Policing: <http://www.popcenter.org>
- Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy: <http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org>
- CrimeSolutions.gov: <http://www.crimesolutions.gov>
- Fight Crime: Invest in Kids: <http://www.fightcrime.org>
- George Mason University's Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy: <http://gunston.gmu.edu/cebcp>
 - Evidence-Based Policing Matrix: <http://gemini.gmu.edu/cebcp/matrix.html>
- International Association of Chiefs of Police: <http://www.theiacp.org>
- National Criminal Justice Reference Service: <http://www.ncjrs.gov>
- National Institute of Justice: <http://www.nij.gov>
- Office of Community Oriented Policing Services: <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov>
- Police Executive Research Forum: <http://www.policeforum.org>
- Police Foundation: <http://www.policefoundation.org>

institutions to police agencies may be needed to implement evidence-based policing.¹⁹ To facilitate this shift, those who hire and fire police chiefs — mayors and city managers — can change the reward systems for police chiefs to encourage them to pursue evidence-based practices. As a consequence, police departments will, as Sherman advocates, become more conversant with the science of crime control and increasingly use the “best evidence to shape the best practice.”²⁰

By encouraging police departments to adopt a community-oriented, problem-solving philosophy and to use the best available evidence to drive crime control strategies, policymakers and taxpayers alike can help law enforcement officers make our cities safer. They can also help law enforcement officers become more responsive to all the communities they serve, increase their legitimacy with these communities, and, in the process, become safer themselves.

Implementing evidence-based policing requires reframing how policymakers, practitioners, researchers and citizens-at-large think about public safety outcomes and the process of crafting and evaluating strategies intended to make our communities safer. We have proven we know how to be tough on crime. Now it's time to prove we can be smart about crime, too.

About the author: Chief Jim Bueermann (Ret.) served with the Redlands (Calif.) Police Department for 33 years, the last 13 as the chief of police. Following his retirement in June 2011, he joined NIJ as an Executive Fellow, and he is currently a Senior Fellow at George Mason University's Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy.

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Notes

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