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National Police Research Platform

**Receptivity to Police Innovation:
A Tale of Two Cities**

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Purpose

Innovation is widely thought to be the key to success in police departments, yet police are often conceived as traditional and resistant to the changes that innovation requires. Recent decades have witnessed much interest among police leaders and policy makers in various innovations, ranging from new applications of information technology (intelligence-led policing) to administrative changes (affirmative action) to strategic changes (Compstat and community policing). Despite a number of studies of the impact of such recent innovations, there have been very few investigations of the receptivity of police to innovation. Who is most and least receptive to innovation? What kind of environment for innovation do police departments provide? Which innovations are most and least welcome? In sum, what is the *environment* for innovation in American municipal police organizations?

This Platform Project report describes a preliminary effort to test some popular views about the orientation of the police to innovation. It compares the responses of police officers in two large municipal police agencies, considering how the police feel about their organization's environment to support innovation and about their department's orientation to specific innovations. Below are some propositions that were evaluated by comparing these two police agencies.

PROPOSITIONS ABOUT POLICE INNOVATION

➢ **Police resistance to innovation is cultural – occupation-wide.**

➢ **The higher the rank, the more receptivity there is to innovation.**

➢ **Older officers are more resistant to innovation than younger officers.**

➢ **Officers with more education are more receptive to innovation than those with less.**

➢ **Police are equally resistant or supportive of innovation, regardless of the nature of the innovation.**

➢ **Organizations with more effective internal communications will have officers more receptive to the department's innovation priorities.**

Methods

The Platform Project currently has underway surveys on innovation in a number of departments. Two large departments, called A and B, have completed the survey process and provide the sample of officers for this report. Table 1 provides some basic information about the departments and the survey sample.

This survey asked officers of all ranks to evaluate their organization's environment for fostering innovation. Three types of evaluations were solicited: (a) the general environment for innovation and change, (b) the need to adopt administrative innovations, and (c) the department's approach to adopting specific innovations that have achieved or are achieving visibility. The survey was delivered online. Both departments have received considerable attention for various efforts to implement a wide range of policing innovations.

Table 1. Department and sample characteristics

	Department A	Department B
Number sworn	Thousands	Thousands
Survey sample size	322	238
% sample sergeant and above	35-40	35-40
% sample minority officers	35-40	50-60
% sample male	80-85	80-85
Average sample age	40-45	40-45
Sample median education	College grad	College grad

Key Findings

General Environment for Innovation and Change

Charts 1 through 4 show that the results were strikingly consistent across all four aspects of the general organizational environment for innovation and change. Respondents in Department A were much less inclined to be positive about their organization's receptivity to innovation than were those in Department B. Uniformly, less than one fourth of Department A's officers were positive about management's role in fostering change, getting employees involved in change, supportive consequences for attempting innovation, and using scientific evidence to drive change. For most indicators, the level of positive responses was two to three times greater in Department B. Notably, however, even in Department B, two-thirds of the officers felt that negative consequences were likely when attempts at creativity and innovation did not turn out well.

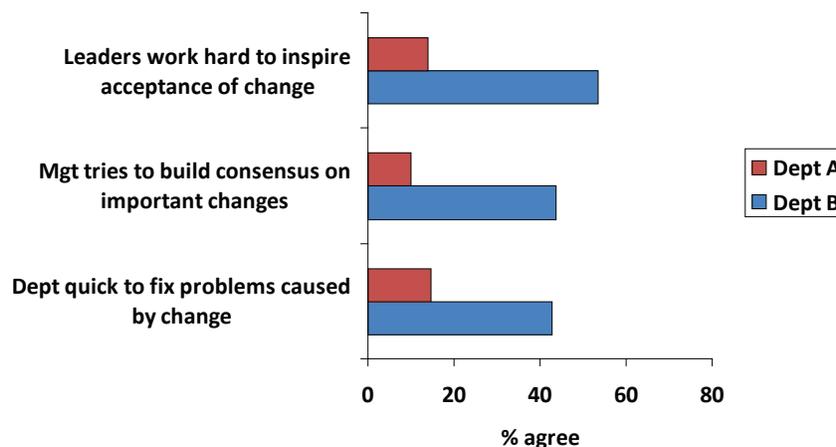**Chart 1. Management's role in fostering change**

Chart 2. Employee involvement in change

Legend: ■ Dept A ■ Dept B

- Employees are involved in planning & implementing change
- Reason for change communicated to employees
- Employees are informed of developments affecting them

X-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80 — % agree
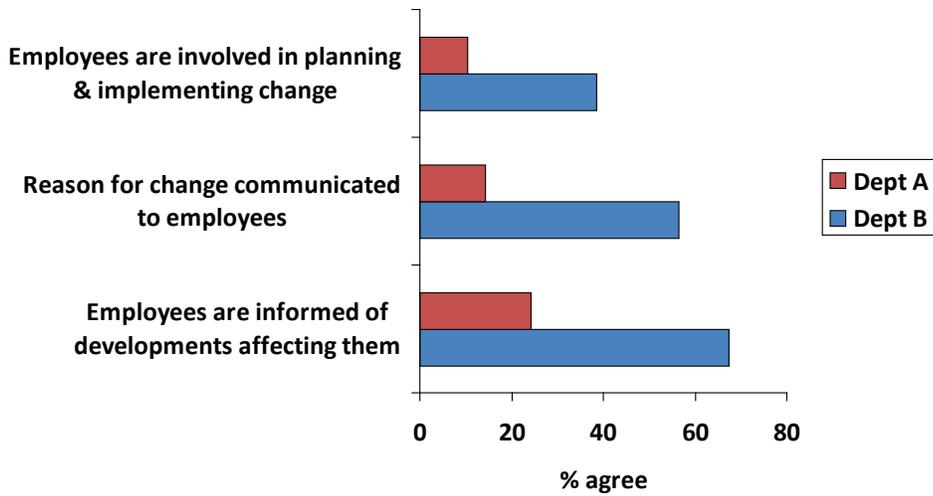
Chart 3. Consequences of innovation and creativity

Legend: ■ Dept A ■ Dept B

- Creativity & innovation rewarded in this department
- Negative consequences likely from creativity and innovation if it doesn't turn out well

X-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80 — % agree
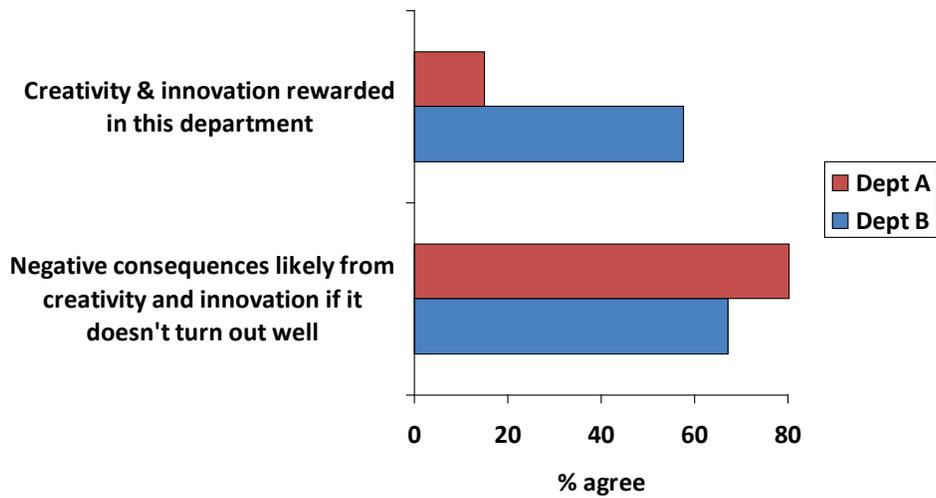
Chart 4. Relevance of science for organizational change

Legend: ■ Dept A ■ Dept B

- Change is driven by scientific evidence of what works

X-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80 — % agree
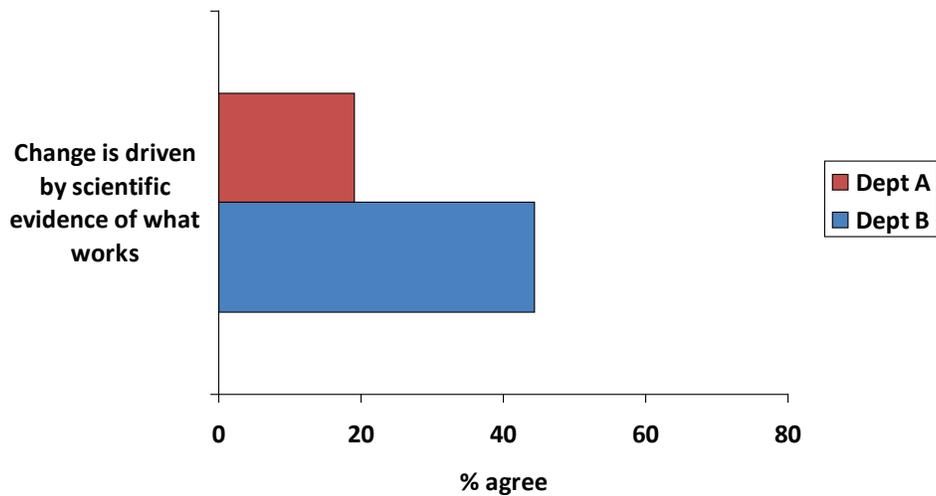
The Need for New Administrative Approaches

Because we anticipated a high degree of concern about administrative issues, we asked officers whether the department needs to try a new approach in various aspects of its administrative practices, as shown in Chart 5. Large majorities of Department A's officers felt that new approaches were needed for discipline, performance appraisal and promotion, recruitment, and supervision. Department B showed markedly lower levels of a desire for change, although the level was still substantial, achieving a majority of respondents for discipline and performance appraisal/promotion.

Chart 5. Need for new administrative approaches


% saying department "needs new approach"
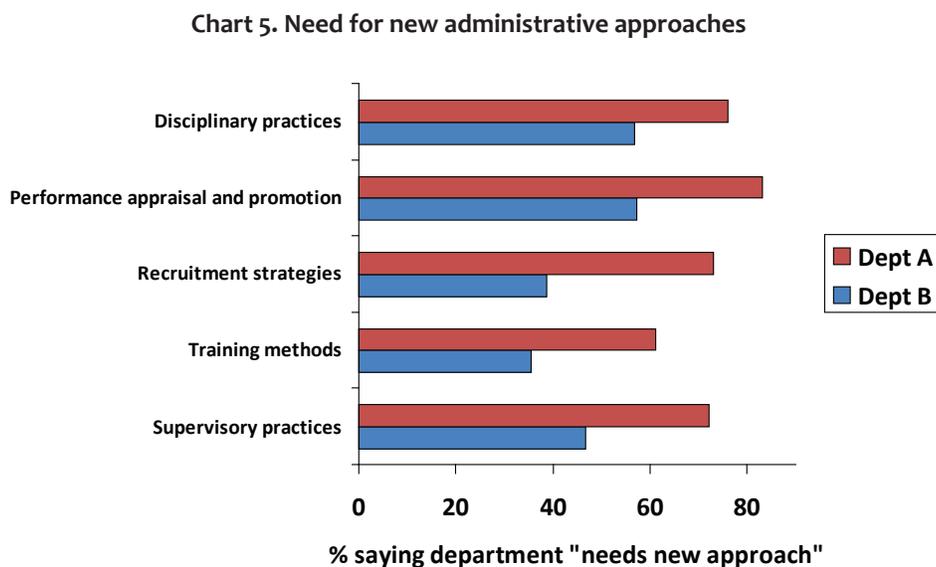
Assessment of Department's Response to Specific Innovations

Officers were asked to evaluate the department's response to a dozen specific approaches to policing that have surfaced as innovations in recent years (Chart 6). They were asked to indicate whether their department was "too willing" to adopt each, "not willing enough," or had "just the right view." Satisfaction with the department's approach (as indicated by "just the right view") varied considerably across innovations. For example, in both agencies the most positive views were expressed for the department's approach to respectful policing,"[1] hot spots policing, and crime analysis units, while affirmative action, early warning systems, and Compstat tended toward the lower end of popularity in the two agencies. These less popular innovations focus on systems for directing, controlling, and correcting discretion and practice.

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[1]   Defined in the survey as "encouraging officers to demonstrate fairness in the way they handle the public's problems and to show respect and concern for citizens." Researchers often refer to this as "procedural justice."


Chart 6. "Just the right view" toward specific innovations
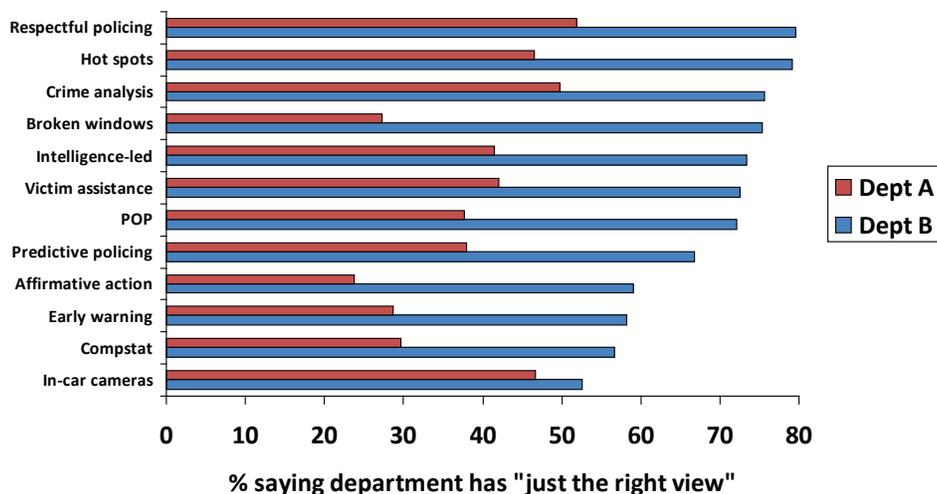
The two agencies were most unalike in officers' perspectives on broken windows policing. It was among the least popular of innovations in Department A and among the most popular in Department B. In general, striking differences surfaced between agencies in the levels of approval expressed for almost all innovations. Department B showed far greater support than Department A except for in-car cameras, where the levels were similar. And finally, there was substantial variation across innovations within each department, ranging from 24 to 52 percent approval in Department A and 53 to 80 percent in Department B.

In some cases, a small net difference between officers who feel that their department is too willing and those who feel that it is not willing enough is the product of a fairly high level of disagreement. The level of disagreement among officers in Department B tended to be small, but Department A reflected a different pattern in the case of Compstat, predictive policing, and early warning systems, where there was considerable variation in perspectives, as Chart 7 shows. Clearly, Department A's leadership faces a significant challenge, given the substantial portions of officers who have opposite viewpoints on how the department is approaching these three innovations.

Chart 7. Most controversial innovations in Department A
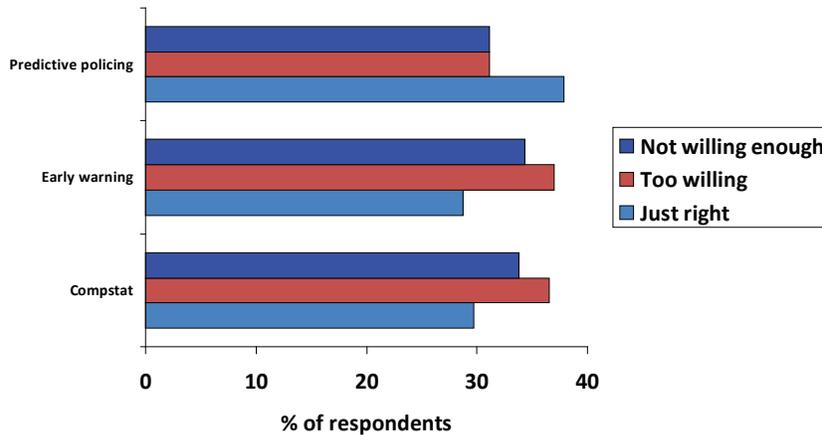
Correlates of Receptivity to and Need for Innovation

What might influence officers' views about their organization's receptivity to and need for innovation? To do this analysis we created two receptivity scales. One was composed of the nine survey items focused on officers' views of the general environment for innovation and change. The other was composed of the five items on officers' perception of the need for new administrative approaches. Higher scale values indicate more positive assessments of the department's organizational support for innovation in the first case, and a greater perceived need for new administrative approaches in the second. For each scale we statistically estimated the relative strength of influence attributable to the identity of the officer's organization (A or B), the officer's age, race, sex, rank, education level, and perceived effectiveness of the department's system of internal communication.[2]

By far the two most powerful predictors of a positive organizational environment for innovation were the department's identity and the effectiveness of the organization's internal communications system and practices. These two factors showed three-to-four times the predictive power of the next most powerful factor, the officer's age (the older an officer, the less positive the view of the organization environment for innovation). And of all the relationships measured, only these three (department identity, communications effectiveness, and age) show statistically

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[2] The effectiveness of the department's internal communications was measured by adding together the scores of three separate survey items asking respondents to indicate how frequently (a) information sent up the chain of command gets there quickly and accurately, (b) work unit members are called together to solve problems, and (c) employees are asked to contribute to problem-solving via electronic communications.

significant effects. Features of the organization, especially its capacity to communicate internally, are the strongest correlates of what officers perceive as an environment receptive to innovation.

The analysis that focused on the perceived need for change in administrative practices showed a similar pattern, except that the officer's age was replaced by the officer being Latino as a statistically significant factor. Latino officers perceive a greater need for administrative change when compared to white officers. Being an officer in Department B and perceiving the internal communications system as more effective are both associated with *lower* levels of perceived need for change.

Summary and Implications

Findings from this comparison of two large American police departments are summarized below.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS ABOUT RECEPTIVITY TO POLICE INNOVATION

➤ **Police resistance to innovation does not appear to be occupation-wide, but it varies greatly between organizations.**

➤ **Rank appears to bear no significant relationship to perceptions of the organizational environment for innovation.**

➤ **Older officers are less positive about certain aspects of the organizational environment for innovation than are younger officers, but that is the case only sometimes.**

➤ **Officers with more education are no more positive about the department's approach to innovation than those with less education.**

➤ **It is hazardous to generalize about police innovation. The nature of the innovation matters in officers' assessments of their department's approach, and the effects are especially strong comparing one department to another.**

➤ **Organizations with more effective internal communications will have more officers receptive to the department's innovation priorities.**

A comparison of only two police agencies does not constitute a basis for generalizing to departments across the nation, but it does undermine the confidence we can have in several ideas that have become popular about the relationship of American police organizations with innovation.

The most important implication of this research is that those who want to implement innovation must first take care to consider carefully the organizational environment into which it

is to be introduced. Officers in our two departments, both similar in size and make up, and both regarded as innovative, showed strikingly different reactions to their departments' environment for innovation and the substance of those innovations themselves. We highlight two features here. First, a large difference was found in whether creativity and innovation are rewarded, suggesting that fostering more positive consequences for innovation may be effective in promoting innovation. Receptivity to *management's* preferences for innovation may well require nurturing a culture of innovation among all employees.[3] Particularly challenging in both of these departments may be overcoming the tendency of even the most progressive organizations to act as "punitive bureaucracies," as evidenced by the large proportion of officers in both departments who anticipated that they would experience negative consequences for creativity and innovation that did not turn out well. Clearly, the art in leadership to overcome this fear is finding a way to communicate clearly how innovation and creativity by individuals will be integrated with performance accountability. Second, our analysis suggests that one key organizational factor to consider is whether the department has a strong system of internal communications – one that moves information quickly and accurately, involves employees in efforts to figure out solutions to problems, and that solicits input efficiently (electronically). Of course, there may be other relevant organizational features that we did not consider in this analysis.

Our analysis also suggests that it is difficult to generalize about which sort of officer is most and least likely to resist a department's effort to innovate. For example, many have thought that more education opens minds up to the benefits of innovation, but we did not find such a relationship evident in these departments. Education is not indoctrination. Consequently, police leaders would do well to dig deeper to learn what features of innovations are regarded as strengths and weaknesses, and whether there are patterns in these views that can be useful to know. One pattern that did emerge in the data, and that was consistent between the two departments, was that higher levels of dissatisfaction are more likely when the innovation focuses on directing, controlling, or correcting discretion and practice. Such innovations may require extra leadership effort to justify in the eyes of many officers. What

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3   David Alan Sklansky, *Democracy and the Police*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press (2008): ch. 8.

may come as a surprise to many is the relatively high level of accommodation officers seem to have made, especially in one of the departments, to some innovations that are widely viewed by researchers and reformers as particularly challenging to implement: respectful policing (procedural justice), hot spots policing, and crime analysis units.[4] Such successes are clearly worthy of further in-depth investigation and perhaps emulation.

These results are only suggestive, and they point to the need for a great deal of additional research on the environment for innovation in police organizations. Do medium-sized and small departments show similar patterns? What are the specific features of innovation that are the most and least attractive, and how does this vary by type of officer and organization? We hope to explore these and other questions in future Platform research.

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4   See for example, Tom R. Tyler, "Enhancing Police Legitimacy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social* Science 593:84-99 (2004); Anthony Braga and David Weisburd, *Policing Problem Places: Crime Hot Spots and Effective Prevention*. New York: Oxford University Press (2010); James J. Willis, Stephen D. Mastrofski, and David Weisburd, "Making Sense of Compstat: A Theory-Based Analysis of Organizational Change in Three Police Departments." *Law and Society Review* 41:147-88.