Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

http://create.canterbury.ac.uk

Evidence-Based Policing: Using evidence and research to improve policing practice…?

Talk given to the Conway Hall Ethical Society on 14th January 2018 by Richard Honess

Before I can begin speaking on how we can improve the police and their practices one must first look at the state of policing as it exists today. It must first be recognised that the Police Service of England and Wales, like all other branches of the public sector, have been severely affect by the current regime of austerity that hit in 2010. Budgets have had to be slashed by billions of pounds, we have seen police stations closed across the country with sever reductions in front counter provision. Police officer (and staff) numbers have fallen with from a peak of around 145,000 officers in 2009 to around 125,000 in 2017 (with a commensurate fall in overall staff numbers)[i]. However combined this this, in part due to the cuts in other areas of the public sector such as social services the police have also seen a rise in demand. In fact, contrary to popular belief in a 2015 study of demand for police services the College of Policing found that only 17% of a police officer's time was directly about dealing with crime[ii].

Set this amongst a background of high profile cases of police failures and negative publicity. Such examples such as the Hillsborough Disaster, the Steven Lawrence Murder, the Jean Charles De Menezes killing, Plebgate and close relationships with certain reporters still haunt the police to this day. Place on top of this negative publicity surrounding attempts to restore community confidence, or encourage citizen involvement such as the recent attempts by the police to highlight domestic violence by painting their nails and posting on social media, or attempts by police officers to take their refreshment breaks in coffee shops and cafes in their local communities. The police have an uphill fight to protect the communities they serve in the best spirit of the Peelian Principles and policing by consent.

As a result the police need to look at doing things better, more effectively and more efficiently. Part of this is the drive to professionalise the police. Many people, including the police themselves, quite rightly see the police as delivering a professional service on a day-to-day basis but it has been considered that the police need to go further than this. Former Chief Constable Peter Neyroud in his 2011 report on police leadership and training stated that the police needed to move away from one that acts professionally to one that is a profession in and of itself[iii]. Comparing policing to other professions such as medicine, nursing or teaching he recommended the formation of a professional body and to include the gathering and dissemination of an evidence-base, or "what works" to inform practitioners.

This leads us to the idea of Evidence-Based Policing (EBP). A term coined in a 1998 paper by Professor Lawrence Sherman in Ideas in American Policing. In it he stated that:

> "Evidence-based policing is the use of the **best available** research on the outcomes of police work to implement guidelines and evaluate agencies, units, and officers. Put more simply, evidence-based policing uses research to guide practice and evaluate practitioners. It uses the best evidence to shape the best practice. It is a systematic effort to parse out and codify unsystematic "experience" as the basis for police work, refining it by ongoing systematic testing of hypotheses."[iv]

The College of Policing, which resulted from Neyroud's review, as the professional body for policing has a responsibility to promote EBP stating that it was about using the best available research techniques to understand what works and what does not work in policing. The Society of Evidence-

Based Policing, an organisation set-up and run by police officers, police staff and research professionals who wish to transform policing through understanding what works, stated that this was the opposite of tactics "doomed to succeed", of police officers claiming reductions in crime was due to their work but then blaming everything else when crime goes up. Instead, they state that EBP is about getting to grip with the real impact of policing, what is and what causes the good and the bad, then changing it for the better[v].

Until recently (and in many case still to this day) policing was delivered in a 'one size fits all' model which involved what is known as the 3 Rs – Random patrol, Rapid response and Reactive investigation. However there is evidence to suggest a change is necessary. EBP as a model emphasised the value of statistical analysis and empirical research and calls for the robust testing of policing interventions. However it does not, as some critics suggest, dismiss the traditional drivers of police decision making such as previous professional experience and craft, but seeks to raise awareness of scientific testing to help inform that experience and craft.

In 2013 Sherman proposed the "Triple-T" Model of EBP. This model consists of "Targeting" scarce policing resources on predictable concentrations of harm from crime and disorder; "Testing" police methods to help chose what tactics work best to reduce harm in those targeted areas; and "Tracking" the daily delivery and effects of those practices through internally generated evidence including public perceptions of police legitimacy[vi].

But what do we mean as "best available" evidence? Not all evidence is created equally. Some study methods are stronger than others. If one examines different kinds of study evidence it is possible to rank them in a hierarchy with the best available types of study at the top and the least reliable at the bottom. Figure 1 shows a recent version of this hierarchy produced by criminologist Jerry Ratcliffe.
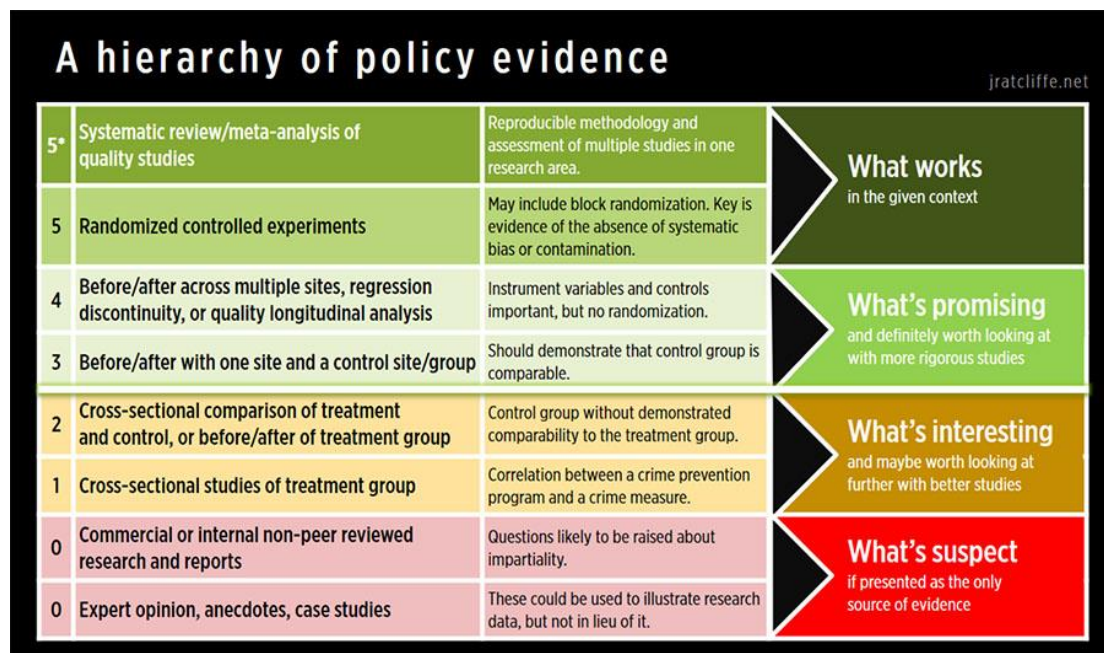

Figure 1 – A hierarchy of policy evidence[vii].

Of course one has to take into account the research questions you are trying to answer with the context of real world application before selecting a method. As a result it is not always possible to conduct randomised controlled experiments.

Not only that, these hierarchies of evidence are mainly focussed on impact questions and not on a range of others which also need answering. Such question could involve investigating why an intervention does or doesn't work, whether it is an intervention that the local communities want or even need. It does not answer questions of process, i.e. what is required to make it work, or of cost/benefit analysis. Moreover it does not ask questions about what the communities think, or what their experiences of crime and policing interventions are, i.e. the Social part of social science.

However, since the application of EBP we have learned much. We know that the 3 Rs have not been effective in reducing crime[viii] but we know that the targeting of crime hotspots does[ix]. We even have an idea on how much time these hotspots require an active police presence (15 minutes every 2 hours[x]). We know that when officers conduct themselves in a just and fair manner public perceptions of the police improve along with public co-operation with the police[xi]. And we also know that mandatory arrest for domestic violence has mixed results[xii].

It is important to understand this because given the aforementioned budgetary restraints we need to minimise the effects of these restraints on service provision, minimise victimisation and minimise societal harm caused by crime and anti-social behaviour. Moreover we also need to minimise the systematic failures that can be caused by "opinion", "personal experience" and untested interventions, such as the "Scared Straight Initiative" which sent vulnerable children to visit prisons in an attempt to prevent offending, yet when properly tested show it actually made them more likely to offend[xiii].

Of course with all such things there are its critics and there are barriers to overcome. Within police culture there is a tendency to distrust academia, an overreliance on personal experience and a culture which still runs initiatives which are doomed to succeed (an initiative which must succeed, or at least be seen and reported to succeed at all costs)[xiv]. As a social science, all research tends to be messy because it involves human interaction[xv], even the best trials are highly contextual and may not be transferrable to other locations. And finally there is the issue with working with evidence within the public policy arena. Politicians and policy makers are often more concerned with ideology over evidence and seek out policy-based evidence rather than evidence-based policy.

However, the future looks promising. New policing recruits and promoted supervisors will be trained and educated in EBP as part of the National Policing Curriculum and promotion processes. EBP will form part of every police officers' continual professional development. In other words, seeking out and asking for evidence will be as normal to a police officer as being able to recite Section 1 of the Theft Act 1968, of to issue the caution after making an arrest. Whilst no panacea, EBP will be the future model the police will be using to keep us all safe in our communities. Let us hope it is "What Works"!

[i] **Home Office.** *Police Workforce, England and Wales, 31 March 2017- Statistical Bulletin 10/1.* London: Home Office National Statistics.

[ii] **College of Policing.** (2015) Demand Analysis Report Infographic. Ryton-on-Dunsmore: College of Policing. Downloaded from http://www.college.police.uk/About/Pages/Demand-Analysis-Report.aspx [Accessed 13/11/2017].

[iii] **Neyroud, P.** (2011) *Review of Police Leadership and Training.* London: Home Office.

[iv] **Sherman, L. W.** (1998) 'Evidence-Based Policing' in *Ideas in American Policing July 1998.* Washington D.C.: The Police Foundation.

[v] **Society of Evidence-Based Policing.** (2016). *Frequently Asked Questions.* SEBP Website. Downloaded from https://www.sebp.police.uk/faq [Access 13/11/2017].

[vi] **Sherman, L.W.** (2013) 'The Rise of Evidence-Based Policing: Targeting, Testing, and Tracking,' in *Crime and Justice.* **42**(5): 377-451.

[vii] **Ratcliffe, J.** (2017). 'Not all evidence is created equally,' *Jerry Ratcliffe: Policing, criminal intelligence, and crime science.* Downloaded from http://www.jratcliffe.net/blog/not-all-evidence-is-created-equally/ [Accessed 13/11/2017].

[viii] **Sherman, L.W. & Eck, J.E.** (2002). 'Policing for Crime Prevention', in Sherman, L.W., Farringdon, D.P., Welsh B.C. & MacKenzie, D.L. (Eds). *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention.* London: Routledge.

[ix] **Lum, C.S. & Koper, C.S.** (2017). *Evidence-Based Policing: Translating Research into practice.* Oxford: OUP.

[x] **Koper, C.S.** (1995). 'Just Enough Police Presence Reducing Crime and Disorderly Behavior by Optimizing Patrol Time in Crime Hot Spots,' in *Justice Quarterly.* **12**:649-672.

[xi] **Wheller, L, Quinton, P, Fildes, A. & Mills, A.** (2013). *The Greater Manchester Police procedural justice training experiment: Technical Report.* Ryton-on-Dunsmore: College of Policing.

[xii] **Sherman, L.W., Schmidt, J.D., Rogan, D.P., Smith, D.A., Gartin, P.R., Cohn, E.G., Collins, J., & Bacich.** (1992). 'The Variabke Effects if Arrest on Criminal Careers: The Milwaukee Domestic Violence Experiment'. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology. 83(1): 137-169.*

[xiii] **Petrosino, P.**(2013). ' 'Scared Straight' and other juvenile awareness programs' *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2013, 4.*

[xiv] **Stubbs, G.** (2014). 'Evidence-Based Policing: Some Concerns…' *The Thinking Blue Lone [Blog]. Downloaded from http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/students/academic-services/coursework-and-examinations/coursework.aspx [Accessed 30/12/2017]*

[xv] **Stanko, E.A. & Dawson, P.** (2015). *Police Use of Research Evidence: Recommendations for Improvement.* London: Springer