



Shifting the focus to evidence of what works in community safety

Institutional support for what works in delivering community safety outcomes and effective policing services

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Without evidence, all policing strategies are doomed to succeed. Evidence-Based Policing (EBP) is based on the powerful idea that police strategies should be based on the best scientific evidence to determine what works in community safety. EBP is a strategic approach where police use their operational experience to lead innovation and test policing strategies using empirical methods, to better understand what works in delivering effective services. Combining policing experience and strategic intent with evidence, allows policing and the community to better establish what works in delivering policing services that actually make a difference.

EBP does not prescribe a singular evaluation method. It does however attempt to shift police thinking beyond reactive responses, to also include the application of science to assess policing strategies. EBP is not a new model of policing, but ultimately sees an environment where evidence of what works 'has a seat at the table' of police decision making. For EBP to advance in Australia, it requires a national approach to build supportive institutions incentivising police to undertake evidence-based trials, the specialist training of middle managers to undertake evidence-based work and a commitment to testing police strategies and knowledge sharing across the policing profession.

This article explores the evolution and implementation of EBP based on interviews with 80 police leaders and academic experts in the United Kingdom, United States, Scotland and New Zealand.

Introduction

Policing is often reactive, requiring police to quickly respond to crime trends and community safety issues. Within this context, the judgement and experience of police leaders is critical, but police services cannot rely solely on intuitive based responses to tackle increasingly complex challenges. Some strategies obviously work, yet other approaches may not make a difference, or worse, may be 'well intentioned cures that harm'. The reality is that much of policing remains untested, and relies on foundational activities of random patrol, rapid response to calls for assistance, and reactive investigations. Although there is emerging empirical evidence in some areas of policing, such as hot spots and problem-solving, overall there is not only a paucity of evidence, but often a lack of interest and advocacy for evidence. This is what could be referred to as the 'what works paradox';

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where everyone wants to know what works, yet few are testing or evaluating strategies for effectiveness.

The Australian community allocates over \$14 billion in funding for policing annually. Governments and communities will increasingly demand greater rigour in showing police effectiveness into the future. In a constrained fiscal environment, Governments will increasingly expect greater evidence of effectiveness to justify new investment in policing. As we are seeing a global discussion around trust in policing, evidence-based practices provide transparency and assurance that police are employing methods that deliver real outcomes and benefits to our communities.

According to many police leaders interviewed globally, it is inevitable that evidence-based responses will be demanded of policing and will ultimately be one of the pillars that transforms policing into the future.

'In this same vein, evidence-based approaches have been employed with great success in not only business and industry but many other professional services sectors such as medicine, law, business and marketing among many others. Evidence-based approaches, in whatever form, in the profession of policing is really in its infancy and there are many rewards to be gained as such approaches have revolutionized how goods and services are produced, distributed and consumed. The same will one day be said of EBP.'

– John Jarvis, Academic Dean FBI

Why is effective policing important and how can research pave the way?

Policing has shown its ability to adapt over the past 50 years with advances in technology, capabilities, and new ways of working. Police agencies around the world are in a period of reform as they seek to enhance trust and confidence of the community, respond to emerging crime problems, and develop new ways to improve officer well-being and safety. This adaptability has never been more important, as we face rapid technological changes that pose new potential criminal threats to the safety of our communities.

Despite the adaptability of policing, there are gaps that impede the acceptance and advancement of EBP within policing in Australia. Government and policy makers need to address this gap through a national plan to drive EBP including greater institutional support, funding to incentivise police, and specialist programs to equip police to lead this work.

There is an opportunity to learn from leading agencies globally in building EBP capability. New Zealand Police have established the Evidence Based Policing Centre, the first of its kind in the world, which drives a focus nationally for evidence and data insights. The College of Policing for England and Wales strongly embeds evidence in policing knowledge, learning and standards. In 2023, the US National Institute of Justice issued \$USD10 million in police research grants on topics including recruitment and retention and gender diversity with a priority focus on evidence based scientific evaluations. In 2023 the UK Home Office has made £55 million available to 20 police agencies for violence reduction units and hot spot policing trials based on problem oriented, evidence-based approaches. This level of institutional support and funding is lacking in Australia.

Evidence is also generated through capability building within policing and equipping police with the skills to lead evidence-based work. In the US, NIJ funds the LEADS Scholars Program (Law Enforcement Advancing Data Science) for mid-ranking police nationally to support professional development and advancing the police profession through science. The Scottish Institute for Policing Research is a collaboration between 15 of Scotland's Universities and Police Scotland. It funds practitioner fellowships to support police to undertake research on policing priorities. Cambridge University, Institute of Criminology has trained over 500 mid-career police officers from 12 countries in applied criminology and evidence-based policing. There is currently no specific police program focussed on evidence-based policing nationally, which is a significant gap in policing capability.

Many of the police leaders and experts interviewed for the Churchill Fellowship provided insights into why more effective policing is important and how research can pave the way. Key themes included the need to demonstrate cause-and-effect to police decision-makers, and the growing need for accountability to communities in preventing harm. The following quote from the 2022 Global EBP Conference sheds light on how police leadership have come to see EBP capabilities within their agencies.

'Evidence based policing is about using scientific and robust research to guide best practice in policing. What separates an evidence-based approach to simply using our experience, is its unique ability to identify cause and effect. Combining our policing experience, strategic and operational intent with evidence, allows us to understand what works in delivering policing services that actually make a difference.'

– Shane Patton APM, Chief Commissioner, Victoria Police, Australia

US National Institute of Justice

US \$10 million

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What are the key features of EBP from a practical standpoint?

A major theme among police leaders was the need for research to be operationally relevant and driven by policing so that they are targeted to areas of greatest need or value. The best examples of EBP are police led trials that provide new knowledge in how police respond to crime. These include strategies that have improved victim responses for family violence and sexual offences, reducing recidivism in young offenders, tackling serious public violence, gang crime and hot spots policing approaches. These evidence-based initiatives share key features: they are police-led (often with assistance of academic partners); they demonstrate the effectiveness of new ways of working; and the knowledge gained is shared across policing jurisdictions.

For example, the London Metropolitan Police have adopted a program that provides support to parents and guardians, which shows promise in providing support and reducing reoffending among child offenders. In addition, Operation Turning Point, a diversion-based alternative to traditional court prosecution, has shown reductions in re-offending and improved victim outcomes. New Zealand Police have partnered with forensic experts to develop the hand-held 'LUMI' drug scan that equips police officers in the field with a tool to instantly analyse drugs on the street. All these examples are police led innovations that have used an evidence-based approach to show effectiveness.

A second theme among police experts was the conviction that police experience and craft alone 'won't cut it'. The fact that 'we have always done it that way' will not be enough in the future, nor will a reliance solely on experience be sufficient in addressing complex crimes. It is important to ask, how can police prevent crime rather than just respond to it after it occurs? How can police use limited resources in the most efficient ways? What can be done to enhance trust and confidence in policing? How can police be more responsive to victims while deterring offenders more effectively? These are all important strategic goals that cannot be demonstrated with traditional approaches and require evidence-based approaches that test the effectiveness of the police response. Fundamentally, EBP is not an academic exercise. It is a process where police use their judgement, experience and creativity to innovate and test new ways of responding to crime. Findings are used to change policy.

A third theme found in the Churchill interviews was that EBP advances policing as a profession because it increases analysis and data capabilities, attracts support from government, and engages with academia to generate and share knowledge. EBP tests long-held assumptions in policing, including what causes crime to increase and whether fundamental policing strategies actually work. Although this can create discomfort within the ranks, police must navigate how they integrate this function into frontline practices. The creation of new roles within agencies such as chief scientist and embedded criminologist will be part of this transformation. Partnerships with academia and specialist institutions will enable police to access and translate evidence into an operational context. Tools such as the newly developed Global Policing Database, drawn from over 300,000 documents, are an example of this collaboration and knowledge sharing.

A thought-provoking case study is the ongoing work conducted by the College of

Policing England and Wales. The College supports the generation of new research evidence with UK grant funding to develop the evidence in areas such as knife crime, gangs, crimes that cross county lines, and child sexual exploitation. The College of Policing's What Works Centre for Crime Reduction provides tools that train officers to access, understand and use research evidence in practice. The toolkit generates over 10,000 hits per month. The College's creation of EBP guidelines brings together independent committees of practitioners and experts to collectively develop guidelines based on the most robust evidence and expertise.

'Our role across England and Wales is about knowledge, learning and standards in policing and embedding the evidence base across all three. We are focussed on creating and sharing knowledge in policing and evidence is at the core of what we do.'

– Rachel Tuffin, Director of Knowledge, Research & Education College of Policing

What are the barriers to uptake and how might they be overcome?

The policing environment requires officers to be highly responsive to crime and disorder problems. There is an expectation that police commanders first have knowledge of emerging crime issues and, second, are responding with appropriate operational strategies. The constant demands of the environment often mean that the evaluation of the strategy is not a priority beyond a simple 'before and after' comparison using incident data. As quickly as a crime problem emerges and is addressed, the next crime issue emerges. The 'elephant in the room' is that nobody knows why crimes went up or down, nor whether the police response improved the situation. A fundamental challenge for policing is, how does this ever-present reactive cycle take the profession forward?

Despite the barriers, there are examples of police leading evidence-based approaches. For example, consider Detective Sergeant Stacy Rothwell's development of rapid video response to domestic violence in Kent, England. Unlike most police operations, this strategy was designed as an evidence-based trial from the outset. Call takers agreed to be randomly assigned to business as usual (control group) or rapid video response (treatment group) to test the intervention. The trial results were noteworthy.

The analysis showed that the average response time declined from 1,969 minutes (32 hours) to three minutes. Her analysis also found a 50% increase in arrests and abuse victims also expressed more trust and confidence in Police compared to the control group. The outcome of this trial is now reshaping police response to domestic violence internationally. This real-world example illustrates the potential that individual officers have to lead evidence-based trials when provided with specialist training. It shows the value of collaboration with academia and demonstrates how an evidence-based approach using robust methods not only mitigates risk but provides innovative ways to resolve complex problems.

Other stakeholders noted the duty to invest in future police leaders through specialised education programs. Several EBP training programs now support middle-ranking police leaders with the skills to design rigorous trials in their own jurisdiction. The three main programs include the LEADS Scholars Program in the US, the Cambridge Police Executive Program in the UK, and the Scottish Institute of Police Research Practitioner Fellowships. The police graduates of these programs have produced an impressive body of research and created enduring capabilities within their agencies. There is a critical gap across Australian policing for such a program.

Societies of Evidence-Based Policing (SEBPs) around the world have been formed by police leaders with a common goal of using, sharing, and producing the best evidence in policing. Societies now exist in Australia, New Zealand, US, UK, Canada, and the Netherlands and have been the 'workhorse' of EBP, sharing innovation, data insights and evidence globally across policing.

Despite the work of Societies, at the strategic level, policing has not yet fully embraced EBP, yet the upward trajectory is clear. There is a strong appetite across agencies to increase their capabilities in the field, yet moving from strategic intent to on-the-ground implementation requires leadership and commitment at the highest levels within agencies and across government. EBP is not a new model of policing, but ultimately sees an environment 'where research has a seat at the table' of police decision making. It requires building supportive institutions, the development of capabilities in agencies, and sharing knowledge across law enforcement nationally.

Australian policing would benefit from a National Action Plan for EBP and the establishment of a National Policing Institute for Evidence and Innovation. The Action Plan will set out a clear agenda for investing in, promoting, and communicating evidence-based practice with a focus on what works.

'It's time for us all to build a data informed evidence based policing model that works in practice. Across the globe, we are all at different points in our journey with evidence-based policing. But we all have responsibility to be leaders, successfully steering the future of policing and criminology to be evidence based. Not only because it delivers the best policing results, but because the people we serve expect it, and that expectation will rightly grow.'

– Sir Mark Rowley QPM, Commissioner Metropolitan Police, United Kingdom

Although policing in Australia exists across state, territory and Commonwealth levels, there are a range of examples where agencies work across boundaries including approaches to combat violence against women, cybercrime, child safety, countering violent extremism and organised crime. There is also opportunity to consider incorporating New Zealand into the broader approach which is consistent with the remit of ANZPAA as well as a range of existing Australasian policing structures.

There are a range of agencies who support policing and evaluation including the Australia and New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency (ANZPAA), the Australian institute of Criminology (AIC) and the Australian Centre for Evaluation (ACE). There is opportunity for these agencies to be involved in the development of the national plan as well as consideration for embedding the National Institute within existing institutional structures.

Recommendations

1. A national plan for EBP

It is recommended that the Australian Government take responsibility for the development and funding of a National Action Plan for Evidence Based Policing. Whilst the National Action Plan will be developed centrally with consultation from key policing institutions, all agencies will have responsibilities to support the delivery of the National Action Plan.

2. A national institute for evidence and innovation

Under the National Action Plan it is recommended that the Australian Government establish a National Policing Institute for Evidence and Innovation. Consideration will be given to establishing this Institute within an existing national agency that best supports the plan and engagement across police agencies.

Key pillars:

- Enabling frontline impact by developing solutions that support public facing service delivery
- A national approach to foster evidence-based practice and knowledge sharing
- Strengthening partnerships with academia and government that deliver outcomes
- Future focused and building understanding of emerging innovations in policing globally
- Increasing police capability for evaluation and field trials through programs and education
- Fostering a culture of innovation and experimentation

Key deliverables:

- Communicating policing evidence including establishing a What Works Centre for Crime Prevention drawing from the UK College of Policing and newly developed University of Queensland Global Policing Database
- Supporting what works impact evaluations through national funding grants
- A coordinated approach to develop and deliver training and education programs to police

3. Partnerships focus

National Partnerships

- The Australia and New Zealand Society of Evidence Based Policing along with affiliated Societies in the US, UK, Canada, Netherlands, and Denmark
- Australian Institute of Criminology
- Australian Centre for Evaluation
- The Centre for Evidence and Implementation
- Attorney General's Department, Department of Home Affairs, Department Social Services – overseeing national approaches to combat violence against women and children, cybercrime, child safety, countering violent extremism and organised crime.
- Prime Minister and Cabinet - Behavioural Economics Team for the Australian Government
- The Australian Institute of Police Management

International collaboration

- The New Zealand Police, Centre for Evidence Based Policing
- The College of Policing for England and Wales & The Scottish Institute for Policing Research
- The US National Institute for Justice & The US National Policing Institute
- The US Centre for Evidence Based Crime Policy

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