

**IMPROVING POLICE PRACTICE
THROUGH RESEARCH :
RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE U.S. NATIONAL
RESEARCH COUNCIL ⁽¹⁾**

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In 2000, the National Research Council (the social science arm of the National Academy of Sciences) convened a special committee of academic experts to review the status of research on policing. Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, the committee was to make recommendations concerning research priorities in the field of policing and when the evidence was clear recommendations for practitioners concerning police « best practices. » The « raw material » with which the committee worked was the body of published, peer-reviewed research that has accumulated since the 1950s, when modern police research was born. The findings of studies employing more rigorous methodologies were given the most weight, and all had to pass muster as « social science. » That is, they had to be empirical, conducted in rigorous fashion, and of a seemingly generalizable nature. In the main, the panel focused on research on policing in North America, although it was open to specific findings that were clearly relevant for the American scene.

This article provides a personal interpretation of the most important of the panel's recommendations for police practice. It describes the panel's focus on what the report dubs the « dual mandate » of the police : to control crime while acting in a consistently lawful manner. It then traces the recommendations of the panel that speak most centrally to those concerns. The full report, titled *Fairness and Effectiveness in Policing : The Evidence*, can be reviewed on the National Research Council's publication web site (www.nap.edu), and it is available for purchase at the same web site.

⁽¹⁾ Although the author served as chair of the National Research Council committee, this is a personal and unofficial summary of its key points. It was originally presented as a plenary address to the 13th World Congress of the International Society of Criminology, Rio de Janeiro, August 2003.

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THE DUAL MANDATE OF THE POLICE

Thinking about the police usually means thinking about crime, but the police actually have two responsibilities. One responsibility is effective crime control : they are responsible for responding quickly and efficiently to crime, and to bring offenders to account. But they are also responsible for building and protecting legality in society. They must act in a consistently lawful manner while performing their duties, and thus build legitimacy with the public. The panel notes that both aspects of this dual responsibility are equally important. Crime control effectiveness is not paramount in a democratic society; building and protecting the legitimacy of society's legal institutions is equally important. Research on policing also indicates that the two responsibilities reinforce each other. The police are more effective at crime fighting when their legitimacy is high. We do not have to give up crime control effectiveness by focusing as well on behaving lawfully.

Unfortunately, politics and public discourse usually leads down only one of those paths, emphasizing crime control effectiveness. The panel noted that this has also been true of police research itself. Modern research on policing had its roots in concern about police misconduct. Many of the earliest projects focused on the exercise of discretion by individual officers, and found that racism, class bias, and disdain for marginalized groups permeated their daily work. In recent years this tradition has been sustained by research on police exercise of deadly force, which continues to point to the same conclusions. But the focus of many researchers – and especially of the government agencies that fund research – shifted to police effectiveness in crime control. However, in democratic countries police eventually get in trouble when they lose sight of their second responsibility : to behave lawfully and thus build confidence and respect among the public.

What do we know about crime control effectiveness? The general principle is that police should be « intelligence driven ». By this I mean that they combine careful and systematic analysis of their crime problems with sophisticated management, so that they can respond to what they have learned. Finally, they need an organization that is nimble enough to respond to what it knows.

But isn't this what the police already do? The panel concluded that too often the answer is « no. » Instead, police are mostly blindly reactive. They try to respond quickly when they are contacted about a crime, and they evaluate their effectiveness by how fast they drive to the scene. Then they fill out a piece of paper and leave, because usually they do not arrest anyone, and the case is turned over to a detective for further investigation. However, research indicates that detectives actually add

little value to crime control effectiveness. They do not develop much new information, and their ability to solve crimes has been dropping since the mid-1980s. We are probably better off investing the resources we put into detectives somewhere else instead, probably in better training in solving crimes among the uniformed officers who arrive at the scene much earlier in the process.

The crime control strategies of traditional police departments are developed at police headquarters, which demands that they be applied uniformly everywhere. This kind of top-down, command-and-control management is a familiar one for people in a para-military organization. It is, however, a tremendous waste of police resources. Many departments are not particularly flexible and able to respond in timely fashion to intelligence on new situations.

Too often the police respond to criticism by arguing that what they need is more police officers. In policing, the idea is that « more is better » and big police departments are best. There is controversy over the empirical evidence on this question. It is difficult to answer statistically, because while more cops may lead to less crime, more crime may cause us to hire more police officers. But a related observation is that many police agencies are very poorly managed and do not make smart use of the resources they have. Their leaders may have been good cops, but they often are not very good managers of billion dollar organizations.

CRIME CONTROL EFFECTIVENESS

What works better than the traditional model of policing? The committee concluded that a « focused » model of policing is more likely to be effective. Here are some examples of the kind of intelligence driven policing that research favors.

Hot spot policing is a good bet. Police need to use their data to identify tight clusters of problems. A relatively small number of hot spots usually account for a large percentage of all crimes, and they often are committed by the most persistent offenders. Identifying and focusing on the 3-5 percent of the locations in a city that can account for 30-40 percent of all crimes is very intelligent policing. Information technology can help identify these hot spots, but the hard part is having a nimble police organization that can respond quickly to the emergence of new hot spots.

Likewise, intelligently managing intensive crackdowns on street drug markets can be productive. We now know that the crackdowns should be short and unexpected. Well managed crackdowns can suppress crime, deter its future reappearance, and avoid just displacing the problem. On

the other hand, announcing «across the board» zero-tolerance crack-downs or having police sit in an area for a long period is not very cost effective or productive. Again, having timely intelligence and reacting to it is important.

A focus on high-risk repeat offenders can also produce «more bang for the buck.» Covert investigation and surveillance of carefully identified repeat offenders has a high yield in terms of arrests and incarceration. Projects focusing on members of specific gangs have also proven to be effective. Initiatives targeting fences, and in «reverse stings» those who bring stolen goods to them, effectively target the economic underpinnings of professional property crime.

As noted above, police agencies must also consider the link between what they know and what they do. To have modern databases and color printers for maps is not enough. In many agencies, intelligence has to pass through overloaded bureaucracies and up and down numerous ranks before it gets translated into practice. Nimbleness is what New York City's famous CompStat system is about. CompStat uses computer technology to identify emerging hot spots, and focuses police resources on them quickly. Today, many departments have better crime analysis and mapping capacity than the NYPD does, but CompStat is most importantly a management process that forces police local commanders to be quick and decisive. They have to cut through the bureaucracy and use their people smartly. If they don't, they may lose their job. The panel concluded that the evidence concerning the impact of CompStat and similar management initiatives is not yet adequate to make a research-based conclusion about it, but praised the visible increase in concern about effective management in policing circles.

In order to become more flexible and able to respond to local conditions, police departments are also attracted to the decentralization of their command and control. More authority and control over resources is being pushed down in these departments, closer to where the crime occurs and officers work the street. Sometimes they succeed in cutting layers of bureaucracy and reducing the number of paramilitary ranks in the organization. However, these are very hard things to do, and organizational restructuring demands resolute leadership.

An entirely different example of intelligence driven policing is community policing. It is well known that community policing involves the public in identifying local priorities, and good programs have in place mechanisms for holding officers accountable for doing something about them. Sometimes the problems that the public identifies are not the same ones the police would identify in their data, for they have a broader view of what is troublesome and know more about what goes on in their

neighborhood. Their concerns can force police to build partnerships with other agencies that can be called on to help with complex problems. Neighborhood residents also have important information for the police, which will make them more effective. Community policing thus breeds tailored solutions to locally identified priorities, and encourages evaluation of whether conditions improve. In this light, community policing is decentralized, intelligence driven, and managed to increase accountability, all key features of effective policing. Problem-oriented policing, which is closely related to community policing but does not involve much public involvement, can pay many of the same benefits.

How do we know these are better ways to do things in policing? The committee's recommendations were based on more than 30 years of systematic scientific research. The most important projects have been randomized controlled experiments testing different police strategies. There is also research based on careful observation of what police do while they are working the street. These observations are conducted by trained observers who travel with large samples of officers, so they can speak confidently about patterns of police work in the community. Many jurisdictions (and the U. S. Federal government) have conducted surveys of the population, to study who has had contact with the police and how effective they appeared to be. All police departments could do careful statistical analysis of the flood of data that comes in every day, but their real challenge is link often beautiful computer crime maps to actual police operations.

A final point about effectiveness is that it demands continuous research and development efforts. As an industry, policing needs to know more about its various customers and the quality of the product they deliver to them.

LAWFUL AND LEGITIMATE POLICING

The second major responsibility of the police is to build and protect legality in society. This means that the police must behave in accordance with the constitution, laws, the decisions of judges, and the rules and regulations of their own departments. This is important because we invest so much authority in police officers. This includes their ability to shoot and kill people, as well as to arrest and prosecute them. Legality is also important because research finds that crime control effectiveness is undermined by unlawful police conduct. They can hurt their own effectiveness, as well as other people.

The importance of police lawfulness is illustrated by Nazi Germany in the 1930s. There, the new Nazi regime had to deprofessionalize the

police before they could use them to spread terror among the regime's opponents. The police had been dedicated to defending the constitution from attacks by the Left and Right during the chaos of pre-Nazi Germany. The Nazis had to fill the police with their own thugs before they could get them to do the new regime's bidding.

But isn't protecting legality what the police today already do? Unfortunately, the answer is often « no. » Research on police compliance with laws and the constitution finds unequal application of their protections. In the United States, this is usually racial inequality. In other nations the division is often along class lines, or by the nationality or immigration status of suspects and victims alike. In the United States, police are far more likely to shoot and kill African-Americans, regardless of the circumstances. The current uproar over « racial profiling » in the United States is only the most recent example of the difficulty police have in balancing their crime control effectiveness with lawfulness and legitimacy. In European countries the police are often unwilling to do much in poor ghettos teeming with recent immigrants and their children, and show little respect for the common people.

How do we get the police to act lawfully? There are important lessons for this in research on police shootings, police use of force, and police corruption.

Police are human service organizations, so their human resources efforts—hiring, training, supervision, and separation—should be an important determinant of their effectiveness. Interestingly, the committee found virtually no useful studies of the impact of hiring or training on actual police behavior. More is known about supervision; those who do police research know that sergeants are among the most important people in the organization. Sergeants determine what police departments actually do, so their commitment to lawful behavior is critical. Police misconduct can be traced in part to a supportive peer subculture within departments, and sergeants are the level at which this tolerance for brutality, racism and corruption must be countered.

Leadership at the top is also very important. Lax administration is the breeding ground for police misconduct. Police executives must express a clear vision for their organization. They must also set their senior managers to actually carrying out that vision. If employees at the bottom of the organization sense that those at the top does not really mean what they say, nothing will change.

Transparency is also important. Much about the inner workings of the police must be visible to the press, to opposition parties, and to official oversight bodies. Traditionally the police have been very effective at keeping what they do invisible to outsiders. They are not alone in

this, but they have a special responsibility to do so. The committee's review did not find enough evidence to speak to the effectiveness of forms of external oversight and civilian review, or the effectiveness of new « early warning » systems intended to identify trouble officers and intervene early in their careers. These do, however, appear promising. Finally, politicians must be committed to lawful policing. In the end, the police will do what they are told, if they are told forcefully enough.

These measures are important for controlling brutality and racism, and also for controlling corruption. Corruption also undermines the crime control effectiveness of the police. It undermines public cooperation with the police, including victim's willingness to report crimes in the first place. It also undermines the ability of the organization to control itself, because individual officers and units begin to pursue their own interests. Corrupt organizations develop a heightened stake in keeping what is going on a secret. In the case of corruption, commitment from the politicians is even more important. Large scale corruption cannot persist without the involvement of politicians, and police departments are not corrupt without corrupt politicians.

How is lawfulness related to legitimacy? Legitimacy is a belief in the rightness of government actions. It is something perceived by the public, based on their experience with the system. It includes judgments about the fairness of the police, their neutrality and honesty, and their willingness to treat everyone they encounter with dignity and respect. The committee considered research on legitimacy at length, for it has many important implications for society as a whole.

There are many specific benefits to the police when they are viewed as legitimate by the public. For example, crime victims are more likely to report to the police when they have trust in them. People are also more likely to provide information to the police, and serve as witnesses, when they believe in them. Research on people who have been arrested demonstrates that even among this group, those who were treated fairly and with dignity and respect are much less likely to offend again in the future. Good police work prevents recidivism in several ways, and one is through its positive impact on offenders. People obey the law not just because they are afraid of punishment, but also when they believe it is being fairly administered.

The taxpayers may also be more willing to pay what it takes to have a well trained and honest police. Good equipment and good salaries can be easier to come by when voters and taxpayers know the police are behaving professionally with their money. It increases their stature in society, and creates a reservoir of support for the police profession.

However, research on public confidence in the police points to shortcomings in this area as well. This research is based on surveys of the general public, interviews with people who have contacted them for help, and interviews with individuals who have been stopped by the police and even arrested. It documents that there is a great deal of dissatisfaction among racial minorities, immigrants, and the poor, with the quality of service delivered by the police.

Studies of crime victims indicate that we do not serve them very well, either. Crime victims have a long list of specific needs. They want information about their case, advice about what to do, emotional support, protection, and reassurance from the police. Usually they do not get much on this list, however. Police efforts involving more rapid response times, in-depth investigations, recovering property and making apprehensions, making follow-up investigations, information sharing with victims, and granting involved and supportive attention to victims' needs, generate more satisfaction and reduced levels of subsequent fear. Typically, however, a majority of victims report they were not kept adequately informed, and that police were not much interested in their needs.

Based on this research the panel recommended more attention to what it dubbed «process oriented policing.» Studies have identified a number of dimensions on which the public evaluates the quality of police service. People are more satisfied when they are able to explain their situation and communicate their views, and they think these were taken into account when police decisions were made. The appearance of neutrality on the part of the police is also important: decisions should appear to be unbiased, objective and even-handed. This can be encouraged by explaining why decisions were made, and taking into account people's needs when doing so. People very much value being treated with dignity and respect. Developing a more effective «bed-side manner» could pay quick dividends to departments that incorporate these simple messages in their training.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the National Research Council stressed the dual mission of the police. They have responsibility for crime control. They can do a much better job of it than they usually do, through focusing their resources on carefully selected problems. This may sound obvious and easy, but in practice it is not. The police are also responsible for building and protecting legality, and through that building the confidence of the public. This is important for the police themselves, for they will be much

less effective without that confidence and support. It is certainly important for the public, for we have given police the authority to take our lives, if necessary.

RÉSUMÉ

Le Conseil national de la recherche des Etats-Unis a souligné la double mission de la police. Elle doit s'occuper efficacement de la criminalité. A cette fin, elle doit adopter une politique d'affectation des ressources à des problèmes soigneusement sélectionnés. Mais elle doit aussi bâtir et protéger la légalité dans la société, et de cette manière s'assurer la confiance du public. Cette relation de confiance est importante, tant pour la police elle-même, que pour le public.

ABSTRACT

The National Research Council stressed the dual mission of the police. They have responsibility for effective crime control. They can do a much better job through focusing their resources on carefully selected problems. But they are also responsible for building and protecting legality in society, and through that building the confidence of the public. This is important for the police themselves, and also for the public.

RESUMEN

El Consejo nacional de Investigación de los Estados Unidos subrayó la doble misión de la policía. Por un lado, debe ocuparse eficazmente de la criminalidad y con este fin debe adoptar una política de afectación de recursos a problemas cuidadosamente seleccionados. Pero, por otro lado, debe también desarrollar y proteger la legalidad en la sociedad, y de esa manera asegurarse de la confianza del público. Esta relación de confianza es importante, tanto para la policía misma, como para el público.