

The Value of ‘Pracademics’ in Enhancing Crime Analysis in Police Departments

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Over the last 40 years, American policing has gone through a period of significant change and innovation (Weisburd and Braga, 2006). In what is a relatively short historical time frame the police began to reconsider their fundamental mission, the nature of the core strategies of policing, and the character of their relationships with the communities that they serve. Three changes seem most notable (Sklansky, 2006). First, a mantra of community policing has replaced the professional model of policing. Secondly, civilian oversight, once strongly resisted by police departments, has become much more commonplace. And thirdly, and perhaps most striking, police workforces have become much more diverse and better educated. As police departments accumulate larger shares of officers with college and advanced degrees, these organizations naturally enhance their capacity to innovate in response to new challenges and recurring problems.

The presence of ‘pracademics’ inside police departments, very loosely defined as ‘skilled police officers with academic training’ (Huey and Mitchell, 2016), seems like a particularly important development in the policing field. The ongoing applied academic work of doctors and other public health professionals in teaching hospitals

have led to important advances in diagnosing the epidemiology of persistent health problems and developing and testing new programmes and treatments to control the spread of disease and reduce the incidence of injuries and other harms. Police pracademics could work in similar ways to advance the capacity of the police profession to address crime and disorder concerns, police–community relations, officer misbehaviours, and other management challenges. By virtue of their experiential knowledge, police pracademics can also enhance existing research partnerships with external academics by ensuring proposed projects are sensitive to real-world conditions and by translating the importance of scientific inquiry to their police department colleagues.

Increasing the number of pracademics in police departments and taking advantage of their considerable skill sets seems like an important step forward towards improving the quality of policing. Further, as will be discussed below, there are simply not enough skilled and willing academic researchers available to meet the growing demands by policing departments for scientific knowledge. It seems clear that police departments need to improve their internal capacity to conduct scientific inquiries. Huey and Mitchell (2016) make a very

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solid case for both police organizations and academics to make better use of pracademics to enhance institutional knowledge, translate scientific evidence so that it can be applied in practical settings, increase the receptivity of police departments to research, and address knowledge gaps by increasing research in varied areas of need. I strongly support these suggestions. However, Huey and Mitchell (2016) predominately focus their discussion on the potential of pracademics to improve policing through rigorous programme evaluation, especially randomized field experiments. In this brief commentary, I make some observations on the ways pracademics could improve crime analysis in police departments and increase the use of the resulting information products to better support police decision-making.

Police practitioner–academic researcher partnerships are not enough

There is a long history of working relationships between law enforcement agencies and academic researchers in the USA. Indeed, modern police practitioner–academic researcher partnerships were set in motion by August Vollmer, a criminologist and reform-minded chief in Berkeley, California from 1905 to 1932. As part of his efforts to professionalize the police, Vollmer developed educational relationships with the faculty at the University of California, Berkeley to educate police officers on an assortment of subjects such as public administration, sociology, and criminology (Vollmer and Schneider, 1917). Over the course of the next several decades, these educational relationships eventually evolved into research collaborations. As Rojek *et al.* (2012) describe, police executives began to open their doors to academics during the 1950s and allowed them to access department records and interview, survey, and ride with police officers. The resulting research became the foundational literature in the study of policing.

As American police departments became more invested in the idea of community and problem-solving policing over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, they started to embrace working partnerships with community members and a wide range of other governmental and non-governmental actors. Police departments slowly began to engage academic researchers as important partners in their efforts to be more effective in addressing community concerns. Federal funding initiatives, such as the US Department of Justice's Project Safe Neighborhoods and the Bureau of Justice Assistance's Smart Policing Initiative, provided support for police practitioner–academic partnerships that could both raise the quality of police crime prevention projects and improve the existing knowledge base on effective crime prevention practices. While not yet common features of modern police departments, these partnerships have certainly become more prevalent. A recent US survey of police departments found that nearly one-third of responding agencies had participated in a research partnership in the past 5 years (Rojek *et al.*, 2012)

Police departments have strong needs for research on a wide variety of complex organizational and operational challenges. For the purposes of providing a concise framework for this commentary, I simplify these needs into two broad categories of research activities. Police departments need solid scientific evidence to (1) understand the nature of crime and disorder problems they seek to address and (2) establish a knowledge base on effective police crime prevention and control practices. In layman's terms, police executives need to understand 'what is going wrong?' and 'what should we be doing about it?' Police departments are called upon to handle a broad array of societal issues. Indeed, the police are the most visible face of government in many neighbourhoods—offer services 24 hours a day and 7 days a week and encourage citizens to 'call the cops' when problems arise. To be effective in controlling crime and disorder, research suggests that police responses need

to be focused and tailored to specific problems (Weisburd and Eck, 2004; Braga, 2008).

Policing scholars and police executives will immediately recognize these two broad categories as capturing key aspects of the work pursued by police officers implementing 'problem-oriented policing' strategies: the analysis of crime problems to reveal underlying criminogenic conditions, and the assessment of implemented responses to determine whether recurring problems were reduced (Goldstein, 1990; Braga, 2008). Others will hone in on the idea of programme evaluation as a central activity of 'evidence-based policing' (Sherman, 1998) and the broader move towards evidence-based crime policy. It is important to note here, however, that the scientific evidence that police executives need to support their decision-making includes high-quality descriptions of the situations and dynamics that cause problems to recur. Programme evaluation to establish 'what works' in policing is clearly important. But it represents only one type of research product valued by police managers and line-level officers alike.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2004) has established the goal of developing police practitioner–researcher partnerships for every law enforcement agency in the US. Relative to the roughly 18,000 law enforcement agencies regularly counted by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of academics with experience and expertise in working with police departments on research projects is relatively small. Indeed, there is a relatively small cadre of criminologists who have partnered with police departments in the past and currently maintain highly productive research relationships. Clearly, more scholars are needed to carry out this very important work in the USA and other countries.

Police departments, however, need to respond to ongoing real-world crises now and cannot (and should not) wait for the development of a larger pool of external scholars. Pracademics can help to bridge the persistent gap in willing and able academic research partners by serving as a kind of

'scholar-in-residence' within police organizations. These skilled officers can apply their academic training to improve crime analysis and programme evaluation in ways that enhance the capacity of their organizations to deliver fair and effective policing services. As suggested by Huey and Mitchell (2016), pracademics can enhance institutional knowledge and expertise in police departments by improving internally their capacity to conduct rigorous assessments of programmes and by serving as a 'bridge' to the external academics interested in collaborating on high-quality programme evaluation. However, through their work in analysing crime and other problems, pracademics can also make highly valuable contributions to their departments in particular and the policing field more generally.

Improving crime analysis and the use of crime analysis products

When knowledge about successful crime prevention programmes in one field setting is disseminated to others, there is a tendency for police officers to blindly adopt these 'proven' responses rather than conducting the necessary problem analysis to determine whether the programme fits well with the nature of the crime problem as it manifests itself in the operational environments of their cities. As suggested by Ekblom (1997), the fact that a crime prevention measure has proven successful in past circumstances does not guarantee its appropriateness in the future. On the surface, the problems may look similar. However, the circumstances may be different, the causal mechanisms might be different, and, therefore, the resulting outcomes could be very different. In his examination of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships mandated by the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act in England and Wales, Hough (2006) suggests that mistaking tactics for strategy caused the failure of the local police and their partners to produce crime prevention gains.

Police-led crime prevention programmes, especially problem-oriented interventions, composed of a package of specific tactics and the active ingredient(s) among the various measures implemented may be unclear. Moreover, even if a particular measure has been shown to result in a strong reduction in crime, offenders may change tactics to overcome the implemented measure. For example, as Ekblom (1997) describes, technological changes in safe design may be enough to thwart even the most skillful and well-organized safebreakers at any one time; however, this capacity to resist penetration may not last indefinitely as safebreakers learn new methods and develop new technologies. For police, the important lessons to be drawn from successful crime prevention case studies lie in the guiding principles and underlying logic developing effective responses, rather than the specific interventions designed to tackle specific problems in specific settings.

Police pracademics, by virtue of their training and practical experience, are well positioned to recognize the need to collect and analyse data to ensure that interventions are tailored to local conditions and capacities. Solid analyses of the underlying conditions that generate crime problems are the cornerstones of successful crime prevention projects (Braga, 2008). Thus, police departments interested in improving their crime prevention capacities should work hard to improve their ability to analyse crime problems. As Tilley (2002) observes, high-quality analysis for crime prevention is oriented directly to the formulation of preventive strategies. Such analysis identifies single offenses or concentrations of crime where there is potential for crime prevention gain; attempts to find the most efficient, effective, and, hopefully, equitable means of prevention; and can help forecast likely future crime problems with an eye towards developing pre-emptive strategies (Tilley, 2002).

Crime analysts are often charged with leading police department efforts to assemble the data and conduct the analysis to understand underlying conditions and dynamics that cause problems to

recur. However, crime analysts are typically civilian employees who do not exert direct influence on police department' decision-making and must rely on the sensibilities of sworn personnel to take advantage of the information products they produce. Sworn police pracademics, especially higher ranking officers, can serve as powerful allies to civilian crime analysts by participating in the crime analysis process, bringing important insights from the street in framing inquiries and interpreting results, and ensuring that the resulting information products are used by decision-makers to develop and implement appropriate preventive responses. Pracademics strategically placed in different organizational units, ranging from large patrol bureaus to small investigative squads, could greatly enhance the overall learning capacity of a police organization.

As suggested by Huey and Mitchell (2016), pracademics need to be identified within organizations and be explicitly recognized as 'domain experts' in particular areas given their practical experience and academic training. Pracademics within police departments could function much like analysts in the business world who report to executives on the quality of their end product (Goldstein and Clarke, 2002). Pracademics, engaged in the systematic study of problems that the police handle, should have direct access to the top police administrator; should be involved in relevant management meetings; and should be routinely consulted for guidance on how to improve the effectiveness of police efforts in their areas of expertise. Their unique contributions could go a long way towards increasing the effectiveness of the police and, as a consequence, the professional status of the police.

Since most problem description exercises are based on analyses of official crime data, police departments need to be well aware of the limits and difficulties of working with such data. The shortcomings of official data, especially when presented through impressive mapping technologies, may be ignored, and potentially misleading results may gain an undeserved 'scientific' aura. Harries

(1999) covers a range of practical problems in mapping the locations of crime incidents that arise when working with address information contained in official records. Ambiguous, incorrect, and missing information are certainly not found only in the address fields of official data. Pracademics are trained to understand these data are generated by human processes and therefore have inherent limits. As such, they could serve as important safeguards against inappropriate interpretations of analytic results by decision-makers who might not appreciate these limits. Pracademics would also clearly recognize the importance for maintaining clean data that are organized in ways that make the information useful for problem analysis.

The experiential assets of police officers, criminal justice practitioners, and community members can make powerful contributions to identifying and understanding crime problems (Kennedy *et al.*, 1997). Since pracademics artfully straddle ‘two, often very different, and sometimes conflicting worlds’ (Huey and Mitchell, 2016), these officers could be used to good effect in developing structured data collection exercises that glean experiential knowledge on crime problems from their colleagues. Relative to external academic research partners, police officers may be more receptive to sharing sensitive information with internal pracademics that could yield deeper insights on underlying conditions and dynamics that cause problems to recur.

Crime incident reviews, for example, provide a method of sharing detailed information on specific types of crime, usually homicide, in the local criminal justice system and using that information to develop strategic approaches to reduce that crime (Klofas and Hipple, 2006). These reviews are usually structured as focus group sessions and rely on input from front-line staff with street-level knowledge of the crimes being discussed. Representatives from across the criminal justice system—including law enforcement, prosecutors, probation and parole officers, and often others—participate in the review (Klofas and Hipple, 2006). The process

involves researchers whose task it is to record the qualitative insights on the events and its participants, analyse these data, and identify patterns or other issues that may be useful in responding strategically to the crime problem. Pracademics could serve as effective leaders of crime incident review processes and other kinds of innovative data collection strategies designed to harvest critical knowledge from experienced officers.

Pracademics also seem well-positioned to understand the strengths and limits of qualitative insights on the nature of crime problems provided by line-level officers. Both academics and police practitioners have been reluctant to incorporate the knowledge of front-line personnel into formal crime analysis. Some argue that the subjective assessments of practitioners are not accurate. Mainstream police administrators, and many academics in police and public safety research, have long discounted the views of line officers as partial, biased, and of no great utility (Goldstein, 1990; Sparrow *et al.*, 1990). At the same time, many police feel that their knowledge and expertise are essentially ineffable—that, in the words of James Fyfe, ‘It’s just something you learn over time, is all’ (as quoted in Toch and Grant, 1991, p. 41). Neither attitude—that police officers know nothing, or that police knowledge is irredeemably particular and incommunicable—lends itself to collecting, testing, and analysing practitioner knowledge.

Others feel that practitioners, particularly police officers, develop rich pictures of their environment and can provide accurate assessments of area characteristics, crime problems, and criminal activity (Bittner, 1970; Braga *et al.*, 1994). In Bittner’s (1970, p. 90) classic observation, some police officers know ‘the shops, stores, warehouses, restaurants, hotels, schools, playgrounds, and other public places in such a way that they can recognize at a glance whether what is going on within them is within the range of normalcy’. These perceptions sharpen and improve as police mature in their careers and gain experience (Rubinstein, 1973;

Muir, 1977). For example, a rigorous examination of the assessments of experienced narcotics officers relative to other, more formal, measures of drug activity found that the officers were highly capable of identifying street drug activity based on quite brief exposures (Braga *et al.*, 1994). To date, though, most problem analysis exercises, whether involving crime mapping or other analytic techniques, have not relied heavily on the systematic gathering, analysis, and application of information from practitioner or community sources. Pracademics could make strong contributions to this important, but largely unexplored, frontier.

Conclusion

As Weisburd and Neyroud (2011) note, academic research is generally divorced from the dynamics of policing. Police operate in a reality in which decisions must be made quickly, and issues of finance and efficiency can be as important as effectiveness. Weisburd and Neyroud (2011) suggest academic policing research generally ignores these aspects of the police world, often delivering results long after they have relevance, and many times focusing on issues that police managers have little interest in. To facilitate the implementation of science in police agencies, they encourage the development of strong institutional links and personnel exchanges between universities and police departments that combine teaching and research agendas. Police pracademics could help develop the internal capacity of police departments to meet their own demands for scientific knowledge and strengthen their connections to external academic partners. Increasing the number of pracademics in police departments, and putting mechanisms in place to ensure their skills and knowledge are actually used to advance knowledge, seems like a commonsense way to improve policing by building scientific evidence on effective programmes and underlying conditions that generate recurring problems.

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