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PRINCIPLES OF GOOD POLICING: AVOIDING VIOLENCE BETWEEN POLICE AND CITIZENS

Cities face a growing number of fiscal challenges, among them balancing the need to combat crime with the cost of policing. Decreases in funding for public safety mean that police departments cannot support an ever-increasing number of law enforcement officers — or, in many cases, even the status quo. Therefore, police officials must shift their attention to the science of controlling crime and disorder. That model is called evidence-based policing. Evidence-based policing leverages the country's investment in police and criminal justice research to help develop, implement and evaluate proactive crime-fighting strategies. It is an approach to controlling crime and disorder that promises to be more effective and less expensive than the traditional response-driven models, which cities can no longer afford. With fewer resources available, it simply does not make sense for the police to pursue crime control strategies that science has proven ineffective.

Evidence-based policing offers a practical solution to the need to balance public safety, community service needs, available funds and taxpayer expectations. It blends the science of controlling crime and disorder with the principles of community policing and problem solving. It helps communities focus on meaningful, achievable public safety outcomes without breaking their budgets. Evidence-based policing can be implemented without adding law enforcement officers, disrupting police organizations or offending community members. It can also help police departments strengthen their legitimacy with the diverse communities they serve.

The science of what really works to control crime can help local officials better craft and implement effective strategies to make their communities safer. But if helping police departments get

smarter is such a good idea, why hasn't a science-driven approach to crime control already become commonplace in American policing?

Unlike medicine and food, no governmental standards exist for the "production" of policing services or public safety. As a result, policing practices are implemented based on organizational culture and political and community expectations rather than scientific findings. Obviously, legal remedies are available when the police threaten the public's civil rights, but there are no statutes or regulations mandating the use of science to drive crime control strategies. Despite the efforts of the U.S. Department of Justice, professional organizations and a variety of academics, there still is no widespread understanding and agreement about how policing strategies should be crafted and implemented. Evidence-based policing offers a framework for developing a coherent approach through the application of sound scientific concepts and standards.

One factor that contributes to the lack of agreement about how to design policing strategies is the disconnect between the evidence researchers uncover and the approaches taken by many police departments.This disconnect has varied causes, and it leads many practitioners and policymakers to view science as "a luxury that can be useful but can also be done without. Conducting social science research is time-consuming, which runs counter to community demands for a quick response and to political realities facing police chiefs. And sometimes, even after months or years of study, researchers simply do not know why certain crime phenomena occur and their call for further inquiry is common.

However, incomplete answers about crime should not keep police departments from using the best available science to inform their strategies. Mayors and police chiefs should embrace the potential of science and add it to the toolbox they use to solve crime problems.

If the onus for adopting evidence-based approaches to controlling crime is on the police, the responsibility for disseminating evidence-based police practices rests with the research community. Researchers can fulfill this responsibility by producing timely, readable reports of their work. Most researchers author

lengthy technical reports full of scientific jargon, more suited for academics than practitioners and policymakers. If they want practitioners to use their findings, they must make their research easier to understand.

Evidence-based policing does not replace community-specific knowledge, and it does not remove a police department's authority or responsibility for crime control decisions. It is intended to inform decision-makers about the best scientific evidence regarding strategies to realize desired outcomes. This evidence helps them create or refine their approaches and provides structure for evaluating their efforts. It cannot and is not intended to replace the wisdom and judgment of policing officials and those to whom they report.

Police departments can increase their institutional knowledge about the science of crime control by forming partnerships with local universities or colleges to use the services of professors, graduate students or interns. They can also hire their own in-house criminologists. For about the same cost as a patrol officer, the Redlands (Calif.) Police Department hired a Ph.D.-level criminologist to translate existing research findings, help craft new evidence-based strategies and evaluate existing ones. Departments wanting to replicate this effort but lacking the financial resources to do it on their own can form partnerships with other police departments and academic institutions to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits of having a criminologist "embedded" within their organization.

By encouraging police departments to adopt a community-oriented problem-solving philosophy and to use the best available evidence to drive crime control strategies, policymakers and taxpayers alike can help law enforcement officers make our cities safer. They can also help law enforcement officers become more responsive to all the communities they serve, increase their legitimacy with these communities, and, in the process, become safer themselves.

Implementing evidence-based policing requires reframing how policymakers, practitioners, researchers and citizens-at-large think

about public safety outcomes and the process of crafting and evaluating strategies intended to make our communities safer. We have proven we know how to be tough on crime. Now it's time to prove we can be smart about crime, too.

List of references:

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