



Enhancing Police Research Partnerships: A Path to Actionable Findings and Community Trust

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In recent years, the landscape of policing has undergone significant scrutiny and transformation, driven by calls for reform, accountability, and increased community trust. A critical element in this evolution is the collaboration among police officers, analysts, and academic researchers to address pressing questions that impact policing strategies and community relations. The articles in this edited volume underscore how police officers who engage in research—whether through independent inquiry or partnerships with academics—are uniquely positioned to produce actionable findings. The goal of bridging evidence to action is foundational to the National Institute of Justice’s (NIJ) mission to build knowledge that informs public safety and the fair and effective administration of justice.

NIJ’s Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) program is central to that goal. Complementing NIJ’s well-established track record in translating and disseminating research findings in ways that are understandable and compelling to those who can make use of them, LEADS works from the inside out, nurturing law enforcement agency officers and staff who have self-identified as being research-minded and interested in further developing their skills. LEADS has spurred a new generation of police practitioner researchers, affectionately known as “pracademics,” who attend academic conferences, conduct research in their agencies, expand their data analysis and methodological skills, and importantly, network with each other in a highly collaborative and supportive manner. It is my belief that this program, and the research products generated from it as represented by the articles in this volume, not only advance the field of policing but also foster an environment conducive to meaningful reform, enhanced community policing, and restored trust between police and the communities they serve.

At the heart of effective policing is the ability to communicate and build relationships with the community. The chapter by Brimbal et al. on improving communication skills of patrol officers through evidence-based interviewing underscores the importance of this foundational work. Theoretically, officers trained in these skills are better equipped to engage with community members, particularly in high-stress situations. When officers identify communication as a key area of improvement and partner with researchers to design effective training programs, the outcomes become not only relevant but tailored to the specific needs of community members. This collaboration allows for the development of training protocols that go beyond theoretical



frameworks, ensuring they are community-centered and grounded in the realities officers face daily. The positive findings on trained officers' knowledge acquisition about communications skills along with their positive perceptions of the training holds promise for the program achieving its intended impact.

Closely related to communications skills are active listening skills, which are essential in all manner of community interactions and are particularly crucial in high-stakes situations like hostage negotiations. Poorboy and Quinby's research on active listening skills by hostage negotiators sheds light on the degree to which negotiators apply best practices in areas in that need improvement. This vital information can inform models for both crisis negotiations and all manner of communication strategies within police work. By investing in training that emphasizes these skills, departments can enhance their operational effectiveness, resolve high-stakes crises safely, and establish stronger relationships with community members.

The evaluation of critical incident response training by Hall and Hoard also reflects the broader theme of addressing training needs versus merely completing checkboxes. Many departments grapple with the challenge of ensuring that training is not just a formality but is relevant and impactful. By engaging in research to evaluate the efficacy of training programs, officers can help identify gaps and propose modifications that address actual performance outcomes. Such research-driven evaluations not only improve the skills of officers but also signal to the community that law enforcement is committed to ongoing improvement and accountability.

Labeling theory presents another critical lens through which police officers can examine their practices. David Miner argues persuasively that by reconsidering how officers think about, refer to, and designate people based on the types of offenses they may have committed in the past, officers can better understand the implications of labeling individuals and the long-term consequences it may have on community relations. This theoretical approach, when combined with empirical research, can inform policies that minimize stigmatizing labeling and foster rehabilitation rather than recidivism.

The chapter on translating academic evidence into actionable strategies underscores the essential role of police leaders in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Mourtgos and Adams document how authentic engagement between police and academic researchers can yield reductions in crime. Officers who learn from and apply academic findings can implement reforms that are not only evidence-based but also contextually relevant. This process of translation is crucial in creating a culture of research within police departments, where officers are empowered to question, investigate, and innovate based on their unique insights and experiences. The more officers are engaged in research about what makes for effective and equitable policing practices, the more likely the findings will be used to make improvements in service of public safety.

Retention of officers is another area where research partnerships can lead to significant advancements. The exploration of the relationship between recruit characteristics and officer retention by Phiri and Alan underscores the importance of understanding how the needs and



motivations of officers can directly impact their longevity in the profession. By evaluating workplace factors that influence retention, agencies can develop targeted strategies to support officers throughout their careers. This is especially important in fostering an environment that values officer well-being, professional growth, and community engagement. Such efforts not only reduce turnover but also build a workforce that is better equipped to serve and connect with the community.

Kilmer et al.'s evaluation of multi-agency peer support programs highlights the necessity of addressing the mental health and well-being of officers. By researching and implementing support systems designed to meet the specific needs of law enforcement personnel, agencies can create an environment that not only promotes resilience but also cultivates trust within the community. The use of peers in this process holds promise in overcoming the stigma of help-seeking that is often a part of police culture. The impact of effective officer well-being programs cannot be overstated: Theoretically, officers who benefit from such programs are more likely to engage positively with the public, thereby fostering an atmosphere of collaboration and understanding.

Lastly, Herold's chapter explains the importance of using implementation science to translate research into practical and sustainable policing strategies. One implementation science principle, the co-production of research, specifically highlights the need for collaboration between police, researchers, and other stakeholders. Working together as equal partners throughout the entire research and intervention process ensures that research findings are relevant and practical, leading to better outcomes and the sustainability of new practices.

Collectively, these articles highlight how police officers and analysts who conduct their own research or partner with academics play a pivotal role in generating actionable findings that can lead to meaningful reform. By focusing on the critical questions that arise within their agencies and communities, these practitioner-scholars are uniquely positioned to build knowledge that enhances their practices, supports community policing initiatives, and restores trust between law enforcement and the public. As policing continues to evolve, NIJ will continue to have a key role in fostering a culture of inquiry and collaboration through LEADS and its other translational research activities. These investments will be essential for ensuring that the field progresses in ways that are responsive to the needs of both officers and the communities they serve. Through research, training, and a commitment to improvement, police departments can become catalysts for positive change, ultimately contributing to a safer and more just society.

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