



# From Academia to Action: How Police Leaders Translate Evidence on the Ground

Scott M. Mourtgos, Ph.D., University of South Carolina | Ian T. Adams, Ph.D., University of South Carolina

## ABSTRACT

**Research Summary.** In response to a significant increase in violent crime and concurrent personnel shortages, the Salt Lake City Police Department (SLCPD) implemented an evidence-based crime reduction program beginning in 2022. This initiative, executed over two years, focused on expanding the department’s analytical capabilities through strategic civilian hires, conducting in-depth analyses of high-crime areas, and developing a robust managerial system for crime reduction that emphasized accountability at all levels. After collaborating with academic criminologists and developing appropriate programs, SLCPD experienced substantial crime reduction. In 2023, the city recorded the lowest crime levels in 15 years. This research brief provides a summary of the program’s partnerships, successes, and challenges—and highlights lessons learned for other police managers.

**Policy Implications.** The SLCPD’s experience underscores several policy implications for law enforcement agencies facing similar challenges. First, investing in civilian staff to enhance data collection, analysis, and dissemination capabilities is critical. Second, the program’s success relies heavily on the consistent advocacy of a high-ranking “champion” and the establishment of systematic processes that become integral to daily operations. Third, consistent leadership and accountability mechanisms are essential but require significant effort over an extended period. Fourth, forming partnerships with academic researchers for training and assistance further strengthens implementation efforts. Finally, succession planning and maintaining a sustained focus amidst competing municipal priorities ensure the longevity and success of crime reduction programs, particularly under staffing constraints.



## Introduction

Calls for evidence-based strategies in policing are not new. Efforts to promote the use of data to make decisions within U.S. law enforcement agencies began almost 40 years ago (Alpert, 1988). Although numerous evaluations have demonstrated that evidence-based policing can positively modify police tactics and strategies as well as impact crime and victimization (Abt, 2019; Braga et al., 2019; Haberman & O’Guinn, 2023), the widespread implementation of these strategies across the United States’ 18,000 police agencies has been slow and inconsistent (Del Pozo et al., 2024).

Why has this been the case? Explanations are varied and nearly endless, with some scholars arguing that police organizations are resistant to change due to local or state political dynamics (Adams et al., 2024; Farris & Holman, 2017), the influence of police unions (Juris & Feuille, 1974; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2022), or policy construction and centralization that hampers local reform (Eagly & Schwartz, 2022). However, from another perspective, police organizations, while not typically considered centers of progressive reform, have demonstrated a capacity for change and have evolved significantly over the past century. As Adams and colleagues highlight (2024), 20th-century police reforms have often been spearheaded by police executives, who have proven more successful in effecting change within policing than Progressive-era reformers (Uchida, 2020).

This case study focuses on one agency’s successful—but not flawless—implementation of an evidence-based crime reduction system. Building on Santos and Santos (2012), we contend that while partnerships with criminologists and investments in civilian staff to enhance data collection, analysis, and dissemination capabilities are necessary, these efforts alone are insufficient for success. Instead, the presence of a “champion”—a high-level agency executive, supported by the command staff, who provides direct, active, focused, and consistent leadership—ultimately determines whether an evidence-based program is successfully implemented. Where leadership is lacking, even a program with a strong empirical foundation risks becoming yet another well-intentioned initiative that fails to achieve its goals.

## Leadership and Implementation

While no single factor fully explains success in the complex environment of policing, strong leadership at the top level is a critical element in implementing any successful evidence-based program, as it influences the organizational changes needed for effective implementation at all levels.

Although police leadership is understudied, growing research highlights that police executives are pivotal in implementing reform (Adams et al., 2024; Mourtgos, Adams, McCrain, et al., 2024). We agree with Filstad et al. (2024) that research should prioritize leadership activities within specific contexts rather than focusing solely on leadership style. Understanding the collective practice of police leadership comes from examining actions taken over time (Karp, 2022).



This article focuses on providing police managers with lessons learned regarding what worked—and what did not—when implementing a comprehensive evidence-based proactive crime reduction strategy. A more technical assessment of the Salt Lake City Police Department’s (SLCPD) implementation outcomes is forthcoming. However, for the purposes of this article, we rely primarily on descriptive statistics to illustrate the program’s effectiveness, as this approach aligns with the goal of making the findings practitioner-friendly and accessible.

We begin by outlining the context SLCPD faced when implementing the strategy, followed by describing the step-by-step process over two years, emphasizing leadership actions. We then present descriptive statistics on crime trends and conclude with leadership lessons that offer insights for future initiatives. We note that leadership, while central to the implementation of evidence-based strategies, is challenging to quantify using traditional metrics. In this case study, rather than measuring leadership through survey-based scales or experimental variation (an approach not easily suited to studying leadership), we adopted a process-tracing approach focused on the *actions* taken by the executive team—especially the designated “champion”—during implementation. We endeavor to provide descriptive clarity and detailed documentation of practices to offer a model for replication in other jurisdictions, tying the implementation of evidence-based policing not to an abstract notion of “leadership,” but to specific, documented, and replicable *leadership behaviors* that can serve as a roadmap for others.

## The Context

On May 25, 2020, the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked nationwide protests. In Salt Lake City, a large protest on May 30 escalated when a crowd forced an officer to abandon a police vehicle, which was then overturned and set on fire. The situation devolved into a riot involving looting and extensive property damage, including vandalism to the police department’s public safety building. Multiple officers were injured, and law enforcement across the state provided assistance to regain control. The National Guard was deployed for several weeks as unrest continued. Between late May and November 2020, nearly 300 protests occurred, many specifically targeting the police.

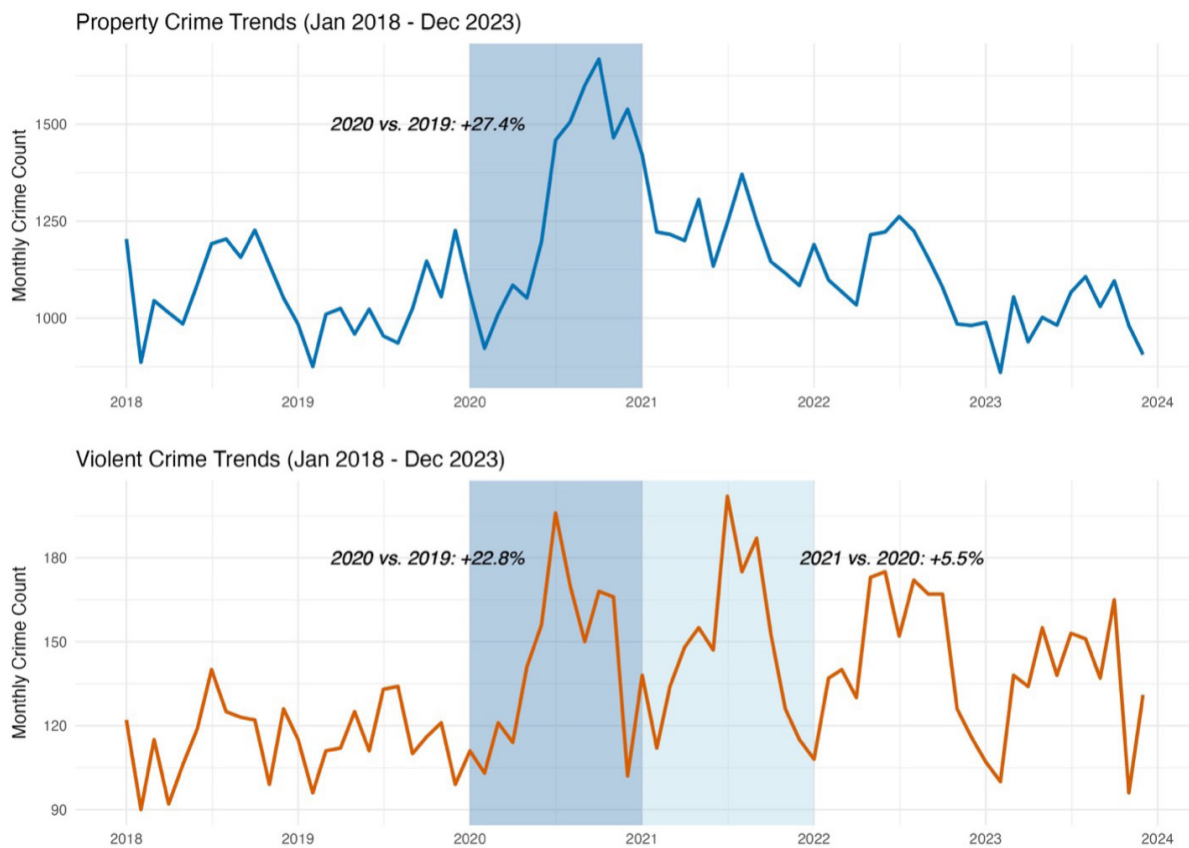
Tensions particularly escalated in June when body-worn camera footage from a separate officer-involved shooting was released, sparking strong public reaction. Before the investigation concluded, a city council member called the incident unlawful. However, additional surveillance footage later showed the individual had pointed a firearm at officers, leading the district attorney to rule the shooting legally justified. Despite this, public unrest reignited, resulting in more violent demonstrations and additional officer injuries.

At the same time, the SLCPD faced severe staffing challenges. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with stay-at-home orders and social distancing mandates, led to significant absenteeism. The department implemented remote work, staggered shifts, and a quarantine protocol; up to 100 officers were quarantined each month until February 2021 when a vaccination program was



introduced (Mourtgos & Adams, 2021, 2023). Following the protests and the resulting political response, SLCPD also saw a wave of resignations, losing approximately one-fifth of its sworn staff (Adams et al., 2023; Mourtgos, Adams, & Nix, 2024). This combination of socio-political upheaval and staffing shortages led to a predictable rise in crime.

As illustrated in Figure 1, property crime in 2020 increased by 27.4% compared to 2019, while violent crime rose by 22.8%. Although property crime began to decline in 2021, it remained higher than pre-2020 levels. Violent crime increased by another 5.5% in 2022.



**FIGURE 1.** Substantial Crime Increase Beginning in 2020

## Implementation

In early 2022, this study's first author began overseeing SLCPD's patrol functions as deputy chief. Shortly thereafter, the chief of police tasked him with implementing a comprehensive crime reduction plan.

The department implemented two primary strategies: stratified policing, a systems-based approach, and a hotspot policing strategy aimed at violent street crime. Stratified policing began in



late July 2022, and the hotspot strategy followed in September 2022. Both strategies remain active at the time of writing. Implementation details are provided below. Committed to evidence-based policing, the first author believed this approach would maximize the likelihood of success.

### *Stratified Policing*

The first author prioritized a systems-based approach to crime reduction by integrating evidence-based strategies within a management and accountability framework to ensure agency-wide adoption and avoid program isolation (Ratcliffe, 2018).

After thorough research, [stratified policing](#) was chosen as the framework for a systems-based approach (*Stratified Policing*, n.d.). Developed by Rachel and Roberto Santos at Radford University, this approach integrates evidence-based practices into daily operations for every employee, from frontline officers to command staff, and emphasizes the role of crime analysts in optimizing resource allocation by identifying high-crime areas and individuals (Santos & Santos, 2020).

Initially, the first author attempted a pilot program but quickly recognized the need for expert support. Though SLCPD had employed analysts for years, data integration remained a challenge. Therefore, the first author hired a data scientist to automate regular updates. He also secured funding for training and technical support from Rachel and Roberto Santos.

Stratified policing leverages the law of crime concentration, directing resources toward areas with disproportionately high crime rates. Within the stratified policing framework, there are several levels of focus for addressing crime concentration. Given staffing and morale challenges, the first author initially chose to focus on two key concerns: problem areas and crime patterns.

Problem areas are high-crime geographic locations identified through systematic crime analysis and prioritized for targeted interventions. Responses to these areas involve short- and long-term strategies like enhanced patrols, community engagement, environmental modifications, and problem-solving initiatives aimed at addressing underlying causes (Santos & Santos, 2020).

SLCPD crime analysts received training to identify problem areas, and patrol captains were tasked with planning and executing responses, including targeted enforcement, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) interventions, community engagement, and public messaging.

Crime patterns are clusters of similar incidents based on characteristics like location and timing (Santos & Santos, 2020). For instance, Central Division analysts frequently identified vehicle burglary clusters within a 0.10-mile radius downtown. Once a pattern is identified, a watch commander (patrol lieutenant) is assigned based on the alignment of their schedule with



the pattern’s active times.<sup>1</sup> The objective is to “resolve” the pattern by achieving a 14-day period with no incidents. If a crime occurs during that period, the countdown restarts, and the watch commander provides regular updates on interventions until a 14-day crime-free period is achieved.

### Hotspot Policing

During the stratified policing implementation, the chief of police highlighted the success of other agencies in reducing violent street crime through collaborations with Professors Mike Smith, Rob Tillyer, and Brandon Tregle from the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). The first author was directed to partner with these criminologists to design a violent crime reduction plan based on their proven approach.

UTSA’s team assessed SLCPD’s violent street crime and devised a three-stage reduction strategy (Smith et al., 2022), starting with hotspot policing in September 2022. UTSA reviewed and adjusted hotspot locations every 60-90 days. Table 1 shows each iteration’s time frame, treated locations, and additional dispatches generated.

TABLE 1

HOTSPOT ITERATION PERIOD	# OF TREATED LOCATIONS	# OF ADDITIONAL WEEKDAY DISPATCHES PER DAY (M-R)	# OF ADDITIONAL WEEKEND DISPATCHES PER DAY (F-S)
9/11/22 - 11/30/22	14	42	31
12/1/22 - 1/31/23	10	43	39
2/1/23 - 3/31/23	12	41	34
4/1/23 - 5/31/23	15	52	44
6/1/23 - 7/31/23	20	78	61
8/1/23 - 9/30/23	19	78	64
10/1/23 - 11/30/23	18	65	57
12/1/23 - 1/31/23	12	63	46

1 While different approaches may better serve other agencies, in the case of SLCPD, the first author, in consultation with patrol captains, discussed and agreed that having the crime analyst supervisor make this assignment based on the analysis and notify the affected watch commander was the appropriate approach. This streamlined the timeline between pattern identification and assignment, avoiding delays caused by bureaucratic approval processes. Moreover, when an assignment was made via email, all patrol watch commanders, patrol captains, and the first author were included in the notification to ensure everyone was aware of current patterns and their respective assignments. Finally, the identification and assignment criteria were transparent and thoroughly explained to patrol watch commanders before the process began, eliminating ambiguity about how a pattern was identified, why it was assigned, and who was responsible.

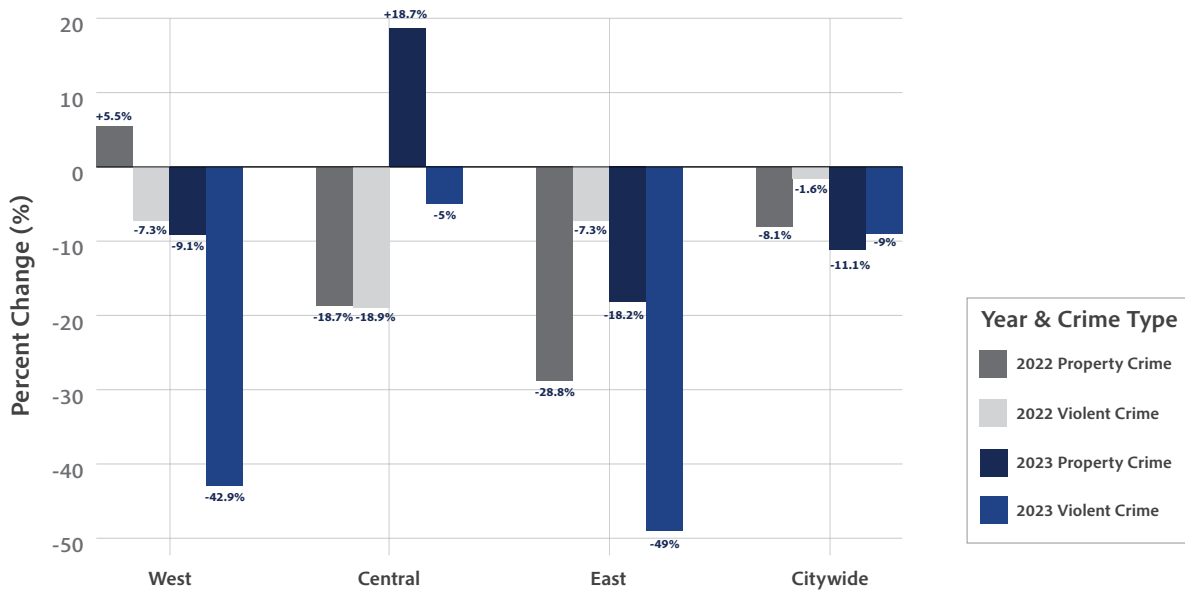


To ensure reliable deployment, hotspot assignments were integrated into the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system at set times and prioritized as level 2 calls, preventing officer breaks if hotspot calls were pending.

Because of concerns that staffing shortages coupled with that high call volume could frustrate officers and reduce the strategy’s impact, the first author closely monitored staffing levels, response times, and officer workloads, adjusting the strategy (with input from the UTSA team) as needed to balance effectiveness and operational feasibility.

## Observed Trends and Key Insights

While a rigorous evaluation is underway to measure the specific impacts of the SLCPD’s crime reduction strategies across time and place, descriptive statistics give context to the crime patterns following the SLCPD’s implementation of evidence-based strategies.<sup>2</sup> This section summarizes the observed outcomes and lessons learned, offering insights for other agencies.



**FIGURE 2.** Year-over-Year Percentage Change in Crime (2022 and 2023) — Property vs. Violent Crime across Divisions and Citywide

<sup>2</sup> We appreciate a reviewer’s observation that other cities experienced crime reductions in 2023, correctly noting that descriptive statistics cannot imply causality. However, it may be prudent to exercise caution in interpreting these reductions as part of a broader trend due to the complexities of crime data reporting in the United States. For example, previously reported violent crime reductions for 2022 were later revised to reflect increases after the FBI updated its 2022 statistics in September 2024. It remains to be seen if upcoming updates—which are routine—will similarly affect 2023 crime data.



## *Crime Trends Post Implementation*

As shown in Figure 2, reductions in crime were recorded in both problem areas and citywide. In 2023, violent crime decreased by over 40% in the West and East District Problem Areas, with a nearly 10% drop citywide. The Central Division Problem Area saw a 5% reduction following an 18.9% drop in 2022. Exceptions included a 5.5% rise in property crime in the West Division Problem Area in 2022 and an 18.7% increase in property crime in the Central District Problem Area in 2023, offsetting the prior year's decline.

Community, business, and public leaders reported marked improvements in livability, safety, and quality of life, with reduced crime and disorder across these areas (Noriega & Dujanovic, 2024).

The successful implementation of evidence-based strategies was associated with substantial improvements, despite SLCPD operating at 20% below its approved staffing levels (Mourtgos, Adams, & Nix, 2024; Mourtgos et al., 2022). These results underscore the potential for evidence-based approaches to achieve meaningful outcomes, even with constrained resources.

## *Lessons Learned*

Key insights emerged during implementation that may aid other police managers in adopting similar programs. These lessons are organized below.

### *Balancing Staffing Challenges with Effective Time Management*

Staffing remains a persistent challenge for police managers (Wilson, 2012). This is understandable as the demand for police services often exceeds the available personnel resources (Mourtgos et al., 2021; Mourtgos & Adams, 2023). It is not our intent to diminish the significance of these concerns. Indeed, our own research has demonstrated how adequate staffing levels can positively influence outcomes, such as call response times, that are important to both agencies and the communities they serve (Mourtgos, Adams, & Nix, 2024). Despite reduced personnel, efficient time management offers room for improvement (Santos & Santos, 2020).

Policing practice includes informal behaviors that can impact efficiency. For example, officers may linger on calls to socialize, multiple officers may stay when one can complete the report, they may run personal errands between calls, or they may have delayed availability post line-ups and early line-downs. While not all officers engage in this behavior, they indicate that time management, rather than just staffing, can influence capacity. We are not alone in making this observation; Santos and Santos (2020) also argue that officers have available time to engage in proactive policing activities—if they are required or encouraged to do so, as they were in the implementation of stratified policing and hot-spots policing interventions discussed in this paper.

SLCPD's experience supports this view. Despite resistance to added responsibilities, officers consistently found time to respond to hotspot calls, with an approximate 90+% compliance rate tracked by UTSA researchers. Officers also engaged proactively in problem areas and with crime patterns, monitored through an intranet system.



Acknowledging workload concerns is important, as every agency has unique limits. To ease strain and demonstrate commitment, the command staff, including the first author, initially handled hotspot calls themselves. This approach lightened the load on patrol officers and showed leadership's support for the program.

When concerns about time constraints inevitably arise, leaders should acknowledge these concerns while reinforcing expectations for efficient time use. By engaging officers individually and in groups, leaders can demonstrate that officers have sufficient time if it is managed effectively, encouraging a balanced approach to both agency demands and operational feasibility.

### *Turning “Impossible” into Attainable Goals: Overcoming Resistance in Leadership*

Resistance to new strategies often extends to leadership, sometimes from the implementation manager's close colleagues. While input from operational leaders is invaluable, implementers should differentiate between legitimate concerns and resistance rooted in discomfort with change. Managers must avoid accepting claims like “this isn't possible” which are based on resistance rather than actual constraints.

For instance, resolving a crime pattern under the stratified policing approach required that no similar incidents occur within a targeted area for 14 consecutive days. Patrol lieutenants initially pushed back, asserting that achieving such outcomes was “impossible,” particularly in areas with persistent issues, such as one downtown area known for vehicle burglaries. Despite repeated instructions, patrol lieutenants failed to adequately address these patterns.

The first author met with the lieutenant in charge of one area and explained evidence-based strategies that had been successful in similar contexts (e.g., Santos & Santos, 2015a, 2015b, 2021). When the lieutenant described his own interventions, it revealed a gap between the program's directives and the officers' execution.

The first author offered practical steps for strategy compliance, clarified the lieutenant's authority to involve property crime detectives, and reinforced the full support of the Office of the Chief. The pattern was resolved shortly after. Within months, other “impossible” patterns were similarly mitigated. The divisions became adept at resolving crime flare-ups, reducing the need for formal interventions.

While it is natural to empathize with skeptical colleagues (Filstad, 2024), evidence-based strategies help managers remain resolute in guiding teams toward seemingly unattainable outcomes. These strategies are crucial to building strong relationships between police agencies and the public.

### *Maximizing Impact through Effective Sergeant Accountability*

First-line supervisors ensure the consistent and effective implementation of any strategy (Cronin et al., 2017). Recognizing this, SLCPD gave all sergeants dedicated training on the new



strategies, helping them understand the initiatives' rationale and evidence-based logic.

The sergeants' reactions varied. Some were high performers who championed the new efforts, others followed the prevailing direction, and some were disengaged unless explicitly required to act. A core component of stratified policing is consistent engagement in problem areas; an intranet system tracked these activities. Initially, a motivated minority of officers was active while the majority lagged behind.

To address this lag, the first author tasked analysts with compiling daily officer engagement statistics, aggregated at the squad level for each sergeant. Certain sergeants had higher engagements, indicating that the issue was supervisory rather than individual. New analytics at monthly meetings highlighted sergeants' underperformance. The first author required captains to develop action plans to improve squad engagement for the bottom 25% of sergeants.

Within months, sergeant accountability increased, and overall engagement in crime reduction activities improved, demonstrating the sergeants' role in success. Not only should they be held accountable for their squad's actions, but accountability should be implemented early to avoid delays in achieving outcomes.

### *Building Analytical Capacity*

Crime analysts are vital for the successful implementation of evidence-based crime reduction strategies (Piza & Feng, 2017; Santos, 2018; Santos & Santos, 2020). They help agencies accurately identify problems, understand when and where these issues occur, and justify resource allocation. Analysts provide evidence to support decisions, preventing agencies from being pulled in conflicting directions by various stakeholders.

Analysts also offer critical feedback on the effectiveness of strategies, allowing for timely corrections when necessary. Having skilled analysts enables the agency to address setbacks and optimize implementation.

Finally, as with any specialized position, the right people must be in the right roles. The first author was fortunate to secure support from both the chief of police and the city government to invest in an experienced, highly qualified data scientist from the private sector. This required a commitment to offer competitive compensation comparable to private-sector positions. While many data scientists may be drawn to unique and impactful police work, government salaries often fall short of private-sector offerings. This consideration is equally relevant for non-management positions. To address this challenge, the first author collaborated with human resources to bring the existing analysts' salaries up to market standards—which had not happened in years. This adjustment facilitated the promotion of a promising analyst to a supervisory role and enabled the agency to attract new talent with the advanced software and coding skills necessary for integrating multiple agency systems.

This investment in data and analytical personnel enhanced the agency's efficiency, automating processes to save time and costs. It also enabled daily statistical updates and the



development of internal and external dashboards, improving communication both within the department and with the public.

### *Strengthening Strategies Through Academic Partnerships*

The first author initially attempted to implement the stratified policing approach independently. Although he was well-versed in the literature and had experience with process management, he now advises against this approach. Implementing evidence-based practices, particularly comprehensive ones like stratified policing, is complex and often presents unforeseen challenges. Collaborating with experienced criminologists is essential to successfully navigate these complexities and achieve optimal outcomes (Rojek et al., 2014).<sup>3</sup>

Without external expert support, it is unlikely that a new initiative will be as effective, potentially leading to suboptimal short-term results and eroding confidence in the strategy. The initial implementation was less effective than hoped for, but fortunately it did not damage long-term perceptions of the program before technical partners were brought in.

Collaborating with criminologists allows for stronger assessments of strategy effectiveness and reduces the agency's operational burden. External researchers can assist with tasks like analyzing hotspot locations and adjusting strategies, making the process more manageable for busy executives. Additionally, external experts lend legitimacy to the initiative, increasing its credibility with politicians, community leaders, the media, and the public even if internal skepticism exists (Hansen et al., 2014).

### *Executive Demands*

Implementation success relies heavily on an executive who consistently champions the initiative, navigates challenges, and maintains accountability. Executives are critical in ensuring that complex projects like this proceed effectively, despite the inherent difficulty of managing relationships with long-time colleagues.

A committed command staff that supports the executive's vision is also essential (Santos & Santos, 2012). The initiative would have faced significant hurdles without captains who were fully engaged in the plan and led their divisions accordingly. Their support helped avoid delays and ensured smoother implementation.

Additionally, the department learned a lesson from the decision to implement two substantial strategies simultaneously. The stratified policing model was in early stages when the chief directed collaboration with UTSA criminologists on a violent street crime reduction strategy. The UTSA team's expertise greatly contributed to the positive outcomes, but implementing both strategies at once created agency-wide confusion about each plan's distinct goals. Moreover, the

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<sup>3</sup> Agencies have several options for collaborating with criminologists, including contract services, grant funding, and cooperative agreements. The SLCPD opted for contract services in both programs discussed here due to the time delays often associated with grant funding and the need for quicker implementation.



added burden to the first author ultimately delayed the medium- and long-term phases of the UTSA plan and accompanying crime reduction.

Police managers may want to consider implementing one major initiative at a time, allowing thorough integration before introducing new strategies. Strategic prioritization should consider local context and agency-specific needs. In this case, the decision to launch stratified policing first was driven by timing.

### *Succession Planning: Protecting Gains Amid Competing Priorities*

Finally, sustaining long-term success depends on early succession planning. The system established by the first author is designed to remain functional as long as an executive continues to support it. However, the author's departure (without a robust succession plan) may lead to a diminished focus on data-driven proactive crime reduction, as shifting political priorities divert attention to other issues. Without sustained support, the programs' gains are at risk, highlighting the importance of succession planning to maintain momentum. This is even more crucial amid competing demands on police resources (Crank, 2003; Crank & Langworthy, 1992; Matusiak, 2016; Matusiak et al., 2017), for which there may not be a straightforward solution. The inability to maintain a sustained focus amidst competing municipal priorities—particularly when an agency is under-resourced—jeopardizes the long-term success of any implementation effort.

## Conclusion

The Salt Lake City Police Department's crime reduction program offers a compelling demonstration of how targeted, evidence-based investments in analytical capabilities and leadership can successfully reduce crime, even under resource constraints. SLCPD's strategic civilian hires and structured management systems were pivotal in translating analytical insights into actionable, effective crime reduction strategies. The evidence suggests that institutional reform—anchored in consistent leadership, accountability, and data-driven strategies—can lead to substantial, measurable outcomes in public safety.

The implications of this case study extend beyond policing into broader public sector governance. The critical role of civilian analytical talent, effective data integration, and unwavering executive leadership underscores the necessity of well-designed managerial frameworks to address complex social problems. Sustained improvement requires leadership that not only champions reforms but also invests in their operational success through careful succession planning and accountability mechanisms.

The SLCPD case also highlights a persistent theme in public administration: the gap between knowledge creation and effective implementation. While evidence-based practices are well-documented, their translation into operational success remains contingent on local leadership, alignment of incentives, and responsiveness to community and political environments (del Pozo et al., 2024). This research underscores how the potential of evidence-based strategies hinges not



merely on adopting best practices but also on embedding these strategies within a sustained, adaptive, and resilient institutional culture. The lesson is clear: successful crime reduction is not simply about knowledge; it is about leadership that transforms knowledge into systematic action.



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## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**

**DR. SCOTT M. MOURTGOS**, who joined the University of South Carolina as an Assistant Professor in 2024, specializes in applied policing and criminal justice policy research—focusing on topics such as public perceptions of police use-of-force, crime deterrence strategies, police workforce issues, and the use of Bayesian statistics in criminal justice analysis. He is a National Institute of Justice LEADS Scholar, serves on research and editorial boards (including the Police Executive Research Forum and several academic journals), and was inducted into the Evidence-Based Policing Hall of Fame in 2024.

**DR. IAN T. ADAMS** holds a Ph.D. in Political Science and an M.P.A. from the University of Utah and serves as an Assistant Professor at the University of South Carolina, where he directs evidence-informed policing research at the intersection of technology, policy, and personnel in law enforcement. In recognition of his impactful contributions, he received the 2024 Early Career Award from the American Society of Criminology’s Division of Policing.