What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising: Exploring the Role of Evidence-Based Policing

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Evidence-based policing is determined by statistical evidence gathered after the implementation of a program. Instead of other policing strategies, this program is malleable, dependent on data and studies being conducted. Currently, police agencies operate under set conditions. The men and women who are on the job determine their own rhythm and discretionary guidelines, reacting to their own personal values as well as the culture of the community.

Evidence-based policing requires the men and women of the law enforcement job to change their daily routine, and sometimes change their entire view of the crime problem and its solutions. A negative element of evidence-based policing involves enforcing the implementation of the strategies adopted by the policing institution. As mentioned previously, many law enforcement officials maintain their own personal routines and strategies that they personally find most effective, true or not. Making someone change his or her ways, especially if the person has been doing it for upwards of a decade, is an extremely difficult and arduous task. It may require more extensive work, and institute more demands on the officer. Some institutions may even be skeptical of the actual effectiveness of the program, addressing the possible temporary benefits or displacement of criminal activity.

Objectively speaking, evidence-based policing is the best, most efficient way to prevent or deal with crime. Why continue to implement a program or strategy that is not effective? Qualitative and quantitative studies in areas throughout the country pertaining to different geographical locations and demographics should dictate law enforcement operations. The ultimate goal of crime research is to find the best way to prevent crime or the best way to deal with the victims or offenders. If law enforcement officials can implement the best strategies and practices, then the resources can be most efficiently utilized.

Many scientific fields implement rules and regulations based on evidential findings through years of research and trials. For example, the medical field constantly conducts studies, due to the fact that the mistakes made when using outdated procedures and treatment plans can cause further illness and even death. That's why experts of the medical discipline welcome tests in advanced technology and practical real-life scenarios to prove their validity and effectiveness. In a similar way, using updated policing practices can have the same effect. A program that effectively reduces illegal firearms on the streets can prevent many deaths.

On the other hand, there may also be some challenges in implementing evidence-based policing, one of which is the fact that research itself provides many questions regarding the authenticity and reliability of the data accrued since numbers are very easily changed and skewed to exemplify an outcome that the researcher wants. Many data sets that are available are studies that were done on a short-term scale, not paying attention to the long-term outcomes of the program. Different researchers may borrow data from other studies that were conducted independently for the purpose of proving a completely different point, further making the data and study findings inaccurate.

Law enforcement officers with many years on the job and with considerably more field experience may also view the researcher as uninformed. For someone who has spent years on the streets of a city, he or she may feel as though they have more knowledge and evidence than the researcher. It is difficult for someone on the inside of an environment to accept someone from the outside, especially if that outsider is trying to tell the insider how to do his or her job. Much tension and resentment develop, furthering the difficulty of implementation of evidence-based policing.

Another challenging issue in evidence-oriented policing is that conducting research itself is extremely expensive and may take many years to produce definitive results. Some research may not even reach a conclusion, and the whole endeavor may seem futile. Although many resources are needed for research, namely funding from state or local governments, the potential rewards may far outweigh the investments. Rewards will not be immediate, however over the course of time, the municipalities will experience benefits. Less money will be spent throughout the entire criminal justice system if the crime can be prevented in the first place. One less offender is one less arrest, court hearing, jail/prison time, probation, and rehabilitation that the criminal justice system must support. This can translate into millions of dollars in the long run, which is the best service for any community.