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Digest

Emerging Issues in American Policing is a quarterly digest intended for police-practitioners and community members that presents innovations in the field of policing from the leading academic journals and research publications. Please forward any questions or suggestions to EmergingIssuesPolicing@vera.org.

Hot Spots Policing and Crime Reduction

Recent research suggests that hot spots policing has the potential to effectively reduce crime, when implemented fairly and in appropriate dosages.

In recent years, police approaches to reducing crime have shifted from reactive methods—such as random preventive patrols and rapid emergency call responses—to more proactive strategies. Hot spot policing is one such approach that involves identifying and focusing police resources on the specific areas that produce the largest volume of crime in a given jurisdiction. Using an advanced computer simulation program, one recently published study compared the effectiveness of low and high intensity hot spots policing against traditional random patrol activities. Low intensity is when officers spend half of their time in hotspots, whereas high intensity is when officers spend all of their time in hot spots. The study was conducted in a hypothetical city that reflects the largest U.S. cities’ average population characteristics. The hypothetical city’s crime patterns mirrored trends in pre-existing robbery data. A total of 36 on-duty police officers patrolled the city, with nine officers assigned to each beat at any given time.

Results indicate that both low and high hot spots policing deployment strategies reduced robberies significantly more than traditional random patrol. Furthermore, high intensity hot spots policing reduced robberies significantly more than low intensity. In comparison to random patrol, high intensity hot spots policing reduced robberies by approximately 77 percent within the hot spot areas and approximately 12 percent within the entire city, whereas low intensity hot spots deployment reduced robberies by about 19 percent in hot spot areas and about 2 percent in the entire city.

Overall, the results from this study lend support to the benefits of implementing hot spots policing strategies in high dosages/intensity in urban areas. Importantly, the authors note that their study does not consider the role of officers’ behavior toward community members in hot spots, which can either supplement or minimize the success of this approach. Specifically, the researchers highlight that when officers behave in ways that are procedurally fair and promote legitimacy, this will likely
enhance public safety, particularly in the context of proactive policing tactics. Thus, it is critical to consider the ways in which hot spots policing and other proactive policing strategies are implemented, and refine the steps taken to strategically reduce crime.

**Officer Stress: Causes and Solutions**

Research highlights the need to understand officer wellbeing, factors that compromise it, and effective solutions for managing it.

The high-stress demands of police work weigh heavily on officers’ morale and health. Police stress is an often overlooked topic, but recently, public health researchers conducted an extensive review of the factors that contribute to police stress and the mental and physical outcomes associated with it.

Many occupational hazards are inherent to police work and can cause severe officer stress. For example, as first responders to a variety of emergency situations, officers commonly witness traumatic events such as violence, death, and abuse. In effect, between 7 percent and 19 percent of officers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with symptoms including depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, aggressiveness, substance abuse, and frequent sick leave. Factors such as social support, resiliency, and life satisfaction can all reduce officers’ risks for developing PTSD.

Importantly, research suggests that while operational stressors (e.g., PTSD, physical injuries) can cause acute stress, organizational stressors (e.g., shift work, job insecurity, and lack of social support) cause more overall stress for officers. Organizational stressors are associated with poor physical and mental health, marital troubles, and disengagement from social support systems. There are steps that police executives can take to reduce and/or prevent organizational stress and promote officer wellbeing, including providing training to staff to help effectively manage stress; listening to officers; improving communication and disciplinary procedures; involving officers in decision-making processes; and creating a procedurally fair organizational climate.

Despite the prevalence of work-related stressors, generally police officers have been reluctant to request or receive emotional support. Incorporating mindful meditation into training curricula and workplace routines is one promising strategy to address this need. Mindful meditation is the practice of momentarily focusing all of one’s attention on their present situation, and the ways they are processing and experiencing it. Research demonstrates that mindful meditation is broadly effective at reducing stress, depression, anxiety, and fatigue, as well as improving attention, self-regulation, and memory. One recently published research article examined the effects of a mindful meditation training on police officers by comparing 43 trained officers’ self-reported health outcomes before and after the training. Results indicated that after the training, officers experienced significantly lower levels of stress, sleep problems, fatigue, emotional regulation challenges, and burnout. This approach to stress relief is particularly advantageous for law enforcement because it can be done quickly, at
almost any time, and involves little to no cost.

This emerging research on officer stressors, impacts, and solutions offers valuable insights for police practitioners to improve officer support services and health outcomes. Given the importance of officer wellbeing to an agency's success, it is critical to consider solutions such as mindful meditation training, which provide promising results and can be very inexpensive or potentially cost neutral to implement.

Supporting De-Escalation through Supervision

Recent evidence from a Seattle Police Department program suggests that simple supervisory meetings may be effective at reducing unnecessary police reliance on physical force and arrests.

Decades of psychological research demonstrates that when people perceive threatening or high-risk situations, in order to ensure their safety, they instinctually resort to “fast-thinking” approaches in decision-making.\(^1\) This phenomenon is particularly relevant to officers working to manage high-risk situations and environments, when they have to make quick decisions about whether to use force. Yet research importantly highlights that while fast-thinking approaches are often efficient, they are associated with higher levels of error in decision-making.\(^2\) When influenced by preconceptions toward particular groups, such as minorities or residents of high-crime areas, fast-thinking can contribute to adverse outcomes including unnecessary use of force and community perceptions of unfair treatment and police illegitimacy.\(^3\) For these reasons, researchers and policing practitioners have begun to emphasize the importance of officers’ ability to efficiently gather key information from their environments and employ de-escalation techniques whenever possible.\(^2\)

Recently, the Police Foundation partnered with three universities and the Seattle Police Department to study a supervision program that encourages informed decision-making and de-escalation.\(^3\) Under this program, officers at high risk for negative encounters with the community members regularly meet with supervisors after civilian encounters that involve obvious danger, crimes in progress, major disturbances, or arrests made. These meetings are intended to give officers a chance to reflect on their decision-making processes and recognize how they may shift into fast-thinking autopilot under certain conditions, with the ultimate goal of promoting more conscious decision-making in future encounters. In a six-month study comparing 221 officers who were randomly assigned to participate in this supervision program to 1,213 officers who were not, researchers found that officers who participated in the supervision meetings were less likely to use force or make arrests unnecessarily than their non-participating peers. The researchers suggested that, over time, this decreased reliance on force and arrests can positively affect communities’ perceptions of procedural justice. Overall, Seattle's supervision program offers a promising and replicable model for reducing officers’ overreliance on enforcement in fast-thinking situations, as it is straightforward, cost-effective, and
noninvasive into policing operations.

Peak Times for Mental Health Calls for Service

Temporal analyses of calls for service placed in Surrey, British Columbia demonstrate that mental illness-related calls for service peak on different days and times than most other calls for service.

A significant portion of officers’ daily tasks involve responding to calls for service. By knowing when to expect high call volumes, agencies can make informed decisions about how to properly allocate resources. Given that mental illness-related incidents make up at least 10 percent of calls for service—yet only a small fraction of officers are specifically trained to assist in these types of situations—it is particularly important to understand when these services are in highest demand. To address this question, researchers from Simon Fraser University, Portland State University, and Texas State University applied a statistical approach known as temporal analysis to six years of calls for service data gathered from the city of Surrey, British Columbia. In total, approximately 20,000 mental illness-related calls for service were compared to a control group of 20,000 domestic violence-related calls for service—an offense type selected because its call data is carefully recorded, and its call time patterns are similar to other violent crimes. The research found that mental health-related calls for service occurred most often on weekdays (especially Mondays and Wednesdays), whereas calls for service related to domestic violence peaked on weekends (especially Sundays). Mental health-related calls for service also peaked in the afternoons from 2 to 10 p.m., whereas domestic violence-related calls peaked during the evenings between 9 p.m. and midnight. The researchers conclude that in Surrey, mental health-related calls appear to peak at earlier points in the day than do other types of service calls, with the highest volume occurring on Mondays. All in all, this study highlights for police agencies the importance of ensuring appropriate resource allocation based on community needs and calls for service, which vary by factors like day, time, and type of service requested.

Future Directions of Technology in Policing

When implemented intentionally, modern technological advances can change the face of American policing by improving agency operations and service delivery to communities.

Modern advances in technology pose many opportunities for policing practitioners, including
increased efficiency, improved analytical capabilities, and enhanced communication and information sharing. However, little is known about the state of technological advances in American policing as a whole, or best practices for integrating modern technologies into the profession. To answer some of these questions, the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) and RTI International partnered to administer a nationwide technology survey to 749 policing agencies and conduct 22 in-depth case studies.

The research highlights several key findings. Large agencies (i.e., those with over 250 employees) report the highest technology adoption rates. Agencies most often acquire visual and audio technology, investigative and tactical equipment, and communications platforms. Furthermore, executive staff decisions, perceived needs, community demands, and available funding influence the types of technology adopted more so than an agency’s mission or preferred policing strategy. For example, an agency might want to enhance their problem-oriented policing capabilities with evidence-based body worn camera technologies, but ultimately opt for in-car cameras, which experience more frequent malfunction and slow upload because they are less costly.

In examining one area of technological adoption, another recent PERF report finds that advances within the field of emergency communications could be central to revolutionizing how policing agencies interface with each other and the community. The report summarizes the proceedings of a conference hosted for 150 emergency communication officials. It suggests that two emerging systems, Next Generation 911 (NG911) and FirstNet, will replace the current 911 call system by allowing community members to send texts, videos, photos, and other digital information to first responders. As an internet-based system, NG911 also allows neighboring police call centers to assist with processing calls when volumes are high or crises are occurring. Currently, 20 states have statewide plans to implement NG911, and 17 of those states have already begun the installment, testing, and use of NG911 components. The other referenced system, FirstNet, is a network which allows police to wirelessly share digital information with each other and the public. For example, in an active shooter situation, dispatchers may be able to send responders a floor plan of the building, perhaps with an indication of the shooter’s potential location. The system also grants police agencies priority mobile broadband service with select carriers during emergencies or major events.

Collectively, the recently published research on emerging policing technologies suggests that cutting-edge advances are a critical component to success in American policing, so long as they are evidence-based, purposefully designed, implemented, and coordinated among stakeholders, carefully maintained, and mindful of privacy and civil rights considerations. Strategically implemented and managed technology has a largely positive effect on American policing by increasing operational efficiency and improving agency communications systems and analytical capabilities. Current research can help agencies place their technology use into greater context and equip them with sound guidelines to meet today’s pressing technological challenges.
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