Evidence based policing: a view on its development within the police service

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Abstract

Purpose – As the education of new police constables moves to degree level, this paper explores the introduction of Evidence-Based Policing (EBP) as a pillar of the evolution of the police service as a profession.

Design/methodology/approach – Combining a review of key literature and explorations of practice, the current situation, challenges, and benefits of the adoption of EBP as philosophy are explored.

Findings – The benefits to the police service and individuals of wholeheartedly adopting EBP are huge; however, such adoption does not come without challenges.

Originality/value – This paper provides a contemporary snapshot in relation to the process of embedding EBP across the new educational routes to joining the police service. The opportunities provided by adopting EBP as philosophy across the service will assist in supporting and strengthening the sustainability of policing locally, nationally, and internationally.

Keywords Profession, Higher education, Evidence-based policing, Practitioner-research

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The term "Evidence-Based Policing (EBP)" is broadly based on the ideas of Sherman (1998), who suggests that rigorous scientific evaluations should inform and underpin decisions made by police practitioners within the workplace. Lum and Koper (2017) reinforce the importance of using such research to inform decisions but continue to suggest that the utilization of alternate broader definitions would also provide useful research for the broader service to apply within the workplace. Whether delivering policing in the UK or cooperating with police services internationally, such an approach could assist by informing, for example, the deployment of scarce resources, the investigative process, or the complexities of decision making as leaders.

As the entry routes to policing across England and Wales change to encompass education at degree level for new constables, it is clear that in order for the police service to be recognized as the profession to which it aspires, it requires the evolution of a body of

evidence-based knowledge to underpin the profession, similar to those which already exist in medicine and theology. Practitioner-researchers, studying across academic levels, are well placed to identify workplace problems, research, implement, evaluate, and share solutions widely. The adoption of such an EBP approach will further enhance the ability of the police services to support the United Nations international sustainable development goal 16, of providing access to justice and strengthen institutional abilities to deliver effective services to the public (United Nations, 2019). However, for this adoption to be successful, a philosophy of making the best use of EBP needs to be adopted across the police service, with the new recruits being well placed to be the catalyst for such a change.

Discussion

Although still in a phase of transition from previous learning programs, since 2018, new police constables have had the opportunity to enter the profession of policing following one of three-degree level educational routes, which are underpinned by the National Policing Curriculum (NPC). The NPC is designed, in consultations between subject matter experts, practitioners, and educational specialists, to support those entering the service as police constables for the contemporary challenges they face. The requirement for the police service to adapt to address such new challenges is recognized in the National Policing Vision 2025 (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners/National Police Chiefs' Council, 2015).

The new police constable entry routes form part of the Policing Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) of The College of Policing (the professional body for the service). The three entry routes are a Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA), a Degree Holder Entry Program (DHEP), or a Pre-Join Degree in Professional Policing.

The PCDA and DHEP programs are delivered in partnerships between Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and police forces, with learners being employees of the service. The Pre-Join degree in Professional Policing is taught solely by HEIs for learners who aspire to join the police service. Underpinning the design and delivery of the programs for all three entry routes is the NPC, within which EBP is embedded as one of the requirements required for licensing of the provider or partnership by the College of Policing as one of the degree level entry routes to joining the police service.

The embedding of EBP across the curriculum for all entry routes at the undergraduate level provides learners the opportunity to define, explain, and adopt the concept of EBP while exploring its importance within the context of policing.

There are many definitions and much debate in relation to what is within the scope of EBP (Sherman, 1998; Fleming, 2016; Selby-Fell, 2020), but there is a general consensus that it is the development of knowledge, which is shared to inform practice.

One approach adopted within policing is that of "ATLAS," which is designed to encourage police practitioners to:

(1) Ask questions that challenge current practices.

(2) Test and critically evaluate existing research and new ideas.

(3) Learn from existing approaches and new ideas while considering how they work in workplace practices.

(4) Adapt practices and policies using the best evidence available.

(5) Share the outcomes across the service.

(College of Policing, 2016)

Once defined and explained, learners on the degree level entry programs are encouraged to question the sources of evidence, their reliability, validity, and the possible presence of bias.

They are expected to establish how EBP has had a tangible impact on different areas of policing through the exploration of relevant case studies. The constraints of EBP, and its failure in some cases to yield the required response, can also be examined from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

The hierarchies of evidence types available are also well debated, with randomized control trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews being generally viewed as providing the "gold standard" of evidence at the summit of a pyramid, with small-scale single-method research studies and expert opinion being at the bottom of the same evidence pyramid. However, while acknowledging the challenges faced by such research methodologies at the base of the pyramid, these should not be ignored, as they can provide insights into current challenges or opportunities for more structured research.

As well as being able to produce definitions and explanations of EBP, curriculum evolve learners critical mindsets, by exploring the potential professional applications of an EBP approach from both the community and organizational perspective. Once the EBP concept has been established, and its potential benefits are viewed from reliable and credible evidence sources within the pyramid of evidence types, the transition is made to the application of EBP within policing practice. This is designed to contextualize, extend, and challenge existing professional practice. Adopting the much wider concept of EBP, those new constables employed by the police service studying either the PCDA or DHEP routes of entry, the curriculum provides new officers the opportunity to use EBP in practice by assessing evidence using professional judgment as reflective practitioners, this being achieved initially through all learners completing small-scale evidence-based research projects for application within their workplace. Such EBP projects have included, for example, identifying crime hotspots through analyzing crime data leading to targeted police operations. In this example, reported snatch crimes using mopeds were rocketing across large cities with many high-profile cases. Within the constraints of a small-scale EBP research project, an examination of existing crime statistics and academic literature identified a lack of UK-based evidence of what works in UK practice, so linking the issue to the principles of Problem Orientated Policing (POP) suggested by Goldstein (1990), research was conducted, which identified crime hotspots around specific public transportation hubs. Then a targeted police operation was conducted to heighten awareness of the public to the potential crimes. The impact of the intervention was again measured, with a positive impact being observed at that point in time with a reduction of offenses (acknowledging numerous variables that may have impacted and the possible displacement of crime, etc.); the outcomes of the intervention were then shared more widely and reflected upon to inform further practice.

For those learners studying a pre-join degree in professional policing and aspiring to join the service, the application of EBP in practice is, of course, far more challenging in relation to access to the policing workplace. As an alternative, EBP research can be focused around suggestions of topics from local police forces, the learners own voluntary roles (perhaps as police volunteers), or the evaluation of interventions locally or nationally. An example of an EBP project leading to a specific intervention by pre-join learners relates to a spate of mobile phones being lost or stolen on a university campus. Following the examination of local records with regards to mobile phone thefts on a university campus and exploration in academic literature of possible interventions, a group of students researched, designed and took action within the wider student community to highlight the loss of mobile phones, record the mobiles unique IMEI numbers and then again measure their success and report their findings more widely within the institution to inform further days of action. The aim is to educate students with regards to possible thefts and reduce mobile phone theft more widely from across the student population, along with the number of offenses recorded on the campus.

Such a multitude of small-scale EBP research projects offers police forces the opportunities to evaluate new ideas, new ways of working, tackling established problems,

and the chance to evaluate new interventions. As a result, opportunities exist to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and continuous development of the service, reducing the harmful or wasteful impact of ineffective interventions, which use up limited finances (Mitchell and Lewis, 2017). Wall *et al.* (2017) relate how effective training and development enables practitioner-researchers to challenge sometimes sensitive and complex workplace issues. In addition, such EBP practitioner research is underpinned by both academic expertise and the ethical approval/review processes embedded within HEIs.

The benefits of adopting a philosophy of EBP are many and varied but include the development of the evidence base for establishing the profession of policing, the identification of innovative solutions by practitioner-researchers who have an insight into workplace needs, which can then be shared across the service. The development of individual practitioner-researcher skills empowers self-actualizing police officers by exposing the expertise within academic higher education partnerships directly to the realities of contemporary policing.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of the wholesale adoption of EBP across the service, there is the requirement for ongoing cyclical processes identifying problems, researching, and testing solutions, while implementing and evaluating the outcomes.

Conclusion

The United Kingdom (UK) is still in a period of austerity with all public services struggling to maintain service delivery. This appears to be the case for the foreseeable future and will continue regardless of the recent announcement of recruiting 20,000 extra police constables (Gov.UK, 2019), which, when complete, will only take numbers to just under the number of officers in 2010. After a long period of decline in recorded crime figures, total numbers of crime are now increasing, specifically in areas, such as knife crime and cybercrime. In addition, crime, in general, is becoming more complex and diverse as technology increases, along with the increased use of social media and the problems that this can invoke.

These issues, coupled with the wider global concerns, such as organized crime, political upheavals, migration, etc., mean the police service needs to be "smarter" in their approach to meeting these challenges. Traditional models of policing no longer appear to provide the answers to current and future policing problems.

The World Economic Forum recently published a report that considers future risks at the global level, which will affect "the local" in many countries. The major risks lay around the economy, state relationships and power, the environment, and technological issues, such as cybercrime (World Economic Forum Report, 2019, p. 22). Linked to the United Nations (2019) goal 16 of providing access to justice, all of these issues will, in some form or another, have implications for the future of the police service locally, nationally, and internationally.

The service needs to think differently about how to deal with such issues and not rely on the approach that is underpinned by guesswork or historical solutions alone. The police service, therefore, needs to be evidence-driven, underpinned by rigor, utilizing the "best evidence available" approach; but it is an organization that needs these results sooner rather than later due to operational necessity. Of course, there is a place for deeper scientific analysis of some subjects, but the day-to-day running of the organization depends upon creating an evidence-based approach invoked, not only by the new recruits but by all police officers and staff of the services. It must be adopted as a philosophy rather than a tactic, as police are under pressure to deal with a large number of calls received, being able to adapt on a case by case basis (Tilley and Laycock, 2014).

The adoption of EBP can strengthen police accountability to the public and those agencies charged with governance responsibility for the service. This will lead to greater transparency, legitimacy, and accountability in professional practice, ultimately

strengthening police–public relationships and enhancing the democratic policing model. EBP clearly allows for outside reviews of decision making. As Pattyn and Wouter (2008) point out, policies or approaches based upon "political" or ideology concerns can easily be identified, as EBP must underpin the presentation of policing choices with solid argument or evidence. This adoption of EBP within policing presents an opportunity to influence wider policies, although the difficulties faced by practitioner-researchers in challenging well-established fundamental workplace structures, hierarchies, and procedures within their own organizations must be acknowledged (Wall *et al.*, 2017).

As within other professions, what needs to be introduced are ways in which EBP is fully integrated into routine policing and accepted as a fundamental part of the policing philosophy. This is not an easy task. The first steps are the introduction of the academic and applied workplace underpinning contained within the police professional degree-level entry routes for new police constables. This range of professional policing degrees, through the PCDA, DHEP, and pre-join, offer a marvelous opportunity to vastly improve the much wider adoption of EBP and its approach, and the service should seize the opportunities it presents unreservedly.

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