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COPS AREN'T FREE AGENTS

To improve police practices, look to the workplace

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. How policing gets done clearly matters. Even if it's mostly done right, do it wrong once and the consequences can haunt a community and the nation for decades. We'll examine several prominent, science-based approaches to improving police practices, then (saving the best for last!) offer our own, workplace-centric view.

In 2011, not long before budgetary concerns brought down the annual shindig, your blogger sat in the auditorium as Dr. John Laub delivered the welcoming address at the NIJ conference. In his speech the agency's freshly-minted director introduced a new way to fuse science and practice.

If that doesn't ring a bell, shame! Have you never heard of "translational" criminology?

> If we want to prevent and reduce crime in our communities, we must translate scientific research into policy and practice. Translational criminology aims to break down barriers between basic and applied research by creating a dynamic interface between research and practice. This process is a two-way street — scientists discover new tools and ideas for use in the field and evaluate their impact. In turn, practitioners offer novel observations from the field that in turn stimulates basic investigations.

We'll come back to the newfangled concept in a moment. But first, let's take a brief detour. In 1998, as part of the Police Foundation's "Ideas in American Policing" series, Professor Larry Sherman applied the "evidence-based" concept from the field of medicine to the field of policing:

> Evidence-based policing is the use of the best available research on the outcomes of police work to implement guidelines and evaluate agencies, units, and officers. Put more simply, evidence-based policing uses research to guide practice and evaluate practitioners. It uses the best evidence to shape the best practice.

If acting on evidence seems, well, commonsensical, keep in mind that action-directed cops and reflective scientists are probably not a natural mix. But problems have a way of forcing change. Propelled by a series of social crises, some of which police themselves instigated or made worse, and supported by initiatives such as George Mason University's Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, evidence-centric research took off.

DOJ promptly jumped in. "Using Research to Move Policing Forward," an article in the March 2012 *NIJ Journal*, highlighted the many benefits of "being smart on crime":

> Evidence-based policing leverages the country's investment in police and criminal justice research to help develop, implement and evaluate proactive crime-fighting strategies. It is an approach to controlling crime and disorder that promises to be more effective and less expensive than the traditional response-driven models, which cities can no longer afford.

The Feds also announced a new website, crimesolutions.gov, that would function as a virtual repository of evidence-based criminal justice practices:

> CrimeSolutions.gov organizes evidence on what works in criminal justice, juvenile justice and crime victim services in a way designed to help inform program and policy decisions. It is a central resource that policymakers and practitioners can turn to when they need to find an evidence-based program for their community or want to know if a program they are funding has been determined to be effective.

CrimeSolutions.gov is more than a bookshelf. It includes an evaluation component, with experts assigning grades on a sliding scale: effective, promising, inconclusive or no effects. To date, they have appraised 80 policing programs, mostly targeted efforts aimed at a specific community, and 11 broader practices. For example, the program "Hot Spots Policing in Lowell, Massachusetts" focused on reducing disorder in high-crime areas by, among other things, increasing misdemeanor arrests and expanding social services. Evaluators found that it reduced disorder and significantly reduced citizen complaints of burglary and robbery. It was rated effective. "Problem-Oriented Policing," a widespread practice that assesses community problems and tailors a response, was reviewed through a meta-analysis of ten studies. In all, the practice seemed to yield significant reductions in crime and disorder and received the second-best rating, "promising."

Basing decisions on evidence is all well and good. But how should knowledge be turned into practice? That's where "translational" comes in. In his address, Dr. Laub defined translational research as "a scientific approach that reaches across disciplines to

devise, test and expeditiously implement solutions to pressing problems." Just like evidence-based science, the translational approach also has its origins in medicine. To assure that end products are responsive to real-world needs, translational researchers and practitioners must collaborate at each step, from defining the issue to devising, implementing and assessing interventions. Involving practitioners allows them to share real-world knowledge with researchers, while involving experts allows them to convey and interpret scholarly findings to practitioners, who might otherwise be forced to rely on secondary sources.

So what's mising? Neither the evidence-based nor translational approaches offer a template for discovering needs. That's where a third paradigm, "Sentinel Events," comes in. Initially described by Dr. Laub as the "organizational accident model," it got started in aviation, was adopted by medicine, then became a key NIJ initiative (full disclosure: I was recently welcomed into its listserv and appreciate the kindness.) Sentinel researchers are alerted by things gone wrong. Using a structured, science-based approach, actual episodes of police shootings, wrongful convictions and such are examined in depth to discover weaknesses and devise changes "that would lead to greater system reliability and, hence, greater public confidence in the integrity of our criminal justice system."

Several studies have praised Sentinel's potential. For example, "A Sentinel Events Approach to Addressing Suicide and Self-Harm in Jail" (2014) concluded that using it to probe violent episodes in correctional facilities can "help to instill a new culture…that better ensures the safety and well-being of those under their custody." Still, there is an obvious "if." Sentinel's success depends on acquiring accurate and complete accounts of what took place. But strangers who pop in with lots of questions after things turn sour might get a cold reception. How to get the real scoop? Here is what our nation's medical accrediting agency recommends:

- Those who report human errors and at-risk behaviors are NOT punished, so that the organization can learn and make improvements.
- Those responsible for at-risk behaviors are coached, and those committing reckless acts are disciplined fairly and equitably, no matter the outcome of the reckless act.
- Senior leaders, unit leaders, physicians, nurses, and all other staff are held to the same standards.

NIJ's 2015 guide for conducting sentinel reviews, "Paving the Way: Lessons Learned from Sentinel Events Reviews" emphasizes avoiding blame. And, harking back to translational research, it recommends that to insure an informed judgment review

teams include “sharp-end-of-the-stick practitioners with front-line knowledge” and researchers with “one foot in the practice world and one foot in the research world….” (For a 2014 NIJ collection of brief essays about the sentinel approach click here.)

Sentinel drew our attention because *Police Issues* also works back from real events, admittedly in a far less scientific way. So what is it that we could possibly add? Let’s begin with a little story.

A very long time ago, after completing his coursework at the University at Albany, your blogger turned to the matter of his dissertation. Fortunately, only two years had passed since he had interrupted his career as a Fed, so his memory of the workplace was still vivid. With invaluable support from Hans Toch and Gary Marx, two scholars with deep knowledge of the police environment, he got the job done. The product, “Production and Craftsmanship in Police Narcotics Enforcement,” explored the interaction between “quantity” and “quality,” which has long bedeviled practitioners of the policing craft. (Click herefor a journal article based on the dissertation and here for a more chatty piece.)

We need hardly mention which of the two characteristics addressed in the title proved the more dominant. After interviewing and administering instruments to members of drug units at six police departments of varying size, it was apparent that line-level officers struggled to balance the same pressures to make “numbers” that had dogged your blogger and his colleagues. Here’s a typical officer comment about the salience of “numbers”:

> It filters down [that superiors] want higher numbers, so inevitably we give them higher numbers. You turn in your monthly report, you’ve got two arrests, they say “you had only two drug arrests”? Now, you may have gotten the two biggest dealers in the State, but they’re still going to complain because you’ve only got two.

Here’s one about the meaning of a “quality case”:

> A quality case is a case where you cover all the little aspects. You make sure your reports are descriptive, that they contain all the elements of the offense necessary for prosecution, that the evidence is properly handled….Basically you’re [covering] all the bases that you feel will be necessary to successfully prosecute that case.

And here's how your blogger reconciled these views:

> It may be that a narrow definition of case quality is an adaptation that allows narcotics police to maintain a craftsmanlike image while presenting the smallest possible impediment to production.

Production pressures have had an unending run in the nation's major police agencies. Bill Bratton brought along number-centric COMPSTAT when he stepped in to manage LAPD. In 2012, three years after Bratton left, CRC Press released "The Crime Numbers Game: Management by Manipulation." Authored by two John Jay Criminal Justice professors (one, a retired NYPD Captain), the book spilled the beans on Compstat's corrupting influence. To make things seem hunky-dory, supervisors ordered officers to increase what could be counted, like car stops, while downgrading the severity of crimes (or if possible avoiding taking reports altogether.) Disgruntled cops soon spilled the beans, generating internal inquiries and a slew of damning media accounts. Alas, Compstat had already been adopted by many agencies and praised as a policing wunderkind (for the Police Foundation's supportive assessment click here.)

Pressures to "make numbers" (or to keep certain numbers down) are well known in industry. But they're seldom considered in policing. Let's plagiarize from a recent post:

> In every line of work incentives must be carefully managed so that employee "wants" don't steer the ship. That's especially true in policing, where the consequences of reckless, hasty or ill-informed decisions can easily prove catastrophic. But we can't expect officers to toe the line when their agency's foundation has been compromised by morally unsound practices such as ticket and arrest quotas. This unfortunate but well-known management approach, which is intended to raise "productivity," once drove an angry New York City cop to secretly tape his superiors.... And consider the seemingly contradictory but equally entrenched practice of downgrading serious crimes – say, by pressuring officers to reclassify aggravated assaults to simple assaults – so that departments can take credit for falling crime rates.

When probing officer-involved calamities your blogger always considers pressures to produce. Another likely suspect is chaos. A never-ending series of posts (most recently, "Routinely Chaotic") addresses factors likely to precipitate a disorderly police response; for example, a lack of information, insufficient resources, unpredictable citizens, and officers who are impulsive or unwilling to accept risk. Despite the best de-escalation training, such deficits can transform so-called "routine" encounters into nightmares that are virtually impossible to manage, let alone peacefully resolve. (For an instant workshop on chaos click on the "related posts" section of that blog piece.) Over the

years, the messiness of the police workplace has led us to suggest a host of correctives, from not involving cops unless absolutely necessary (an idea from, gee, medicine!) to implementing early intervention protocols so that problem characters get snagged before they cause their own demise.

Our suggestion here is that whatever the approach, whether evidence-based, translational or sentinel, explicitly considering the forces that affect (some would say, beset) the police workplace can point us to remedies that really work. To begin, check out the posts linked below. Then, let's get busy!