



POLICY BRIEF

Building research evidence that works for policing

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There is almost no evidence that policing in South Africa reduces crime or improves feelings of safety. This does not mean that it has no impact. It means only that the link between police activities, and levels of crime, perceptions of safety, fear of crime and community satisfaction with the police has not been competently shown. This brief explains how that conclusion was reached and what it implies.

Key findings

- ▶ Although SAPS has an impressive performance management system that collects masses of useful data, it does not rigorously determine impact.
- ▶ Building evidence on 'what works' in South African policing will not require an overhaul of methods, data sources or principles.
- ▶ Police work should aim to improve levels of crime, perceptions of safety, community satisfaction with the police and/or reduce fear of crime.
- ▶ Despite huge investment in human and physical resources, there is no good evidence that South African police work has its intended impact on crime, satisfaction with police or safety.
- ▶ We know a great deal about South African policing, but researchers and police have not asked questions in a way that identifies how changes in policing could bring about changes in outcome.
- ▶ Studies are needed that explore which differences in policing activity have the intended impact on crime and safety. This requires systematic empirical observation of causal relationships between policing activities and their outcomes.

Recommendations

- ▶ There is an urgent need for research that explores whether a difference in South African policing activity can be demonstrated, through careful observation, to make a difference to crime and safety.
- ▶ Research that can realistically improve policing must explore whether, how and to what extent a difference in policing activity can be said to cause a difference in outcomes.
- ▶ South Africa need not reinvent the wheel in identifying promising interventions for evaluation.
- ▶ Research for evidence-based policing (EBP) need not necessarily be randomised control trials, but should use various methods of careful, documented observation.
- ▶ Proponents of EBP in South Africa should seek lessons from similar environments – middle-income democracies with high rates of violent crime.
- ▶ To determine the impact of South African policing, researchers should collaborate to observe variation in both police behaviour and safety experiences and perceptions of the rest of society in the same study.

Introduction

There is almost no evidence that policing in South Africa reduces crime or improves feelings of safety. This does not mean it has no impact; only that the link between police activities, and crime levels, safety perceptions, fear of crime and satisfaction with the police has not been shown. This brief explains how that conclusion was reached and what it implies.

Much of what the police do is based on what is understood as common sense, or on practices long-established but never properly evaluated or compared to other options.

In evidence-based policing (EBP), research, analysis and evaluation inform police planning and practices. It places ‘how do we know?’ at the centre of police practice. It recognises that some policing behaviours are more likely to be effective than others, and uses careful, intentional evaluation to identify which is which. Doing things the way they have always been done is not good enough for important decisions that can affect the lives of millions of people.

Evidence Based Policing places the question ‘How do we know?’ at the centre of police practice

EBP can be compared to the role of a judge in a criminal trial. It demands more than guesswork and a balance of probabilities – it requires that conclusions are proven beyond reasonable doubt. Did a festive season crackdown reduce crime or did would-be offenders migrate to other areas for a month? Does a stop-and-search operation deter potential offenders and improve safety, or does it erode trust between police and citizens, resulting in more rather than less long-term law-breaking?

EBP asks us not just to have an opinion, but to test it by making structured observations of the real world in the most reliable way.

Given the stakes and resources at play, there is an urgent need to ask whether the activities of the South African Police Service (SAPS) make a difference to crime and safety.

This policy brief reflects the conclusions and implications of the first attempt to do so – a rapid evidence review. That review proposed a conceptual foundation to guide the growth of EBP research in South Africa and explored what evidence exists that policing in South Africa reduces crime and improves safety.

It found much research on ‘what happens’ in South African policing, ‘what used to happen’, ‘what isn’t working well’, ‘what communities think or feel about the police’ and ‘what should happen’. However, there is almost none that asks the question ‘what works?’ or demonstrates the efficacy of South African policing.

Multiple online databases and key journals were searched, thousands of research papers and more than 400 of the most promising abstracts scanned and the 140 likeliest full texts read. Only five papers could be said to evaluate whether something SAPS did worked. Building evidence on ‘what works’ in South African policing will not require an overhaul of methods, data sources or principles. It can be done by simply asking research questions in a slightly different way.

Research for a cause

EBP research is all about causation – whether one thing happening is responsible for another thing happening. Usually there is a goal in mind and an action chosen that is most likely to bring about that goal. Ideally, this choice should be made only once the impact of all feasible actions have been clearly defined, fully understood, evaluated and compared. Experimentation is often the best way to determine whether one thing causes another.

Medical research relies extensively on experiments – specifically on randomised control trials (RCTs). In an RCT, several people are randomly split into two (or more) groups and given different treatments. One group may receive a new medication, the other an old medication. If the former shows significantly better health outcomes, it suggests that the new medication is more effective and should be preferred over the old (although ongoing effects should be monitored and compared).

Doctors and health authorities will not usually approve or implement a treatment until it has done

well in at least one RCT. Preferable, though, are the combined results of numerous RCTs conducted by different researchers.¹ A systematic review of repeated RCTs is also the ‘gold standard’ for selecting a course of action in EBP, as promoted by the Campbell Collaboration and the UK’s What Works College of Policing. The trouble is that RCTs are not as easy to conduct or as widely understood outside of medicine. They are time-, energy- and resource-intensive.² Therefore, they are incredibly rare in criminal justice research, especially in middle-income, high-violence environments such as South Africa.

One review of studies on the effectiveness of policing interventions in reducing interpersonal violent crime in developing countries identified only five eligible studies, none of which had been conducted in Africa.³ This approach to EBP gives the impression that the global north is the only source of high-quality research and that nothing is known about the impact of South African policing. RCTs are ideal, but there is no reason why other forms of rigorous, careful evaluation and research should not inform police decision making.

Back to basics

Research that can realistically improve policing must explore whether, how and to what extent a difference in policing activity can be said to cause a difference in outcomes. This must be based on carefully organised and clearly documented observation and reasoning. It does not need to take the form of an experiment. Different fields of study have contributed various methods of bringing structure and transparency to observation and reasoning.

Useful observations about causation can be made of how things work in one case, or of the differences or similarities between how they work in two or more cases at one time. Observations can also be made of one or more cases over a period of interesting change, where an intentional change has been made. Alternatively, the results of several studies can be combined.

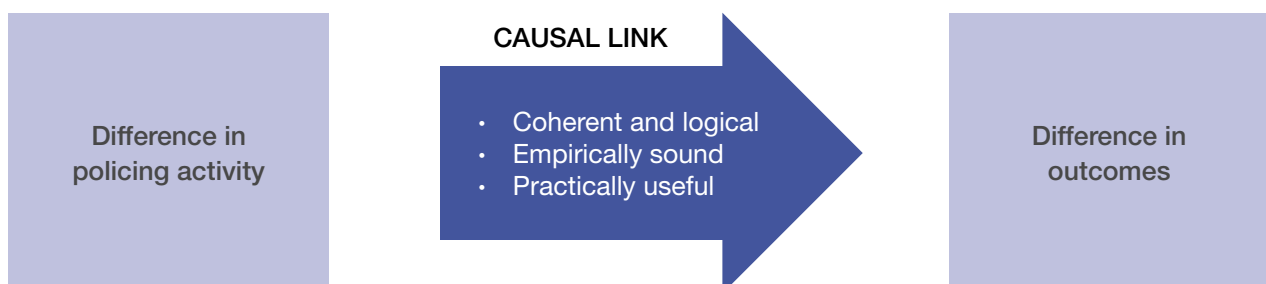
Whatever kind of observation is made, researchers must be clear on how they drew their conclusions, the strengths and weaknesses of their approach, and how results should be interpreted. It should be considered that every study may be biased, misleading or doubtful as a guide for decision making. Efforts should always be made to understand why a study may have got something wrong.

Useful research for EBP should not have to be an experiment, but should draw a link between a difference in policing activity and a difference in outcomes (e.g. that A causes B). It should be clearly stated and make logical sense, it should be possible to test and observe it to produce supporting evidence, and it should be of practical use in decision making. These are the non-negotiable, minimum building blocks of EBP research. This way of thinking should make it possible for a wide range of studies to ‘count’ as useful knowledge.

The review

To find out what is known about which SAPS activities make a difference to crime and safety, an extensive literature search and review was conducted. Online databases and key journals were searched for publications exploring a link between a difference in

Figure 1: Requirements of research for EBP



SAPS activities, and crime levels, safety perceptions, fear of crime and community satisfaction with the police. Only English and electronically accessible publications were considered.

Personal judgment influenced the screening, but ultimately, after scanning thousands of titles, and reading the 435 most promising abstracts and 140 likeliest full texts, only five papers met the broad inclusion criteria. Three of these addressed the impact of firearms regulation on levels of violent crime. None addressed an outcome of community crime perceptions, fear of crime or satisfaction with policing. They varied a great deal in logical coherence, empirical support and practical applicability.

In other words, with the exception of changes in firearms regulation, the review found no good evidence that a difference in SAPS activities has made any measurable difference to SAPS's intended goals. Again, this does not mean that the police have no impact; only that no such impact has been competently shown. Almost nothing is known about whether the police are doing the right things to improve crime and safety, because nobody has yet asked the question. And although SAPS has an impressive performance management system that collects masses of useful data, it, too, fails to rigorously determine impact.

The 'medication' of South African policing is being taken despite zero demonstrated impact on the 'disease' of crime

This is extraordinary. It implies that the 'medication' of South African policing is being taken despite zero demonstrated impact on the 'disease' of crime. It has to change. There is an urgent need for research that explores whether a difference in South African policing activity can be demonstrated, through careful observation, to make a difference to crime and safety.

A modest causal research agenda

When the UK Home Office launched its 'evidence-based policy programme to tackle crime and disorder' in 1999, it received £400 million of public money over its intended run of 10 years.⁴ That is more than R14 billion in today's terms.

This high-profile programme was cut short in 2002 because of its over-ambitious scale, unrealistic expectations, and 'unfeasible timescales, slow-moving bureaucratic procedures and shortages of "capacity"'.⁵ More recently, one law enforcement agency discussed sending 85 police to university over six years for EBP degrees, including 12 PhDs, as the start of a totally evidenced tipping-point campaign.⁶

South African EBP will necessarily take a different path. It will never match such funding levels, but it has an established policing research



SA HAS AN ESTABLISHED
POLICING RESEARCH
COMMUNITY AND GOOD
PUBLISHING RECORD

community and a good publishing record (compared to most lower- and middle-income countries). It is also a national police service that allows a single entry point for partnerships, has a research office and a strategic vision that sees it using research to direct its work.⁷

South Africa also need not reinvent the wheel in identifying promising interventions for evaluation. Unfortunately, most policing evaluation research is conducted in the few countries with high incomes and low to moderate levels of fatal violence. An excellent and unambiguously successful policing experiment in rural England may not apply to a South African informal settlement. Evidence of the effectiveness of promising policing interventions

should be sought in contexts as similar as possible to the 'patient'.

South Africa is a middle-income democracy with very high rates of violent crime - important criteria to determine whether another country's experience is likely to be applicable here.

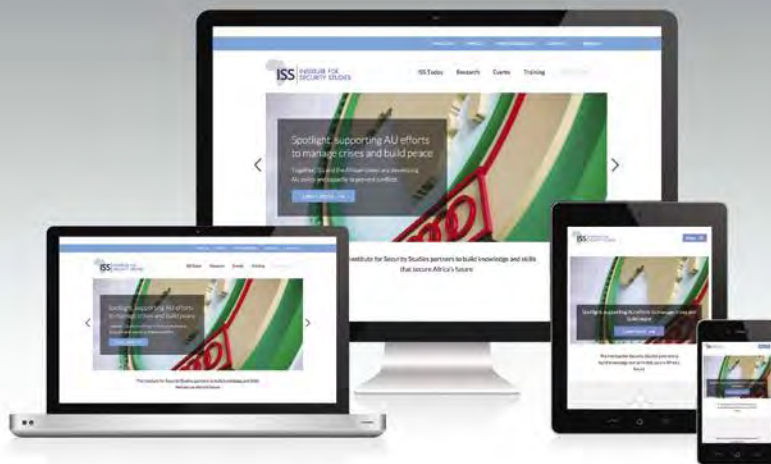
Much South African policing research will almost certainly remain observational and passive⁸ rather than experimental. It is important, nevertheless, that researchers and police produce clearly stated and logical research with supporting evidence, using careful observation, that acknowledges its limitations and is of practical use in decision making. In this way, policing in South Africa can incrementally embrace the logic and promise of EBP.

Notes

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- 3 Angela Higginson et al., Policing interventions for targeting interpersonal violence in developing countries: A systematic review, 2015.
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- 6 Lawrence W Sherman, A tipping point for 'totally evidenced policing': Ten ideas for building an evidence-based police agency, *International Criminal Justice Review* 25, No. 1, 2015, 11–29.
- 7 South African Police Service, Strategic Plan 2020-2025, 2020.
- 8 Ardil Jabar et al., Rationale and design of the Violence, Injury and Trauma Observatory (VITO): The Cape Town VITO Pilot Studies Protocol, *BMJ Open* 7, No. 12, 2017; Andrew Faull, How to map violence without police data, 2019.

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