



# Owning Police Reform: The Path Forward for Practitioners and Researchers

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## Abstract

The integration of evidence-based policy into criminal justice reform – and into police reform specifically – is a daunting but necessary endeavor. In this essay, we examine police reform, including a review of the literature, which is summarized and guided by our experiences and thoughts into a broad conceptual framework for what we believe is needed to realize true change in the policing profession. This essay provides a brief review of the history of police reform and explores three primary reasons why it has failed so far: (1) the tendency to implement reactionary (i.e., knee-jerk) reforms; (2) the reliance on non-aspirational reforms; and (3) a lack of necessary evidence to guide reforms. We then provide what we believe to be the path forward – the co-ownership of evidence-based police reform by police executives and researchers. We encourage and advise police executives to be proactive, strategic, and courageous in owning reform, see greater value in being users and builders of evidence, and educate the public and their own officers. We also call on researchers to do better by creating the knowledge needed for the field and packaging it in a way that can be more easily consumed by practitioners, policymakers, and the community. We believe it is through this co-ownership that police reform efforts have the greatest potential for success.

**Keywords** Police · Reform · Evidence-based · Use of force

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Thoughts and opinions expressed in this article are from the authors and do not necessarily reflect the perspectives or official positions of the National Policing Institute.

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## Introduction

ON August 4, 2015, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* ran a front-page story with the headline “Meet the Reformer.” Only a few weeks had passed since the fatal shooting of Samuel Dubose, an unarmed Black motorist, by a White campus police officer. This critical incident reignited pain within the Cincinnati (OH) community that had laid dormant for almost 15 years since the 2001 fatal police shooting of Timothy Thomas, another unarmed Black man. Civil unrest followed the 2001 incident, along with federal oversight of the Cincinnati Police Department, culminating in a five-year police reform plan that would become a national model for community-police relations and the implementation of problem solving as a primary policing strategy (Eck & Rothman, 2006; Rothman, 2012; Schatmeier, 2013). Despite this history of successful reform in Cincinnati, community demands for changes in policing were renewed in 2015. Beneath the “Meet the Reformer” headline published by the *Enquirer* was the picture of our lead author (Engel) – a then criminal justice professor from the University of Cincinnati – who was quickly appointed as Vice President for Safety and Reform at the University and given the mandate to implement evidence-based reforms designed to heal a troubled police department and grieved community. In this role, the lead author experienced the challenges and community concerns accompanying reform efforts, including the difficulties associated with the implementation of well-intentioned efforts that are rarely supported by evidence.

The challenge of reform is a familiar story to those who work within and beside police officials. Across the country, similar heightened scrutiny on the police, largely due to controversial deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police officers, has prompted substantial efforts toward reform. The Howard Center for Investigative Journalism identified nearly 300 police reform bills passed across the United States since the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020; while many of these laws are designed to reduce police use of force and increase accountability, some are also designed to bolster protections *for* the police (Monnay, 2022). This information highlights how active many legislatures are regarding systematic changes in policing, mandating reforms at the state level rather than waiting for police agencies to make their own. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the wide variety in the interpretation of what is viewed as necessary reform, including uncertainty in what is needed to enhance policing and ameliorate the crisis in public trust that has coalesced with an uptick in violent crime and a dilemma in police recruiting and retention.

This article presents a personal and professional tale of what works—and does not work—in police reform and the role of research and academia in this movement. Our thoughts are based upon prior academic writings but also on direct experiences with research and evidence in guiding reform efforts. We begin with a broad discussion of police reform, including its definition, history, and relationship with evidence. We follow with a discussion of why police reforms appear to be failing, identifying three primary reasons: the tendency to implement reactionary reforms, the reliance on non-aspirational reforms, and the lack of evidence

available to guide reform efforts. This leads to a discussion on the path forward for police reform, highlighting the importance of co-ownership in reform efforts by police executives and researchers. Finally, we underscore the need for reform in both the field of policing *and* academia to address the need for meaningful change in police practices guided by evidence.

## What Is Police Reform?

We begin by asking an obvious question that has yet to be satisfactorily answered: What is police reform? Unfortunately, for a term that is widely used, a comprehensive and shared definition remains elusive. Yet discussions of, and demands for, police reform have been prevalent in the United States since the onset of the modern criminal justice system. The term has been used to describe both the most minute adjustments (e.g., minor modifications to use of force policy) and broad sweeping transformations within policing (e.g., implementation of community-oriented policing philosophies).

Generally speaking, the concept of “reform” can be quite controversial among law enforcement practitioners, especially line-level police officers. On its face, “reform” suggests an unwillingness to accept the status quo. In its definition, “reform” refers to improving or amending something that is “evil,” “corrupt,” “wrong,” or otherwise problematic. It also implies that wholesale changes and a complete system overhaul are necessary remedies. It should be no surprise, then, that suggestions for the need for police reform can be interpreted by some as an implicit (if not explicit) assessment that the policing profession is malevolent, as opposed to a noble public service. Acknowledging the historical suspicions, and even hostility, of police officers towards those who promote reform (Goldsmith, 1991), some progressive police executives have reframed their presentation of “reform” as strategic actions associated with innovation, enhancement, progress, and continuous improvement. Yet, even with this reframing, it remains unclear what police reform actually is – and, further, what we expect reformed police to do.

## The Recent History of Police Reform

Guided by decades of recommendations from national commissions, progressive police leaders, policymakers, and scholars have sought to change the fundamental mission, core tactics, and measures of success in American policing (Weisburd & Braga, 2019). The result of these concerted efforts has been the development of numerous strategies in the 1980s to early 2000s that sought to enhance police effectiveness in crime prevention and control and to improve community-police relations (Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018). After experiencing increasing crime for almost three decades, crime rates began dropping in the early 1990s. Although there is debate concerning how much of the crime reduction was a product of police reform, research consistently suggests that changes in policing made at least some difference in crime prevention and control (Eck & Maguire, 2000; Engel & Eck, 2015; Zimring, 2007, 2017).

Despite the tremendous amount of police innovation and the dramatic reduction in violence and disorder in cities across the country, the public expressed discontent regarding the nature of police practices in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Engel & Eck, 2015; Meares & Tyler, 2017). Specifically, the concentration of police activity and resources in inner-city communities resulted in collateral consequences (e.g., over-reliance on aggressive crime control tactics and racial disparities in enforcement activities; see Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018 for review), spurring tensions between the police and the communities they serve and provoking a new crisis in police legitimacy. In turn, renewed concerns of racial bias in policing and the “second great awakening” (Sherman, 2018) on police use of deadly force spurred a “new conversation” on police reform (Walker, 2018). There is widespread consensus that a “tipping point” had been reached in the years following the 2014 death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, which then reached a “boiling point” by 2020 with the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN.

Most recently, concerns over policing practices have combined with recent upward trends in violent crime (Major Cities Chiefs Association, 2022), leading to a revisiting of a recurring question about policing in a democratic society: How can police maintain the community’s trust and confidence while at the same time effectively preventing crime and keeping citizens safe? In difficult times, police reform discussions often focus on only one objective at a time (Lum & Nagin, 2017). This has led some to believe that a tradeoff between fairness and effectiveness in policing is inevitable. However, both objectives are fundamental to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing and achievable when research findings and evidence guide practices. Police are tasked with using their discretion in ways that are proportionate to the harms they are designed to prevent (Sherman, 2022). Attaining a balance to achieve “just right” policing is an elusive but not unobtainable goal (e.g., see Engel & Eck, 2015), and we submit that any worthwhile police reform effort must be specifically focused on maintaining both public safety and public trust by using research evidence to guide practice.

## The Role of Evidence in Reform

As calls for police reform have continued to grow among the public, so too have the appeals for incorporating research evidence into police practice. Although not formally named until the late 1990s by Lawrence Sherman, the evidence-based policing (EBP) movement ushered in a generation of research on “what works” in policing and the application of those findings into practice (see Sherman, 1998, 2013). Over the last three decades, the EBP movement has increased the quantity and quality of evidence and its influence on police practices (Sherman, 2013; Sherman et al., 1997). This is perhaps best exemplified by the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy’s *Evidence-Based Policing Matrix* – an annually updated research-to-practice translation tool that organizes available experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations of police strategies for crime prevention (Lum et al., 2011; see also the Office of Justice Program’s *CrimeSolutions.gov*). To date, this matrix presents over 150 studies published from 1971 to the present.

Policing is not the only area in criminal justice where a push to embrace research findings has simultaneously propelled reform efforts. For example, recall the “nothing works” perception in the field of corrections in the 1970s that spurred academia into action, resulting in a plethora of research that suggested otherwise, and ushered in a slow and steady march toward the integration of evidence into correctional practice. The pinnacle of the anti-rehabilitation sentiment was reached when Martinson’s (1974) critique of the correctional system concluded that with few exceptions, rehabilitative efforts had no effect on recidivism. This launched the “what works” movement in corrections, resulting in a body of knowledge about the best treatment options for justice-involved individuals. This knowledge created the *who*, *what*, and *how* of effective correctional intervention (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005), shifting the corrections field to promote cognitive-behavioral treatment (CBT) (Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005; Wilson et al., 2005). Similar to the rise of CBT, agencies across the country began to rely upon actuarial risk assessments to identify an individual’s risk of re-offending and treatment needs (Latessa & Lovins, 2010). While the implementation of such practices tends to vary widely across state and local correctional systems, many agencies have adopted the evidence-based principles of effective intervention as the primary method to reduce recidivism (Cullen, 2005; Farringer et al., 2021). Collectively, this shift in policing and corrections to build and integrate research into practice has been situated within the broader movement toward evidence-based policy in the criminal justice system as a whole.

## Why Is Reform Failing?

Despite the impressive movement toward evidence-based practices across the criminal justice field, it is well recognized that this movement alone cannot effectively reform agencies. In policing, for example, there are many reasons why police reform has not gained momentum in the field and why, in some jurisdictions, it appears to have failed (e.g., see Rushin, 2016; Herskind & Roberts, 2022; Goldsmith, 2005; Lum & Nagin, 2017; Robinson, 2020). Scholars and practitioners alike have lamented the numerous and powerful barriers to the implementation and sustainability of reform efforts, even when research about what works is plentiful. More burdensome is the frequent situation when little or no research is available to guide reform.

As a result, in many communities, despite genuine and sincere efforts for police reform, success – measured as enhancements in effectiveness, efficiency, legitimacy, and fairness – remains elusive. This is especially true when examining the efforts implemented in the direct aftermath of high-profile incidents. Based directly on our experiences, we argue there are three primary reasons for police reform failure in the era of EBP: (1) the tendency to implement reactionary (i.e., knee-jerk) reforms; (2) the reliance on non-aspirational reforms; and (3) a lack of necessary evidence to guide reforms. Each of these is discussed in greater detail below.

## Implementation of Reactionary Reforms

The reality of policing is that police executives are responsible for crisis management. They must make decisions, even when there is little scientific evidence to guide them. Moreover, executives are often judged by the speediness of their actions rather than the quality of their responses. Due to these pressures, executives may implement “knee-jerk reaction” reforms. These are immediate responses to a critical incident or concessions to the loudest voices, designed to reduce the likelihood of civil unrest and save political and executives’ careers, rather than actually improve police practices. As a result, most of these efforts are inherently destined to fail; indeed, the expectation of failure appears to be the norm. Perhaps more importantly, those supporting reactionary reforms often cannot articulate what “success” looks like. What, specifically, is the purpose of the reform, and how will its effectiveness or impact be measured? These questions remain nearly universally unanswered with reactionary reforms.

As described by Lum (2021), many who are demanding police reform following a high-profile incident reach for “low-hanging fruit.” For example, consider the recent focus on banning chokeholds by police, mandating body-worn cameras (BWCs), disclosing data on the use of force, implementing particular training curricula, or reducing police budgets (i.e., de-funding the police). Each of these reforms lacks a strong evidence base to demonstrate effectiveness (Engel et al., 2020; Lum, 2021). Likewise, the “#8CantWait” campaign that encourages policymakers to quickly enact eight procedural changes to police use of force policy to reduce police-involved killings (Yglesias, 2020) is not based on strong research evidence, and even if effectively implemented, would likely result in only minor changes in behavioral and cultural outcomes in policing. Attempting police reform “around the edges” may lead to short-term relief, but only further delays – and in some instances intensifies – the inevitable public discontent and backlash that occurs when policing practices fail to address the broader set of issues related to more fundamental problems. Further, as Lum (2021) suggests, these types of efforts will not meet the challenges of reform because the “interdependent systems” of policing (training, deployment, supervision, accountability, technology, etc.) are “so interlocked that reforming one subsystem is challenging without realigning the whole machine” (p. 20).

To illustrate this point further, consider the continued demands for implicit bias training, also endorsed by the 2015 President’s Task Force report (see, e.g., National Urban League, 2021). A majority (69%) of the 155 large police agencies surveyed by CBS news in 2019 reported they employ some form of implicit racial bias training (CBS News, 2019). By now that percentage has surely grown larger. But this reactionary reform effort is not supported by science (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021a). Only one rigorous attempt to evaluate implicit bias training on policing outcomes has been produced, and the results of this study demonstrate minor improvements in officer beliefs and attitudes immediately following the training but essentially no change in racial disparities in police searches, stops, arrests, or use of force within the New York City Police Department (Worden et al., 2020). Many agencies continue to implement the training despite no evidence (or even an expectation) that the training will reduce racial disparities in officer behaviors. Rather, it checks a box

for police — demonstrating to the public that something proactive was done, regardless of actual impact.

### Reliance on Non-Aspirational Reform

Herold (2021) recently introduced the concept of police reform failures resulting from what she describes as “non-aspirational” reform. This phenomenon speaks to the tendency of stakeholders to focus on what police *should not do* rather than what police *should be doing*. This focus results in a laundry list of reforms designed to limit particular types of police behavior (e.g., eliminate no-knock warrants, ban the use of neck restraints, limit response to mental health calls, reduce arrests for low-level offenses, etc.). Indeed, most reform efforts are designed to restrict or otherwise control certain police practices rather than encourage the practices that we want our police agencies and officers to invest in. For instance, instead of focusing on limiting police responses to mental health calls as police reform, we should be more focused on providing police officers with the tools, resources, and training necessary to improve the outcomes of these types of engagements. Focusing mostly on what we want to prohibit or reduce is (by definition) restricting in both application and imagination. It also prevents us from focusing on more difficult questions (e.g., What do we want our police to do? What does good policing look like?) Failing to make reforms aspirational facilitates the proliferation of reactionary, check-the-box reforms (see above).

Constitutional policing – a current initiative growing in popularity among policymakers and scholars – is a key example of non-aspirational police reform that we believe will provide limited advancements to the field. Constitutional policing has been described as “legal policing—that is, policing that operates within the parameters set by the U.S. Constitution, state constitutions, [and] the body of court decisions that have interpreted and spelled out in greater detail what the text of the Constitution means in terms of the everyday practices of policing” (Police Executive Research Forum, 2015, p. 1). The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), for example, implemented the Office of Constitutional Policing and Policy, born out of a Department of Justice (DOJ) federal consent decree to further institutionalize reforms prescribed by the federal monitorship. We concur with the Police Executive Research Forum that “constitutional policing is necessary but not sufficient; it is a baseline standard” (2015, p. 3). While meeting constitutional thresholds is an important aspect of policing, it is not a sufficient strategy for police reform. Indeed, to police in a manner that is not in violation of the constitutional rights afforded to the public is the very definition of the lowest acceptable threshold. Philosophies guiding reform efforts should have a greater purpose than meeting a legal standard; these philosophies should aspire to promote innovation that enhances public safety (Lum & Nagin, 2017).

A second example of non-aspirational reform is the focus on minor changes to use of force policies (e.g., banning police use of chokeholds and the use of no-knock warrants), which have been enacted in many jurisdictions in an effort to curb officers’ use of force. Because the potential risk of serious physical harm and possible

death outweighs the benefits of subduing suspects, it is understandable why banning chokeholds would have widespread support. However, new research suggests that vascular neck restraints – different from chokeholds but similarly viewed as dangerous and sometimes banned – are actually quite successful and do not appear to result in fatalities or serious injuries during police field applications; the authors recommend that the use of this technique by police be revisited (Bozeman et al., 2022). Nevertheless, deaths resulting from the use of neck restraints are extremely rare. As such, eliminating this police action will do little to impact rates of police-involved deaths or enhance police accountability (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021b). A similar argument can be made for banning no-knock warrants and unannounced police raids. The available research supports the banning of these procedures (Council on Criminal Justice, 2021c), but they are unlikely to result in substantial changes to police-involved violence, police accountability, or police-community relations.

A final example of non-aspirational reform is the overreliance on technology as a solution for change rather than using technology as a tool to help generate and sustain reforms. There have been historical and contemporary trends in relying on technology to transform policing (Harmon & Harman-Heath, 2022). Historically, technological advances such as radios, patrol vehicles, and the use of forensics have changed the way that police are able to operate, generally for the betterment of the profession. But *how* police use technology is what really matters, and this perspective is routinely neglected by police executives and political figures who simply point to the acquisition of technology itself as implemented reform (e.g., purchase of body-worn cameras, ballistic firearm detection systems, surveillance cameras, automatic license plate readers, etc.). For example, police executives now describe their violence reduction strategy as installing ShotSpotter in neighborhoods with higher rates of gun violence. While this technology may provide additional information regarding when firearms are used in certain locations, it does not address what we want police to do with this additional information. The mere procurement of technology will not properly guide changes in policing unless coupled with a comprehensive and strategic plan for how to use it (Engel et al., 2020; Lum, 2021). Technology alone is not a policing strategy, and it also should not be considered reform.

### **Lack of Evidence on Reform**

In 2020, Laurie Robinson reflected on the state of police reform, detailing four broad barriers that have challenged reform efforts since the turbulent events in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. She argues the barriers to effective reform include: (1) the decentralized nature of policing, and that nearly half of all agencies have ten or fewer officers; (2) the culture of policing that is not traditionally open to change; (3) a substantial lack of scientific support; and (4) that the federal government had stepped back from leading reform. While we agree that all four of these barriers are important, we argue that the third barrier – lack of scientific support – is a particularly salient but alterable hurdle in implementing reform. When considering the lack of scientific support to guide reform, we note that the problem is multifaceted and



includes: (1) a lack of standards for evidence, (2) the failure to use available evidence, and (3) a lack of necessary evidence in critical areas.

Just as we lack clarity in what we mean by “reform,” Mears (2010) notes that the term “evidence-based” has considerable ambiguity when used to describe policies and programs. He argues there are several different (and sometimes competing) dimensions that might identify a program or policy as effective. Further, many definitions of “evidence-based” include some form of scientific testing, including the use of experimentally controlled designs. Still, the use of randomized control trial designs is not the panacea it is sometimes perceived to be (Sampson, 2010). Only a minority of available policing studies rely on experimental designs, and several issues of interest to the field are simply not amenable to randomization. Mears (2019) further emphasizes that while relying on evidence-based policies should be applauded, it is problematic when we lack a systematic meaning of the term. This is especially critical when comparing differences in definitions across the policing, courts, and correctional systems.

When evidence *is* available, it appears police executives may overlook its use. While the application of research findings by police practitioners appears to be growing, Sherman (2015) notes that they often encounter opposition from their colleagues. There is still confusion regarding what EBP entails and mixed receptivity to it from the field (Telep, 2017). Telep and Bottema (2020) found that higher-ranking officials in police departments tend to demonstrate a greater understanding of EBP than lower-ranking officials, but their definitions of what the term means sometimes vary from the intended meaning. A 2021 survey of police departments concluded that a majority of 122 responding agency representatives appear to understand evidence-based policing, but only half (50.8%) reported that they found research regarding police tactics useful or very useful (den Heyer, 2022). Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents suggested that decision-making in policing should be based on an equal contribution of experience and scientific knowledge, and one-quarter reported that experience was more important than evidence in making decisions (den Heyer, 2022). Indeed, despite optimistic discussions on the adoption of evidence-based practices and the many resources available (e.g., the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy’s *Evidence-Based Policing Matrix*, the Office of Justice Program’s *CrimeSolutions.gov*, and the Arizona State University’s Problem-Oriented Policing Center, among others), there continues to be a debate about the utility of experience and anecdotes over knowledge (Telep & Lum, 2014).

In addition, resistance to evidence may occur due to issues surrounding external validity, or the extent to which findings from one study are generalizable to other settings. As we work to build the evidence base, inevitably some topics will generate only a small number of studies, and these findings may not be easily generalizable because of the specific context of the implementation sites. Agencies may adopt a policy or practice based on this limited evidence, only to later become discouraged if it is found to be ineffective within their own jurisdiction, furthering mistrust of research findings. Alternatively, many police executives believe their context and circumstances are somehow so different or unique that evidence-based approaches could not be implemented or simply would not work within their jurisdictions.

To overcome these issues, there is a pressing need for research that examines the conditions under which beneficial policy and program effects arise; in short, we need to invest in implementation science (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020; Eccles & Mittman, 2006; Eisman et al., 2020; Proctor et al., 2009). Describing its use in health care, Eccles and Mittman (2006) define implementation research as “the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices into routine practice, and, hence, to improve the quality and effectiveness of health services and care,” (p. 1). Like other fields, only systematic assessments of the facilitators of and barriers to the implementation of evidence-based practices will lead to effective police reforms (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020). However, a quick scan of the literature demonstrates that rigorous research focused on the implementation of EBP policing practices is nearly absent, despite its importance in advancing effective police reforms.

Finally, in many instances, we do not really know what works to achieve successful police reform because some of the most critical issues in policing have not been routinely subjected to rigorous scientific inquiry. Consider the findings and recommendations provided in the influential President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) — the first-ever presidential task force devoted exclusively to policing. This report outlined over 150 recommendations and proposed action items for police reform. A subsequent review of the available evidence supporting these recommendations, however, demonstrated significant gaps in the research base with few recommendations that had any empirical support (Lum et al., 2016). In discussing the prioritization of action for training and education in the report, the authors emphasize the lack of knowledge stating, “Because of a lack of research on a number of these recommendations, it is difficult to make strong conclusions about what actions law enforcement agencies should prioritize in this pillar” (Lum et al., 2016, p.28). Likewise, the Council on Criminal Justice’s (2021d) assessment of the evidence for police training concluded that despite the critical importance of police training, there was very little research about its effectiveness.

In 2020, we published an article describing five police reform strategies to reduce officer-involved shootings: body-worn cameras, de-escalation training, implicit bias training, early intervention systems, and civilian oversight (Engel et al., 2020). We argued that despite widespread endorsement and implementation of these strategies, none of these key strategies were supported by strong empirical research and called upon police executives to test interventions and researchers to engage in rapid research responses for critical issues in policing. Three years later, not much has changed. These findings highlight the importance of extending the production of research to advance policing practice.

## The Path Forward

Faced with the many failures of police reform, scholars have pondered the path forward for meaningful changes in policing (e.g., Lum, 2021; Lum & Nagin, 2017; Robinson, 2020; Walker, 2018; White et al., 2021). Though varied, the arguments

presented in recent years bring to light a broad conceptual framework comprised of several assertions of what is needed to realize true change in the policing profession.

First, scholars have argued that the priorities of the police must be reframed to emphasize crime prevention and police-community relations. This suggestion is built upon decades of research demonstrating the benefit of prioritizing police resources towards proactive, highly focused, problem-solving-based strategies for addressing crime (Lum, 2021; see Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018 for review). It is also founded upon the observation that citizen reactions to police practices matter independently of the effectiveness of those practices and, as such, should be given consideration in organizational decision-making (Lum & Nagin, 2017; Robinson, 2020; White et al., 2021).

Second, scholars emphasize the need for systemic – rather than piecemeal – changes within police agencies to achieve real organizational transformation. Moving beyond the “low-hanging fruit” in police reform, this suggestion acknowledges the many subsystems that make up the complex structure of an agency (Lum, 2021; White et al., 2021). True reform requires more than the implementation of new training, the revision of policy, or the introduction of technology. Instead, the systems of leadership, management, training, discipline/rewards, technology, and others must be united in institutionalizing and reinforcing reform (Lum, 2021; Lum & Nagin, 2017).

Third, the collection and use of data to inform police practice and enhance police-community relations are consistently reiterated (Lum, 2021; Lum & Nagin, 2017; White et al., 2021). This argument highlights the value of strengthening the data collection and analytic capabilities of police agencies to inform the deployment of resources and enhance understanding of the impact of police practice across multiple outcomes. It encourages police agencies to become learning organizations – data-driven and willing to adjust practices based on findings from those data – and promotes transparency through the sharing of information derived from those data on a regular basis with the community.

Finally, scholars call for the continued development of evidence by integrating evaluation into the implementation of police practices. This requires consistent tracking and testing of both old and new interventions to understand whether anticipated outcomes are being achieved (Sherman, 2013). It also calls for a commitment to rigorous research to build objective information on police practices that can inform democratic debates and policy development (Lum, 2021).

These arguments provide a road map for meaningful, effective change in American policing. However, they will not magically happen. We argue that the success of reform efforts hinges upon the ownership of the development and implementation of evidence-informed practices. Police executives must proactively engage in evidence-based reform, making these efforts a normative ideal within their agency’s culture. Simultaneously, researchers must emerge from the academic sidelines to help lead the industry forward in building and translating empirical evidence to guide reforms. Below, we discuss the path forward for this co-ownership of evidence-based police reform. We focus, in particular, on the necessary actions for police executives and researchers to take to implement this road map for successful change.

## Owning Reform: Police Executives

Although we recognize that identifying and implementing successful reforms is challenging – something that has been experienced first-hand by the lead author – we argue that the only realistic path forward is for police executives to invest heavily in the production of evidence necessary to turn the tide in policing. To “own” evidence-based reform, we encourage police executives to be: (1) proactive, strategic, and courageous; (2) users and builders of evidence; and (3) educators and communicators to multiple audiences. By doing these things, executives are far more likely to lead their organization toward successful outcomes that advance the policing profession.

Police executives must be proactive in accepting their role as police reformers and defining what reform means within their agencies. Defining reform as *a method of continuous improvement* can assist leaders in shedding the negative implications often associated with the term. This ownership must be followed by the strategic implementation of evidence-informed practices. In instances where no evidence is available to guide practices, police executives must demonstrate courage by implementing new, innovative strategies that are subject to immediate testing for impact. As a former police executive, Edward Flynn suggests that, too often, the safest strategy for police executives is to fail at their mission using conventional methods. In many ways, this conventionality stands in the face of innovation and evidence-based reform. Innovative approaches in policing reflect specific decisions made by police executives to try something different, and failure associated with innovation can make police leaders more vulnerable to criticism. However, it takes resilient, courageous leadership to recognize that failure is a natural part of innovation. Police agencies must be willing to try, test their efforts, and adjust their practices based on the findings of those tests. Police reform requires this type of courage from executives, a commitment to building the evidence base, and a willingness to collaborate with researchers to expand knowledge both in their own agencies and the broader policing profession.

As suggested above, police executives must be willing to use, generate, and disseminate knowledge on fair and effective police practices. Police executives have an ethical obligation not only to *integrate* available research evidence into their agency’s policies and practices but also to *build* the evidence base by conducting research in their agency, including partnering with researchers when their expertise may be needed. With the exception of a handful of progressive police agencies, this type of evaluation is rare. However, it is only by combining the implementation of innovative approaches with continuous review and evaluation that ineffective practices and the unintended consequences associated with certain practices can be identified. As the EBP movement continues to grow, it is likely that the policing profession will reach a tipping point, with research and evaluation becoming a mainstay of the institutional practice of American policing. Police executives must be a catalyst for this movement to tip the scales, pushing their agencies beyond being consumers of research towards engaging in the production and active application of research.

Finally, police executives must work to educate others, including politicians, policymakers, and members of the public, on what effective reform means for their

organization and community. Many of these groups may demand that specific strategies or approaches be implemented, with little knowledge about their effectiveness. Increasing community knowledge around what is effective, what is not, and what remains untested is vital to collaborating on reform strategies that will improve policing practices to increase safety and equity for all.

As reforms are considered, it is imperative that police executives not overlook one of the most important audiences for making those reforms a reality: rank-and-file police officers. True change within the policing setting requires buy-in beyond the upper echelons of an agency. As Robinson (2020) notes, there has been resistance from the front lines about reform, and research has demonstrated officers feel undervalued and uncertain about how to operate post-Ferguson. It is critical to engage with officers about their concerns and explain the importance of reform in a way that creates buy-in from the front lines. The impact of first-line supervisors is also fundamental, although little is known systematically about how to increase their impact through effective coaching and mentoring of line-level officers. First-line supervisors, as well as other less formal leaders in an agency, are an often-overlooked resource in promoting innovation. These individuals are uniquely situated to provide regular reinforcement of coordinated, comprehensive efforts in police reform (i.e., through training, policy, and practice) at the line level. As a result, the need for more evidence regarding what works in first-line supervision is critical.

### Owning Reform: Researchers

While the importance of police executives taking ownership of reform in their agencies should not be understated, an often-missed argument in discussions on reform is the need to *change the work of researchers* to better support evidence-based changes in the policing profession. Simply stated, *effective police reform requires innovation in the production and distribution of science*. While efforts to bridge the gap between research and practice span nearly a century, wide chasms remain (Robinson, 2020) due, in part, to delays in the dissemination of research, focus on few topics, and limited accessibility to findings outside of academia (Engel & Whalen, 2010). These conditions hinder the identification and adoption of evidence-based practices. Systematic change is needed for research to be both relevant to and applied in the field.

Researchers must develop the infrastructure to provide a *rapid research response* to the most pressing issues for police reform. We argue that this type of response is best realized through fully collaborative partnerships between teams of researchers and law enforcement agencies (see Bradley and Nixon, 2009; Engel & Henderson, 2013) that are characterized by both longevity and sensitivity to the political, organizational, and operational realities of policing. These partnerships require researchers to step outside of academic institutions into the field of policing to work side by side with the practitioners tasked with making reform a reality. In this position, researchers are better situated to hone the focus of their work on the needs of the field. It also provides greater opportunities for real-time implementation science – a much-neglected area in policing research

involving the study of *how* training, policies, practices, and other reforms can be implemented effectively to achieve desired outcomes.

Similar to the sentiments expressed by Lum (2021) and Robinson (2020), we also believe researchers need to improve the accessibility of evidence to ensure its utility outside of academia. Research translated into products more easily consumed by practitioners, policymakers, and the community has a better chance of informing conversations in the field and steering stakeholders toward evidence-based practices. The value of this type of translation has been observed through the work of the *Center for Problem-Oriented Policing*. For years this Center has provided accessible information on ways that police can effectively address crime through the problem-oriented framework. As a more recent example, the *Law Enforcement Knowledge Lab*, funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance and launched in April 2022 by the National Policing Institute and partner organizations, provides an online resource hub designed to identify and publicly disseminate information on fair and effective police practices. The translation and dissemination of research will be accompanied by on-demand technical assistance and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. It represents a significant undertaking that requires ongoing investment from the research community to ensure evidence is accessible to those that can make the most of it.

We also consider the possibility – based on our experiences – that academia (in its current form) is not the best partner for law enforcement agencies seeking to advance evidence-based reforms. Rather, we believe that significant changes to both formal and informal barriers routinely posed within academic institutions are required for academia to remain relevant and useful to practitioners and the communities they serve. Unfortunately, the familiar and oft-noted limitations within academia to have a real-world impact will continue to hinder the larger movement toward evidence-based practices in policing (Caplan, 1979; Fyfe & Wilson, 2012; Wowk et al., 2017). The need for sweeping reform in *academia* – including the need to incentivize and prioritize the timely production and dissemination of research on topics that can inform policy and practice – was especially clear during the lead author’s three-year stint as a police reformer. The gap between what evidence was needed and what was being produced was especially obvious when daily decisions on policy and practice were being made. Simply stated, evidence that could be translated into effective policy and practice often did not exist. Most recently, all the authors of this essay – all classically trained criminal justice academics – have left academia to join a non-profit, non-membership, and non-partisan research institution with the singular goal of having a greater and more immediate impact on law enforcement effectiveness.

## Conclusion

When faced with a national crisis of confidence in the equity and effectiveness of policing, public outcry for reform has become the norm. However, recent years have highlighted the difficulties in systematically changing the police profession and the need for innovative, concerted efforts by policing stakeholders in the identification,

implementation, and sustainment of reform. While many of the issues surrounding the application of systematic change are pertinent to reform efforts across the criminal justice system, this essay has focused on policing because debates regarding *police reform* are often the most visible, inflammatory, and persistent. Indeed, seven years after Engel was informally given the title of “reformer,” these conversations continue in Cincinnati and beyond.

We argue that the path forward in police reform requires ownership in the development, implementation, and evaluation of evidence-informed practices from police executives and researchers alike. Our police executives must take responsibility for their role as reformers, being proactive in the identification of evidence-based practices that will benefit their community and willing to implement and track new strategies when evidence is not readily available. In turn, as researchers, we cannot expect law enforcement agencies to rely on evidence-based reform if the evidence is not available in a timely manner, related to topics pertinent to their reform efforts, or provided in an accessible format. While we can encourage our law enforcement partners to own reform, we must also look inward at our own institutions to ensure our efforts make us agents of change and effective partners in policing reform. We believe it is through this co-ownership that police reform efforts have the greatest potential for success.

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