

Editorial

The Importance of Evidence-based Policing Practices and Challenges to Implementation: The Case of KP Police in Pakistan

With the increasing pressure on police organizations to improve the quality of service and operations, the reliance on practices based on evidence and facts helps to justify policing choices and decisions. In turn, this enhances the force's legitimacy. The concept of evidence based policing, which is inspired by evidence based practices in the field of medicine, is not new. Indeed, there is consensus among researchers and policy-makers that the absence of credible research-guided policy making and practices is likely to lead to less effective policies, imperfect training and even low quality academic programs in policing. Hence, to counter the problems related to police effectiveness, evidence based policing provides a decision-making perspective which is based on the premise that police practices should be supported by rigorous research evidence. In sum, it focuses on the application of science in everyday policing for the improvement of organizational efficiency and effectiveness.

In this connection, the evidence based policing initiatives launched by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Police is a much needed step in the right direction, reflecting political commitment to improve the effectiveness and image of police in the province. But despite the noted benefits of basing organizational strategies on research evidence, police organizations across the globe have been slow to adopt such practices. It is therefore important for Pakistani police organizations to recognize the practical aspects of evidence based policing, and the factors inhibiting its adoption, so as to develop strategies which are conducive to implementation of such practices.

Since police organizations generally struggle with resource constraints, the use of evidence provides a decision-making framework, based on strategic planning and cost-benefit analysis. This can lead to more cost effective policing solutions. Larry Sherman, the father of evidence based policing, believes that it is one of the most powerful ideas in modern policing, as it takes into consideration the best practices in the field. An important element of evidence based policing is for officers from all organizational levels to have adequate knowledge regarding the tactics and strategies that are instrumental to dealing with crime and making informed decisions.

Although evidence based policing does not overlook the traditional style of decision making in policing, it encourages the application of the strategic principles of targeting, testing and tracking. Targeting begins with allotting scarce

resources to crime and disorder of significant importance and establishing guidelines for action based on published or in-house research. These guidelines also need to take into consideration the community culture and values, in order to determine measurable outputs. Once high-priority criminal targets are defined, methods to counter such activities are tested to determine their suitability. The departmental performance is then tracked over a period of time against these defined benchmarks, as well as with the performance of other policing units, so to evaluate the level of success. The outcomes are then used to further refine and improve the initial guidelines.

However, despite the established role of evidence-based practices in improving organizational efficiency and effectiveness, they have not yet made a significant impression on police organizations across the globe. The barriers to the adoption of such practices can be individual, organizational or political in nature. Like other professionals, police officers are also reluctant to adopt unfamiliar practices that diverge from their usual way of work. They only tend to recognize the value of research that employs less rigorous methodology and does not interfere much with their established patterns of work. Officers also prefer to rely more on internal organizational knowledge regarding tactics rather than external experts. Besides, personal resistance to change by individuals, certain structural, functional and political barriers also prevents the police from readily embracing new practices. Organizational and political factors like budget controls, organizational norms and culture prevent the adoption of programs that disrupt the established routines and relationships.

As top police managers are the main decision makers in organizations, their commitment is vital for the adoption and success of a new strategy. Organizational members cannot adopt or support a new initiative on their own as it must first receive the approval of the management. There have been instances where strong police leaders have instituted new programs despite initial resistance from the line staff, who finally acknowledge the value of the initiative after being apprised of the benefits by the top management. Since supervisors in paramilitary organizations such as police have a major influence on officers, they can use it to promote evidence based practices within their own departments. Top leadership can thus act as agents of change who create advocates for change at all levels of the organization to achieve the desired goals.

The efforts to implement evidence-based practices are resource-intensive and may initially involve costs like training and new equipments. Public servants face tremendous scrutiny by elected officials and any initiative involving public funds is closely monitored. The higher the costs, the more resistant the top management is expected to be in terms of committing to a new strategy, given the

resource scarcity in the public sector. The risks associated with a new initiative as well as the lack of managerial experience to deal with such changes may also affect their receptivity towards initiatives. Changes those are more difficult to implement and have higher levels of uncertainty associated with success, or contribution to organizational performance, are not readily accepted by the top management. For countries like Pakistan where the traditional model of policing is still in place, the introduction of an innovation such as evidence based policing may be viewed as a devaluation of the previously acquired skill and experience of officers, leading to resistance towards the adoption of such practices. Besides the challenge of dealing with resource constraints, the top management would also have to ensure a balance between traditional policing and science while keeping in view the operational concerns of the rank and file officers, in order to ensure their commitment towards such initiatives.

Research on receptivity to evidence based policing highlights the importance of training officers of all levels to recognize the importance of research in making effective policing decisions. While training can help reduce barriers to the adoption of research based practices in policing, research has also found resistance to training programs by the rank and file officers, who believe that learning new scientific research is not relevant to their particular job assignments and also lacks direction regarding specific measures to be taken in certain circumstances. It is therefore imperative to create a partnership between researchers and police organizations in order to translate academic findings into more accessible and applicable formats for use by officers across various hierarchical levels. In sum, police must make use of scientific knowledge regarding what works to improve crime control as well as community relations, which in turn helps improve their legitimacy. What is most important for the successful adoption of evidence based policing practices is the realization that such measures will receive greater support across the board if considered in tandem with personal experience while making decisions, so as to improve organizational ability to prevent and reduce crime.

In conclusion, it may be observed that the evidence based policing reforms adopted by KP not only represent a new mode of policing in the province but also serve as a useful experiment to evaluate whether or not similar reforms in Pakistan's other provinces have a chance of improving the organizational efficiency and the image of the police force as suggested by research. Indeed, this crucial first step by KP may be symbolic of a new dawn for Pakistan's embattled police forces and their slow march towards modernization and emancipation from their colonial legacy of public control rather than public service.

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