

Debating policing research: a research council for crime and justice?

Jonathan Shepherd and Ken Pease call for medical research standards to be replicated in policing studies. Robert Reiner, Peter Squires, and Louise Westmarland respond.

Unfashionable as it is to claim, there are parallels between policing and medicine. Professional practice in medicine has been built upon foundations laid down in universities, led by practitioner-academics. In medicine, we owe a debt to Sir William Osler, who in the face of few effective treatments and great uncertainty about 'what works' demanded an invasion of hospitals by universities.

High quality research helped protect science based medicine from political fad and fashion, albeit imperfectly. (It took eight years between the publication of evaluations which found, convincingly, that clot

busting drugs administered after a heart attack reduce death rates, and widespread adoption.) University infiltration of medical practice prevented enormous harm and saved countless lives.

The first proposed step is to establish university police schools, using medical, dental, and veterinary schools as a model. The first such

school is being nurtured in Cardiff. A virtual policing institute has been established in Scotland (SIPR, 2010). But one crucial element is missing, namely the establishment of a Research Council devoted to the criminal justice sciences, as the Medical Research Council is devoted to the medical sciences. This was one largely overlooked recommendation of the Centre for Social Justice's report (2009) on policing.

Policing has been tardier in its demand for a defensible academic basis, to train practitioners and to refine the knowledge base. This must change.

complications need to understand something of the transmission of disorders such as neural tube defect (like spina bifida) and the science skills to understand whether a new treatment has been assessed rigorously. This requires at least some knowledge of medical genetics and statistics, not to mention ethics. Medical breakthroughs arise from advances in knowledge in basic

science which are translated into clinical applications and evaluated by senior clinicians working with non-clinical scientists. This fundamental and applied research is substantially funded by the Medical Research Council where decisions as to which projects get funded are made by clinical academics and laboratory or behavioural scientists. Policing is different. Searching on the keyword 'police' on the websites of the existing Research Councils shows that the majority of Research Council funding for crime and justice investigations has in the past come from the Economic and Social Research Council. Academics refereeing applications for funding are mostly social scientists and economists. There are relatively few police practitioner-academics to marry science skills and practical experience. Of course some research of relevance and importance to the police is carried out with money from other Research Councils, notably the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council, which has made commendable efforts to fund applicable research on crime and security.

The schism between physical and social science research as applied to policing is reflected in the strange organisation of Home Office research functions. The Research Directorate is staffed primarily by social scientists and economists. Thirty miles away, we find the Home Office Scientific Development Branch, staffed by physical and biological scientists. Possible synergies are forgone. For example, the specifications and deployment of CCTV cameras require the expertise of engineers and geographers. Understanding how CCTV operators will perform requires psychologists understanding vigilance tasks.

Although establishing an infrastructure of research from many disciplines to underpin the policing enterprise is crucial, and would be facilitated by a single Crime and Justice Research Council, such a body would also help to instil in senior police officers (dare one hope eventually judges too?) something close to a research mentality. One of us recently visited a police

headquarters featured in the national press for an operation to execute as many outstanding arrest warrants as possible. The obvious question was what arrangements had been put in place to measure the consequences of such a resource-intensive initiative? The depressing answer was—none. No lessons were to be learned, no evidence gleaned let alone published, no implications for practice gathered. Doctors are keen to assert that there is no such thing as

complementary or alternative medicine. There is just medicine that works and medicine that does not work. Likewise there is policing that works and policing that does not work. What we need is a cadre of police officers motivated and able to seek out and discern the difference, and to be the commissioners, adept readers, and implementers of the evidence that will lead policing to mirror medicine as an evidence based profession. If experience in

medicine is heeded, the best way to do this is to recognise the art and science of practical policing as an academic discipline, embed it in research-intensive universities, and develop dedicated police and justice research funding arrangements. ■

Jonathan Shepherd is Professor of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery and Director, Violence Research Group at Cardiff University and **Ken Pease** is a Chartered Forensic Psychologist and retired Professor of Criminology.

Robert Reiner highlights the political dimensions of policing, research, and crime policy.

It is hard to think of criminological researchers who have made more significant contributions to knowledge, policy, and practice than Professors Jon Shepherd and Ken Pease (most obviously through developing alternative ways of measuring crime and recognising the significance of repeat victimisation). So when they advance an argument for the establishment of a Research Council for Crime and Justice it is hard to be other than an enthusiastic cheerleader. Yet I must confess to having some reservations and only being able to offer two and a half cheers.

Their vision is explicitly modelled on the premise that 'there are parallels between policing and medicine'. What they envisage is the development of a cadre of practitioner-academics, based in university centres that combine fundamental scientific research and the development of evidence-led guidelines for best practice, based on rigorous assessments of 'what works'. Funding would be both boosted and used more effectively if it was directed by a specialist body analogous to the Medical Research Council, rather than split between the ESRC and the various physical science research councils as at present (a 'two cultures' divide echoed in the Home Office).

At one level this is an apple pie win-win suggestion: more money, better spent. Who could deny that intelligence-led trumps ignorance-led policing? But apple pie has its down-side, as the scales tell us the next morning. There are some intellectual and policy reservations I have about the proposal, which are not intended as opposition, but should be borne in mind in its development.

My basic worry is the down-playing of the political dimensions of policing and crime policy, the

assumption that the appliance of science can iron out structured conflicts of interest between different groups and produce results that 'work' for everyone. This is arguably a problem for medicine too (Groopman, 2010). But it is certainly a major issue for policing. The categories of 'crime' and 'policing' are inherently value-laden and political, almost inevitably used in at least implicitly partisan ways (Reiner, 2007 and 2010). The seminal work of Bittner (1974) shows that policing is an inherently tainted, 'dirty hands' practice. It seeks to mitigate the myriad tensions and conflicts of social co-existence using a situationally-judged threat of legitimate force, i.e. pain. So does medicine: hardly any interventions are without discomfort at least, and they are almost invariably 'NICE'ly evaluated balances between alternative forms of suffering. But policing involves more than that. It requires (implicitly at least) judgments between contending people, and is thus almost always partisan in impact. This is most obvious in situations that are already explicitly politicised, such as the 1984-1985 Miners' Strike or today's judgments about whose mass killing is 'terrorism', but it is inescapable in most everyday calls from domestic disputes to car accidents.

The benign and apparently value-free advocacy of scientific or medical models for policing may be the way to succeed in current political fights for a share in a diminishing public purse. But it would be an intellectual and practical loss if it was at the expense of the kind of critical analysis of the practice of policing out of which academic research has grown in the last half-century.

Robert Reiner is Professor of Criminology, Law Department, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Peter Squires calls for a multidisciplinary approach to research.

Shepherd and Pease make an intriguing case for a new criminal justice research council to ensure that henceforth criminal justice policies and policing practice develop upon 'well-grounded' research. Perhaps this sounds a little like 'evidence-led policymaking' which, so far, has seemed rather stronger on promise than practice. Things can only get better, indeed. Yet, while we might have *some* common ground on the problems they refer to there are anomalies and ambiguities in what they propose, some interesting silences and political questions, and a seeming reluctance to follow the logic of their argument to its natural conclusion.

The underlying proposal emanates from the Centre for Social Justice Police Reform Working Group Report (2009) chaired by Ray Mallon and upon which Shepherd and Pease both served. Amongst a range of recommendations, the report urged in favour of 'evidence based policing', the establishment of university police schools 'in Russell Group universities', an excellence institute, a new research council 'to support police research', and an independent police staff college. Clearly, the specific proposal in their article does not extend to all of these issues but having a sense of the wider context is helpful. And here lie some of the problems.

A number of important developments also surround these issues. The great expansion of criminology as an academic discipline, reflecting the political salience of

crime (mixed blessings each) has coincided with a perceived detachment between the academy and policymaking. At the same time, criminology's renewed clarion call for a 'public criminology' has been met, in part, by the patter of not so tiny feet, from the police pension to the universities, and the related emergence of (American sounding) centres of crime science/police science distinct from mainstream criminology. Many of these developments are not inherently problematic, in themselves, but to adapt Martin O'Brien's recent phrase, if 'criminal justice policy is too important to be left to criminologists' it is certainly too important to be left to (ex-)coppers (O'Brien, 2008). And there is the issue.

When Shepherd and Pease refer to 'evidence based' police policy development we need to know *whose* evidence. The academic engagement of policing studies with the universities has thus far been to the great benefit of policing and has opened policing (and criminal justice more generally) to issues and concerns that policing in particular had long neglected. It would be unfortunate if policing studies were now to retreat to a narrow evidential bunker, surrounded by a 'blue wall of science' topped by a fig-leaf of supposed Russell Group 'excellence'. There *is* a pressing case for a substantial increase in criminal justice research but it needs to draw upon the full breadth of criminological multi-disciplinarity and must not become cornered by a rather narrower police-led point of view.

Peter Squires is Professor of Criminology and Public Policy and the University of Brighton.

Louise Westmarland points to the challenges of encouraging senior officers to take note of research findings.

Shepherd and Pease state that they are taking an unfashionable position by arguing for a more 'scientific' version of policing and the establishment of university police schools. My position may be even less popular. Front line policing is not, in the main, an intellectual activity. It is an occupation that consists of long periods hanging around doing nothing much, interspersed with rare instances of eagerly anticipated physical 'action'. Even the remotest chance of a fight is raced towards with lights and sirens blaring, followed by disappointment when it turns out to be a minor scuffle. Busier shifts consist of driving from one call to the next, usually residential 'addresses', where forms are filled in and no action or help can be provided and none is usually expected.

It might be argued that this is no reason to dismiss the possibility of having an educated, research-aware workforce. For those of us who have struggled for years to get the police to take any notice of studies they have carried out, to find, at the next project meeting, that they 'wonder why women don't seem to want to be promoted' it would seem to be an appealing idea. To have research 'truths' which all forces would have to accept, once verified by a policing version of NICE

would at least ensure that we would not have to keep doing the same research projects again and again only to have our findings ignored. On the other hand this would assume support from high-ranking officers in individual police forces across the country in what is largely a higher education-adverse organisation. It would rely on individuals such as a BCU (Basic Command Unit) commander who joked recently, in response to my question whether he had seen a recent research paper on policing in his area that 'if it wasn't in the pages of *Rugby World*, probably not'.

Aside from the problems of 'establishing an infrastructure of research from many disciplines' that could agree 'what works', instilling anything in senior officers who have worked their way up the ranks that an academic could tell them anything worth knowing, let alone 'a research mentality', is, to say the least optimistic. The police do a difficult job and deal with society's dirty washing. Lots of officers say they join because they want to help people or make society better. What works? An interesting question for academics, perhaps a gravy train, but in practice policing will muddle along as it has always done with or without a crime and justice research council.

Dr Louise Westmarland is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the Open University.

And finally... Jonathan Shepherd and Ken Pease respond to some of comments made about their proposals.

Reiner, Squires, and Westmarland's responses to our proposals illuminate the routes and barriers to understanding and managing crime. First, the assumption by Squires that our proposals emanate from our work as members of the Centre for Social Justice panel which produced the 2009 report *A Force To Be Reckoned With* is quite wrong. These proposals were published in *Evidence and Policy* in 2007 and reiterated in subsequent articles and letters in the *Times* and *Public Servant*, and prefigured in the Foresight Crime Panel discussions around 2000.

Reiner is right to explore the parallels between criminology and medicine. We would like to draw out even more starkly the differences between organisation in the two disciplines. In medicine, fundamental biological and behavioural sciences—building blocks of healthcare which produced stem cells—are differentiated from applied science, which is embedded in medical schools. Doctors graduate as competent practitioners having moved from the starting point in fundamental science through the wards, communities, and operating

theatres of professors of surgery, public health, and general practice—test beds of regulated, experimental practice which in large part account for the increase in life expectancy of around one year per decade over the twentieth century. This journey is a complex political, economic, and ethical business. Logically, research organisation reflects this continuum: the Medical Research Council funds (not directs) fundamental medical research and the National Institute for Health Research funds health service research and development. There is a national strategy board which co-ordinates the two.

Westmarland's counsel of despair reminds us of the surprising comment of a professor of criminology who said that 'you can't train policemen to do research'. The fact, acknowledged by Squires, is that there is a huge credibility gap in crime and justice between the academy and services. Our proposals are designed to do away with this by increasing the prominence of fundamental and applied research and by developing cadres of practitioner-academics in crime and justice schools and institutes who are responsible both for rigorous

evaluations founded in theory and for the education and training of practitioners and who, like professors of public health, are keen observers and have feet solidly planted in theory and practice to the benefit of both.

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