To What Extent Can We Trust Police Research?

Examining Trends in Research ‘on’, ‘with’, ‘by’ and ‘for’ the Police

Dr. Matthew Davies
Associate analyst, RAND Europe, email: Matthew_Davies@rand.org

ABSTRACT

To what extent can we trust police research? In this paper, I use Brown’s (1996) typology of police ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to delineate some of the methodological challenges to conducting research on the police. I argue that there has been a convergence between insider and outsider research in the context of key developments to police research and policing more generally. On the one hand, ‘outside’ police scholars are being incentivised to work more collaboratively with police organisations as part of knowledge-exchange funding schemes. On the other, the police have become increasingly driven by an evidence-based approach that encourages greater analytical capabilities of those on the ‘inside’. This blurring of outsiders and insiders brings a series of advantages to police research, including better access to the field, opportunities for knowledge exchange, wider dissemination of results and greater policy impact. But simultaneously, researchers now face a number of challenges, including a narrowing focus on policy-oriented research questions, as well as a possible erosion of research independence. I argue that in order to trust police research in this collaborative phase, researchers must be able to adopt a reflexive approach and ask wider questions than ‘what works’. The discussion is not limited to Nordic countries; nor is it specific to police research. However, the themes presented here are of critical importance in establishing trust in Nordic police research.

Keywords

Police research, evidence-based policing, methods, research independence

INTRODUCTION

In a paper on Nordic police research, Lars Homberg (2015) presents two survey questions designed to measure public trust in the Danish police. The first asked citizens how much they trusted their police, using a scale between 1 and 5 to indicate trust (1 being ‘very little’, and 5 being ‘very great’). The second asked ‘Do you agree with the following statement?: I trust that the police will come to my aid if I need it’ (author’s translation). Options for this question included ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The results in the former survey revealed that 60% of respondents had either ‘great’ or ‘very great’ trust in the Danish police, whilst the latter found that 84% responded positively. Although these are evidently very differ-
ent questions, the outcome measure in both was trust in the police, and the latter claimed a greater proportion of trust in the police. It is somewhat revealing that the first was conducted by an independent university research team, whilst the latter was conducted by the police organisation. As Holmberg notes, it would appear that the second question was designed in a way to secure a greater proportion of affirmative responses.

The point here is not to make claims about the methodological rigour of independent research on the police versus police-initiated research – rather, my intention is to draw attention to the underlying motivations behind research on the police and examine ways in which this can affect research outcomes. This is imperative because research – whether conducted by the police or by external researchers – is deeply connected to issues of trust. Police can strengthen their perceived legitimacy (and related measures of trust) by first opening their doors to public scrutiny, such as academic enquiry. Attempts to blockade research by the police may undermine the perceived accountability of the organisation. Conversely, where the police conduct their own research (narrowly defined), public trust in the institution may become eroded if it is found that they have manipulated data to present certain favourable outcomes. On the other hand, academic research on the police also has to contend with issues of trust. Research conducted with the police – where knowledge is co-produced – may be seen by researchers as more representative and therefore more reliable. But by the same token, a lack of research independence in the process may result in biased outcomes that are favourable to the police, which again may corrode trust in the research itself. Thus, research both on and for the police can have implications for the concept of trust.

I begin by introducing different approaches to conducting police research, borrowing from Brown’s (1996) typology of police ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. I then explore how these roles have appeared to converge on the back of two parallel trends, predominantly in the US and UK (albeit with links to developments in Nordic countries). The first trend concerns the evolution of police research from the outside, in which there has been an apparent transition from a critical towards a collaborative approach. I then outline emerging trends inside of the police, which have been driven by the growth of evidence-based policing. This convergence has been enhanced by intermediaries, exemplified by the Norwegian Police University College (PHS), and the College of Policing in England and Wales.

In this new phase of police research, I sketch out some of the opportunities for research, as well as some of the potential pitfalls. In particular, I echo concerns that have been made elsewhere about the potential for losing sight of some of the wider picture in police research, as well as concerns around research independence. This is not to say that collaborative working is detrimental – in fact, it is essential to the development of police scholarship. But whether it is trust in police, or any other topic of police research, we first must be able to ask ourselves how much we can trust the research.
TRENDS IN POLICE RESEARCH – FROM RESEARCH ‘ON’ THE POLICE TO RESEARCH ‘WITH’ THE POLICE

Brown (1996) characterises four types of police researchers, distinguished by their affiliation with the police (Table 1). Each are briefly summarised below.

TABLE 1. TYPOLOGY OF POLICE RESEARCHERS (BROWN, 1996)

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<th>Institution</th>
<th>Police</th>
<th>Civilian</th>
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<tr>
<td>(i) Insider insider</td>
<td>(ii) Outsider insiders</td>
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<td>(ii) Inside outsiders</td>
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Insider insiders: police officers who effectively conduct ‘in house’ research. This type of research is narrowly focused on management requirements, such as collating statistics and producing time-and-motion studies. Research is conducted for internal purposes.

Outsider insiders: police officers conducting research outside the organisation. This might include former officers who have decided to move towards academia, or serving officers seconded as researchers in other organisations (e.g. universities)

Inside outsiders: qualified civilian researchers working in the police. These might include researchers who are hired by the police on a consultancy basis to research a particular area of policing.

Outsider outsiders: external researchers with no affiliation to the police, studying the police or policing. This would typically include university researchers, as well as other researchers in other organisations such as consultancies and NGOs.

(Brown, 1996)

With each role, there are a number of advantages and disadvantages to the researcher, relating to data access, independence, research freedom, ethics and impact. The scope of research differs across each category, ranging from narrowly focused managerial tasks (e.g. collating statistics for crime reports), through to broader theoretical and empirical studies into policing. However, the nature of police research (by insiders or outsiders), and policing more generally is not static and both have evolved (and continue to do so) in different ways.
Evolution of police research

There have been several historical accounts of modern police research, most notably by Robert Reiner (see for example, Reiner 2007, 2010, 2012, 2015), but also a series of other reflective commentaries by policing scholars (e.g. Bayley, 2015; Brown, 1996; Holmberg; 2015; Punch, 2015). I will therefore only briefly outline the key contours here. It should be noted that this history is centred on developments in the UK and US, although the story that emerges has implications for police research internationally.

Reiner (2010) highlights five distinct phases of (outsider outsider) police research in the UK and US: (i) consensus; (ii) controversy; (iii) conflict; (iv) contradictory; and (v) crime control. First, he describes a consensus stage of police research, characteristic of research conducted between the early twentieth century and the 1960s. The writing was largely supportive of the police, in line with a wider political consensus around policing issues. However, research between the 1960s and 1970s adopted a more distanced tone, asking increasingly critical questions about police practice – mirroring the discourse of wider critical criminology at the time (Reiner cites the works of Michael Banton, Jerome Skolnick, Egon Bittner, Herman Goldstein, and David Bayley). This period is thus labelled the controversy stage by Reiner, in which the police were being increasingly implicated in explanations for deviance. This critique became more pervasive in the 1970s and 1980s, under the conflict stage. Police research in this era took on a broader critique of policing beyond informal police practices, and radically challenged the links between the police and the state (examples given include Peter Manning, Simon Holdaway, Maurice Punch, Gary Marx, John Van Maanen, Richard Ericson, Clifford Shearing, Tank Waddington, and Robert Reiner). Researchers involved in this more critical type of study were typically ‘lone scholars’ – PhD students with minimal external funding, conducting cultural analysis through ethnographic methods (Reiner, 2010).

Subsequently, a contradictory phase emerged between the 1980s and 1990s. This era saw a politicisation of the police (e.g. the Miners’ strikes in England and Wales), and with this came a greater policy interest in policing. There was a broader commissioning of research from government and by specialist think tanks, and the scope of the work became increasingly policy-oriented (e.g. situational crime prevention at the Home Office). These institutions also funded empirical evaluations of policing and crime-control policies, which meant that academic research also became increasingly policy-oriented, marking a departure from earlier cultural analysis. There was a distinct shift from a ‘nothing works’ mentality towards a ‘what works’ approach. This squared with realist perspectives in criminology, which remained critical but were not wholly oppositional (Reiner, 2012). Finally, Reiner (2010) observes a shift towards police research characterised by crime control. In this emergent phase, born in the early twenty-first century, police research has become more concerned with intelligence-led policing and detailed crime-analysis. Part of this has
entailed a growing research capacity within police organisations, alongside increasing collaboration with outside researchers.

I argue that we are now in a sixth phase of police scholarship: a collaborative stage. This has entailed a further blurring of boundaries between insider insiders and outsider outsiders. This shift can be observed in a number of ways.

For outsider researchers, funding appears to value collaborative working between insiders and outsiders. For example, the ESRC encourages collaboration between university researchers and other organisations through a number of mechanisms centred around knowledge exchange. One example is ‘Impact Acceleration Accounts’ (IAAs), which are block grants awarded to research organisations in order to ‘respond to knowledge exchange opportunities in more flexible, responsive and creative ways than centrally administered schemes’. The aims include:

- ‘Building relationships and networks with potential users of research to facilitate co-production of knowledge and maximise impact
- Movement and secondment of people between Research Organisations and user stakeholders
- Support for researchers to build networks with potential users of the products of their research, and further work to establish ‘proof of concept’ for their innovations
- Drive culture change in Research Organisations to promote knowledge exchange and improve related skill sets and capabilities
- Improve engagement with the public sector, civil society, industry (including SMEs, local business and Innovate UK) and publics.’

(ESRC, 2016).

As of May 2016, the ESRC awarded IAAs to 24 research organisations. With increasingly competitive funding, researchers are seeking ways to collaborate to win research grants. Such financial incentives pave the way towards more collaborative working with organisations, such as the police.

**Evolution of policing**

According to David Bayley (2015) ‘the most important innovations in policing in [the last 50 years] have come from observers and researchers outside the police establishment rather than from inside’ (p. 10). However, we are now at a pivotal point in police research, as ‘insiders’ are becoming increasingly equipped in conducting scientifically-grounded research. As Sherman (2013) argues, there has been a transition away from a reactive style of police work,
characterised by the three ‘R’s of random patrol, rapid response, and reactive investigations. Accordingly, there has been a shift towards three ‘T’s of targeting, testing and tracking. This refers to a more proactive and analytical approach to policing, which entails systematic prioritisation of resources, efficient working, and monitoring police decision-making. This monitoring and evaluation process is facilitated through advances in technology, such as crime mapping and body-worn video, which makes it easier to collate data.

Alongside these developments in policing, there has also been a growing recognition of the need to professionalise the police. This has been in part driven by insider outsiders. For example, a review on police leadership and training, led by Peter Neyroud (former Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police in the UK) recommended the creation of a chartered professional body for policing that would set standards and ensure accreditation of these, a new delivery body for police leadership and training and a new qualifications framework for policing (Neyroud, 2011). This has been supported by calls for qualifications to be a pre-requisite for police officers in the UK (College of Policing, 2015). The UK lags behind other countries in this respect, with qualifications being a pre-requisite for entry into the police service in Sweden and Norway, for example.

In the case of Norway, this is co-ordinated by PHS, which provides training for service in the police. Its aim is to ‘train police officers, both men and women, to act independently and analytically, and to be conscious of their own opinions, attitudes and choices in their everyday work’. Simultaneously, PHS also conducts its own wider research programmes, centred around four key pillars of research, including 1) Police Organisation, Culture and Behaviour, 2) Police Strategies, Practice and Methods, 3) Police Challenges and 4) Police as a Social Institution (PHS, 2014). The strategic goals of PHS also make police research an explicit goal (e.g. Strategic Objective 1 is to ‘develop Police Science as a separate research discipline and strengthen profession-based research’ [PHS, 2014, p.4). In this manner, PHS occupies a unique position which blurs distinctions between insider and outsider research.

There are parallels here with the College of Policing in England and Wales. The College sets standards for the police in professional development, training, skills and qualifications. It promotes an evidence-based approach to policing via an ESRC ‘What Works Centre for Crime Reduction’, which entails collaboration with university partners. It also takes ‘a coordinating role across the country, commissioning research and setting up regional networks, so that universities, further education colleges and police forces can work together to learn from best practice’ (College of Policing, 2016). Like PHS, it acts as a meeting point between insiders and outsiders to promote collaborative research on and for the police.

In this new era of collaboration, the insider/outside dichotomy becomes increasingly porous. Under the auspices of evidence-based policing, ‘insider
insiders’ become increasingly familiar with the language, tools and skills used by outsider researchers, and in turn open further opportunities for them to become ‘outsider insiders’. Simultaneously, as I have portrayed above, there is an apparent trend towards police-based evidence in academic research, by which I mean an increasing emphasis on developing research with police institutions to harness more embedded research. In this context lie a series of opportunities and possible pitfalls for all engaged in policing research.

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN A NEW ERA OF COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH**

The new collaborative dynamic brings with it many opportunities. First, there is now scope for greater access to data. Improved dialogue between the police and outsider researchers removes a potential barrier to data access. In earlier phases of police scholarship, gaining access to the police and related data was more challenging, with outsider researchers regarded with suspicion (Reiner, 2015). However, with the shift towards collaboration and greater involvement in the academic world for police chiefs (see Reiner, 1991; Savage, Charman, & Cope, 2000), police organisations have become more receptive to research conducted by outside organisations (Reiner, 2015). What is more, a drive towards evidence-based policing, in which rank-and-file police increasingly appreciate the need to collect data, means that researchers may now be able to access more representative data from a larger sample of the police. This is further supported by developments in technology, such as body-worn video, which facilitates data capture.

Another potential benefit of this increasingly collaborative dynamic is that the impact of police research may be clearer. Firstly, police research that is conducted in collaboration between outsiders and insiders may be more directed towards instrumental ends that ultimately support police practice. The results are also more likely to be received and implemented by the police organisation if they have played a part in the research and understand its value. The collaboration can then provide opportunities for the police to feedback any issues or challenges in implementation of recommendations, which can inform future research. By avoiding working in silos, police insiders and outsider researchers can develop better quality research, which is grounded in empirical data that can be challenged and tested in practice.

However, there are also some concerns pertaining to the ultimate aims of these forms of collaborative police research. Reiner (2012) distinguishes ‘abstracted empiricism’, referring to policy-oriented evaluations of specific initiatives, strategies and developments and ‘grand theory’, characterised by a focus on the ‘overall nature and function of the police and policing in reproducing social order, and their place in fundamental structures of power and (in)justice’ (p. 101). He argues that the shift towards a more collaborative era fosters research aligned to the former, to the detriment of the latter (Reiner, 2007,
Indeed, Holmberg (2014) recognises this as a feature of contemporary Nordic policing research. He illustrates that the number of academic publications on policing research have almost doubled between the periods of 1992–2004 and 2004–2009, pointing towards a growing number of research projects geared towards more instrumental questions. With this focus, the macro questions in policing may become peripheral to those researching the police, either inside or outside the police institution. This issue can become particularly acute where research funding is tied to a limited set of outputs associated with specific policies or practices, restricting opportunities to consider where the research sits within the broader field of policing. In response to this emerging trend, Punch (2015) calls for a transition away from questions of ‘what works’, towards broader normative questions concerning ‘what matters’ (p. 16), such as broader issues concerning police accountability, human rights and civil liberties.

There are also methodological implications for the blurring of boundaries in police research. Questions geared towards instrumental ends attract quantitative evaluations, epitomised by the gold standard of randomized control trials. This may have the effect of undermining the perceived utility of other methodologies underpinned by qualitative approaches. This may be regarded as a form of methodological elitism, which sets impracticable standards for police scholarship (see for example, Crawford 2016).

Increasingly collaborative policing research can also have an impact on research independence. This might mean being unable to take a critical perspective on particular police practices. For Reiner (2012), this is particularly concerning, who argues that we ‘need to bring political economy and ethical critique back in to academic policing debate, as it was in the early years of the sub-discipline’ (p. 107). If researchers become too closely affiliated to their subject matter, there is potential to lose a distanced perspective which is essential to high quality research. Bayley (2015) reminds us that in the last 50 years of police research, police organisations ‘have not been the source of significant reform ideas’ (p. 11). Instead, the majority of innovations in police research (e.g. hotspots policing, community policing, problem-oriented policing) have all come from outsiders. This raises the question as to whether increasingly close ties between insiders and outsiders allows sufficient space for the generation of innovative reform.

Holmberg (2014) also raises the potential issue of self-censorship in this current climate. He notes, ‘[i]n an era of increasing dependence on external research funding, the mere threat of selective allocation of funding towards more ‘positive’ results may influence both how we study specific problems, and what problems we study’ (pp. 50–51). This may also be driven by pragmatic willingness to keep close ties to police organisations in order to secure

1. The latter time-period is seven years shorter than the former, making this disjuncture all the more apparent.
future research funding and access. This embeddedness may in turn have implications for research ethics. For example, the idea of reporting police malpractice may become unpalatable to the researcher keen to stay on the inside.

With these challenges in mind, Crawford (2016) calls for a ‘knowledge-informed policing’ as opposed to evidence-based policing. That is, co-produced research that assumes a mutual respect between insider and outsider perspectives, characterised by knowledge exchange rather than knowledge transfer. This perspective recognises mutually competing interests, with no hierarchy of knowledge, and a normative concern with police practice beyond a focus on purely instrumental ends. One example of this approach is the N8 partnership in the UK, which is a network for collaboration between universities, Police and Crime Commissioners, police forces and other partner agencies. Funded by a block research grant, the overarching priorities of the collaboration include building research co-production capacity, strengthening the evidence base of policy and practice, and supporting innovation and the professionalisation of the police. This kind of strategic collaboration that recognises the value of police research for a multiplicity of actors provides a series of opportunities for policing scholars, and may help to overcome challenges associated with the blurring of insider and outsider positions.

CONCLUSION: TRUSTING POLICE RESEARCH

Policing is an inherently conflict-ridden enterprise, involving a multiplicity of interests (Marenin, 1983), making it all the more complex to achieve ‘trust’. Likewise, with research, there exist myriad interests – ranging from the normative to the instrumental; from quantitative to qualitative; from insiders to outsiders. Trust in police research, then, is equally malleable, and hinges on the extent to which different stakeholders can derive meaning, validation, and learning from the research process. As we traverse this collaborative era, we should not lose sight of the mutual interests, and recognise opportunities for both insiders and outsiders to co-produce and co-benefit – all the while remaining cognizant of some of the possible pitfalls of such research.

Punch (2015) suggests some future directions of police research, including upwards (e.g. ‘high policing’), outwards (e.g. private policing), and abroad (i.e. comparative studies). Indeed these are all important areas of research with relevance to Nordic policing. For example, one of the challenges Holmberg (2014) raises is of nation-centrism of police research. Through an examination of the nationalities of those conducting research on police, he argues that there ‘is a profound lack of cross-national research, that is, police research carried out by scholars who do not share nationality with the officers they study’ (p. 54). For Holmberg, this is a missed opportunity, given the parallels that can be drawn from police research across the Nordic countries. The wider point here

is the importance of collaboration – not only with insider insiders, but also other outsiders. Collaboration brings with it a host of opportunities, and researchers must make the most of these in order to avoid working in silos.

But I would like to add one additional perspective to Punch’s suggestions to look ‘upwards’, ‘outwards’ and ‘abroad’: inwards. By that, I mean a reflexive account about current trends in police research, asking critical questions about the underlying motives of the research and stepping back to think about the wider implications of the research. As noted by PHS (2014), ‘…by observing one’s own role and one’s own tasks from the outside, the police are able to become better equipped to solve new tasks and challenges.’ (p. 7). It is only with this critical – yet collaborative approach that we can trust police research.

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