

## Research: A Practitioner's Perspective, from the Streets

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Good afternoon and thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to address this exceptional gathering of scholars, researchers, and criminal justice professionals. Like all of you, I enjoy and appreciate these conferences in that they give us an opportunity to look at where we have been, where we are, and, most importantly, where we might be going. We are intrigued and inspired about the possibilities the future holds. Unlike most of you, I am first and foremost a practitioner, a cop, and have been one for 36 years. I am also a consumer and strong advocate of research. As the current president of the Police Executive Research Forum, the foremost practitioner/research partnership organization in policing, I am a proponent of more intimate partnerships and collaboration between practitioners and academics. I respect partnerships that helped to shape successful problem solving and community policing philosophies of the 20th century. These partnerships can lead to a better understanding of the complexities of the rapidly expanding paradigm of crime and criminal justice in America in the 21st century.

This is particularly important as we enter that emerging new paradigm of the 21st century where intelligence-led policing and the uncertainties of the under-researched issues of the many facets of terrorism and cyber-crime begin to confront and challenge us. What I would like to do with my time here today is to share with you some of the ways that I believe research has and has not contributed to the practice of policing in this country over the last 40 years. Speaking as a successful practitioner and manager of six police agencies, including three of the largest police agencies in the U.S., I will just state that the views are mine, but they are shared by many of my colleagues.

I think I can be comfortable in saying that for most of the last half of the 20th century, the relationship between police practitioners and researchers has been, at best, one of agreeing to disagree on the causes of crime and the best ways to respond and prevent crime. Unfortunately there are times when we talk past each other and don't connect at all. Since one of the purposes of research is to

spawn and encourage debate and dissent, that set of contradictions may be entirely appropriate. I embrace and encourage the need for research, because I am a change agent, who constantly needs timely accurate information to help shape my initiatives and understand my challenges. I want to challenge you all to continue to be inquisitive, forward-thinking, and constructively critical of the status quo. Both practitioners and researchers together must fight fiercely for expansion of NIJ and private sector research initiatives. We all know that funding fuels research as well as the attention of the public, the media, practitioners, and politicians. Right now, the overwhelming majority of federal funding is being redirected from traditional criminal justice arenas to homeland security issues. While I agree that homeland security is important, we need to maintain a balance between counter-terrorism funding and funding in support of our traditional criminal justice responsibilities.

As for the title of my remarks, I also challenge you to aggressively respond to and research the increasingly conflicting theories, efforts, arguments, and almost mean-spiritedness of some criminologists, academics, and sociologists, including some in this room, to diminish, refute, or dismiss outright the contributions and effectiveness of our police officers and practitioners in preventing, controlling, and reducing crime. Some seek to assert, with what to me and my fellow practitioners sometimes appears to be specious data, faulty assumptions or ivy tower perspectives and assertions that the police play little or no role in the prevention of crime. I'm sorry, but *we do play a major role*. Absent clear-cut results, or at least research that is intelligible and useful to the field and to practitioners like me, they and you risk being shut out, cut off, and ultimately reduced to the point of irrelevance.

For most of the period of the 1960s to the 1990s, for a variety of reasons, including the limited criminal justice research available at the time, many of the most influential politicians, researchers, reporters, and even some well-intentioned police leaders sought to limit the role of the police to first responders rather than allowing them to be

first-preventers. We were also told that the causes of crime were economic, social, demographic, and ethnographic. Furthermore, we were told that we could have no impact on these so-called causes. Rather, we were encouraged to focus on response to crime and to measure our success by arrest numbers, clearance rates, and response time. Police leaders at the time either were not intellectually equipped or inclined to refute this research and political direction. Alternatively, they understood, possibly in a self-serving manner, that they were being absolved of the traditional and historical role of prevention and were now going to be held accountable only for the less challenging and potentially more successful response to crime that had already occurred. Fortunately, there were some in your ranks and in the new emerging leadership in the ranks of the police, like me, who because of our experience on the front lines, on the streets, and in the neighborhoods of our cities embraced a different approach that understood quite simply that the so-called causes were in most environments strong influences, not causes. We believe strongly that the single most important cause of crime has been human behavior. I have learned from and worked with researchers and practitioners whose focus is on the street, and we have embraced the reality that in order to control human behavior, *the police do matter*.

That focus on outcomes and on controlling behavior, rather than just measuring our response, has shown that after 40 years of uncontrolled increases in crime, fear, and disorder, we finally began to get it right in the 1990s. The police have helped to create a huge and positive impact. We did it by focusing on and prioritizing the right outcomes: less crime and more safety. We began to achieve historic crime reduction and improved quality of life. Our new focus remains primarily on measures of effectiveness, not just activity and response. The lesson learned quite simply is that *cops do count*. We are one of the most essential initiators and catalysts in the criminal justice equation. Crime may go up or down to some degree when influenced by many of the old so-called causes, which I prefer to describe as influences, but the quickest way to impact crime is with a well-led, well-managed, and appropriately-resourced police force that embraces risk taking over risk adversity. A policing structure that includes accountability focused Computerized Statistics (COMPSTAT) management principles, broken windows quality of life initiatives, and problem-oriented community policing that is transparent and accessible to the public, the profession, the media, and the research community will be most effective. It is inclusive not exclusive. I advocate that position, because that is what I have consistently done successfully for

almost 30 years in six different police departments.

I am asking that more of you begin to work with us and among us in the real world laboratories of our departments and cities to help us prove or disprove the beliefs and practices that practitioners like myself and most of my colleagues deeply believe in, espouse, and practice. You don't need to look at us and analyze us like a far away galaxy through a telescope. We are right here, and more of you need to work among us, rather than just observing and commenting about us in language that is seen as disparaging or dismissive. You view us through theories that appeal to and are understood fully by a limited few among you, but that are not appreciated, understood, or embraced by those leaders like me, who can take your thoughts and theories and validate or refine them in the petri dish of our departments and cities.

More than ten years ago, I encouraged the creation of and participated in a National Institute of Justice (NIJ) conference similar to this one called Measuring What Matters. The conference was initiated by then NIJ director Jeremy Travis, who had formerly worked for me as my deputy commissioner for legal affairs. I was completing my second year as New York City Police Commissioner at the time. My appointment by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was based largely on my success in the New York Transit Police two years earlier, as well as our mutual belief in broken windows quality of life enforcement as an essential strategy for reclaiming public spaces. We had undertaken a top-to-bottom reform of the NYPD, including the development of the COMPSTAT process, and we were beginning to see the extraordinary declines in violence and other crimes that have typified New York City ever since. Starting in 1990, there were 17 straight years of decline in reported crime in the subways. Starting in 1991, there were 16 straight years of decline in reported crime in the city. A world-renowned reduction in fear-inducing disorder began and public space quality of life improved. I tried to give the criminologists and attendees at the Measuring What Matters conference a heads up, both in my keynote comments and in my contribution to the seminal report "Measuring What Matters." Indeed some of my remarks to this audience are remarkably redundant of those that I made and wrote ten years ago. Paraphrasing the remarks I told them,

Something very different is coming your way. If you think police departments can't rouse themselves from their bureaucratic torpor, think again. If you think police are doomed to be perpetually overwhelmed by demographic trends and these so-called so-

cial causes of crime, think again. If you think adaptability, flexibility, and responsiveness to local conditions are beyond the capacity of police organizations, think again.

Unfortunately, what I mostly encountered was resistance. Many of the attendees at the meeting were pretty sure that I was just a lucky cop riding a statistical wave. “If you take credit when crime goes down, what will you do when crime goes up?” one asked. “Crime goes up somewhere in New York City everyday,” I replied. “The difference now is that we know when it goes up we have the flexibility and the focus to drive it back down.”

In any event, I must be the luckiest cop alive. Starting in the 70s in Boston and continuing today in the LAPD, one of the smallest police departments per capita, I have always been able, in all six departments, to drive crime down and keep it down by responding quickly to the spikes that will always occur.

It has been an enlightening and invigorating experience. We police managers were supposed to be the conservative ones, stuck in our ways, and impervious to new ideas. Yet, it was many in the research community who couldn't or wouldn't see what was happening in front of them, possibly because it was so contradictory to their own research and beliefs. We have all come a long way since then. I think much of the criminal justice community now acknowledges that police management was one of the many influences on the remarkable crime declines of the 1990s. And more and more police managers understand that they have to open their organizations to challenging new ideas and research possibilities from the outside. I know I want my new department, the LAPD, to be seen as a national laboratory.

Let me share with you the last paragraph from that 1995 presentation:

Criminology tends to view the criminals as a kind of irresistible social force. Its prognosis for the future amounts to a cry of, “Look out! Here comes a demographic bulge in the crime-prone age cohort of 15 to 19 year olds, and we are all going to be swamped by it” (remember John Dilulio and the super predators?). I don't think so. The criminals are no irresistible force. In fact, the criminal elements responsible for most street crime are nothing but a bunch of disorganized individuals, many of whom aren't very good at what they do. The police have all the advantages—in training, equipment, organization,

and strategy. We can get the criminals on the run, and we can keep them on the run. It's possible. We are doing it in New York.

As the late great Jack Maple once said, “I'm not worried about organized crime; I'm worried about disorganized crime.”

And guess what? We are doing it again in Los Angeles with many fewer resources but using many of the same ideas. But we need to do more. We need more ideas and more research into what works. In what has burgeoned over the last five decades into a huge criminal justice research field, it is my belief that not enough effort has been or is being focused on the police, our role, and our impact. So much of what has been done seems intent on disproving that we count.

Expanding on that premise, I want to encourage the research community to be introspective and to think about your audience. Much of the social science research that I encounter appears to be written by academics for academics and does not appear to be grounded in and validated by solid field experience. So, as a result, it is not viewed as credible by many police leaders. Some of it appears to me and to other cops as coming from a decidedly anti-police biased perspective. Now maybe we are cynical and a bit paranoid, after all we are cops, but take a look at some of these arguments and decide for yourself.

Bernard Harcourt recently wrote an editorial for the LA Times, titled “Bratton's Broken Windows” based on his research and aimed at disproving the broken windows approach. His basic premise was that with precious resources, misdemeanor arrests do nothing but waste the time of the officers and the courts. Secondly, he proposed that this is an either/or situation. Either you focus on guns, gangs, and drugs or you focus on quality of life and public disorder violations. In reality, as police chief, I don't have the luxury to shrink away from my responsibility to the public and pick and choose how to enforce the law. You have to do it all, and the number of police officers is inconsequential in the big picture. If I had one police officer, he or she would be doing both. I have always done both successfully in my six police experiences.

Then there is the economist, Steven Levitt, who in his best-selling book *Freakonomics* spends a great deal of time bashing many of your colleagues' theories before attributing the dramatic crime declines in the 1990s to the unintended benefits of legalized abortion. What neither of these researchers chose to consider in downplaying the role of police in crime reduction is that we did have

something of an experiment with which to gauge the effectiveness of innovative police strategies in the New York City subway system. That is where the philosophy, strategies, and tactics that were later applied to the city of New York as a whole were tested. Unfortunately, these applications have been ignored by most of you but addressed so brilliantly in Malcolm Gladwell's *Tipping Point*.

I understand "research for the sake of research sake" and believe that it has its place. However, in order to be useful to practitioners, researchers need to understand their audiences and the potential impacts of research on the front end. Otherwise, we might just end up having academics writing to impress each other with no long-term lasting effect on what is actually happening in the field. I have also commented that practitioners and researchers often think in different time frames. The police executive has to deliver results in a much more immediate time span and is constantly in need of even more timely and accurate information upon which to make allocation decisions. Researchers oftentimes cannot meet these needs. The sometimes enormous lag between research being conducted and its eventual application is frustrating to those charged with delivering fairly immediate results where lives are quite literally at stake. Knowing what happened two years ago, let alone five or ten, is often of no value and is not included in the decision making processes of practitioners. We often use such information as bell weather guides to measure how we are currently doing. I can remember during my time in New York City that once we had a plan, we did everything everywhere all at once, because with 38,000 cops for the first time in my career, I could do that. Regrettably, according to the experts, this type of approach does not allow for valid experiments or for a perfect research setting. Well I'm sorry, but I am sure that the thousands of people whose lives were saved are grateful that we didn't wait to experiment here and there. This difference in mindset contributes to what I believe is part of the divide between some researchers and some practitioners.

It is of the utmost importance that we exploit opportunities like this conference to foster a more collaborative relationship between researchers and practitioners. That is why I believe it is important to air our differences and to try to come to some common ground. So in the spirit of sharing, let me offer you some of my observations about what is good and productive versus what is misguided and unproductive about research. This is just from my perspective as a practitioner. What my colleagues and I find useful is applied research that is understandable and pertinent to the practitioner, research that is conducted to

advance the field and enhance productivity, and research designed to measure effectiveness. When considering the research sources of evidence-based policy and practice, practitioners are concerned with the quality of the research, its synthesis into the overall picture, and the ability for the findings to be disseminated in a "practitioner-friendly" manner so that practitioners can gauge the relevance, importance, and reliability of the research.

What we find of limited value is theoretical research aimed at provocation of a response, grand-standing through controversial hypotheses with little basis in fact, writing that is strictly focused at other academics with no grounding in reality, and the kind of reconstructed logic that is clearly based on presuppositions and bias. Echoing these comments, my friend and equally outspoken colleague Miami Police Chief John Timoney points out that:

We are not concerned with setting up the perfect experiment to prove our point or satisfy academic curiosity. When we drove crime reduction in New York, we implemented it citywide. We could not ethically let certain communities suffer when we knew what we could do to help them.

We are concerned with saving victims' lives. In LA so far this year through July 16, 2006, due to a combination of strategies, including broken windows, 16 fewer people were killed in this city versus last year at this time. That's 16 families spared the grief of the violence that claims so many lives. That is also 16 fewer young people who would likely be spending the rest of their lives in prison.

My biggest regret in Los Angeles is that, unlike in New York City in 1994, I don't have the cops to do it everywhere all at the same time. But where we have applied the lessons learned from New York with more police, we have been having the same predictable success.

To help you understand the points I am making, it might be helpful to review my background to give you some insight into how I view the world. My first law enforcement job was as an MP in Vietnam. By the time I came back and joined the Boston Police Department in 1970, as a skinny white kid walking a beat in a crime ravaged and predominantly African American community armed with a badge, a six-shot revolver, six spare rounds, handcuffs, a twelve inch club, and no radio, a dramatic change in the so-called policing profession was on the way; 'so-called' because based on any acceptable description of what constitutes a profession, in 1970 we clearly

were not a true profession. More cops were getting educated through the Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) and on their own, and many were becoming familiarized with the potential benefits of dramatically increasing research and body of knowledge in the practical application of law enforcement operations. But we still had the old guard practitioners to contend with. They tended to be close-minded, cynical, and unwilling to accept new ideas that came initially from outside of their insular environments and experience, and eventually and increasingly from inside.

Coincidentally, this was just about the same time that NIJ came into being. So, in a sense, I grew up in the NIJ era. NIJ grew out of the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 and dedicated itself to researching crime control issues to meet the challenges of crime and justice, particularly at the state and local levels. As time progressed, the federal government took on more and more of a role in crime control research and dedicated more and more funding to research, other technical assistance, and training programs to assist state and local authorities. During its first years of operation, NIJ focused on law enforcement communications systems, crime prevention, rehabilitation, technology, management, and organization of the criminal justice system. NIJ also began to support graduate research fellowships and assessed curriculum needs in degree programs for criminal justice professionals.

Throughout the 1970s, the federal agencies and NIJ struggled with their new role, and much of the interesting research came out of the Ford Foundation-funded Police Foundation. Still, the initial research on the causes of crime often was of little value to the practitioner in the police environment of the 1970s and 1980s when we were still operating under a reactive model. In fact, many of the academics, sociologists, economists, and politicians did not want the police to focus on the causes. They had already made up their minds about the causes of crime, and we were told it was beyond our purview. In 1973, former NYPD commissioner Patrick V. Murphy took over the Police Foundation and three years later, along with other local police chiefs, created the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) as a national membership organization that would foster debate, research, and openness to challenging traditional police practices. PERF's first executive director, Gary Hayes, one of Herman Goldstein's former students, decided that problem solving would be the agenda of PERF, and we were off to the races.

In 1978, as a young Boston police lieutenant implementing one of the country's first community policing initiatives, I remember reading Herman Goldstein's

*Policing a Free Society*. In 1979, Goldstein published *Improving Policing: A Problem-Oriented Approach to Crime and Delinquency*, and we were thrust forward into the Community Policing Era that would finally take hold in the 1990s. Throughout the 1980s, the crack epidemic raged as NIJ developed and improved soft body armor for the police who were facing heavily armed drug dealers. NIJ also conducted research on difficulties victims faced in the criminal justice system and recommended reforms that led to victim assistance programs nationwide.

Later in the 1980s, James Q. Wilson published *Thinking About Crime*, and the federally funded Executive Sessions on Community Policing began at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. I was a late-joining participant. It was also during this time that the broken windows philosophy, first espoused in the 1982 Atlantic Monthly article of the same name, by Jim Wilson and George Kelling, was embraced by police leaders, including me. I embraced it, because I had lived it during my neighborhood policing initiatives in some of the highest crime neighborhoods in Boston. Society had told the police to focus on serious crime response, while it figured out what to do about the causes. In the neighborhoods of Boston, the residents wanted to know what I was going to do about the broken windows victimless crimes like graffiti, prostitution, and drug dealing that were destroying their neighborhoods.

It was also around this time that Chips Stewart took over at NIJ in the 1980s and began to sharpen its focus and concentrate its attention on the proximate measures of crime prevention reduction and control; work that was later built upon by Jeremy Travis in the 1990s. With this background, we were positioned to carry out what we learned in the 1980s in a meaningful way in the 1990s. We changed the way we were doing business. We had been focused on a failed reactive philosophy based on the strategies of random patrol, rapid response, and reactive investigations. Based on what we learned in the 1980s, we moved to a community policing model characterized by prevention, problem solving, and partnership. We got it right in the 1990s. We turned the system on its head, and we were successful in driving crime reduction through accountability, through measuring what matters, through partnership with the community, and through problem solving. We developed COMPSTAT with its emphasis on risk taking, accountability, and the use of timely and accurate intelligence to make police smarter.

The results, as reflected by the dramatic crime declines of that period, that continue to this day in cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles were lasting. At the same time, the federal government, through the

Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program, took action to increase the number of law enforcement officers, to strengthen penalties, to control guns, to support prevention programs, to widen efforts to combat organized crime through the use of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statute, and, most importantly to this audience, to increase research dollars. In the 1990s, for the first time in our history, we got it right. The police were catalysts in many instances for the significant reductions in crime, fear, and disorder. These successes further reinforced my belief that the philosophy that shaped so much of police policy and practice in the 1970s and 1980s, with its emphasis on police responding to crime rather than focusing on the prevention of crime, was wrong, *dead wrong*. The belief held by many, including possibly many in this room, that crime was caused by economic, social, demographic, or ethnographic factors (or even by the weather) was fundamentally flawed. All of those factors may act as influences, in some instances significant influences on crime, but the real cause of crime is *behavior*. The one thing I have learned and strongly advocate is that the police, properly resourced and directed, can control behavior to such a degree that we can change behavior. My experiences in Boston, in New York, and now in Los Angeles have all borne this out. In sum, *the police do matter!*

I have seen nothing in the way of hard evidence to dissuade me from this simple truth. We are the difference—we are one of the essential catalysts in the reduction and prevention of crime. In a recent article in the *National Review*, “There Are No Cracks in the Broken Windows,” George Kelling and I sought to refute several of the ideological academics who are trying to undermine our efforts and our success. Many of these social scientists are wedded to what I believe is the failed and never proven idea that crime is caused by the structural features of a capitalist-based democratic society such as demographics, economic imbalance, racism, and poverty to name a few. They assume that true crime reduction can come only as the result of economic reform, redistribution

of wealth, and elimination of poverty and racism—all worthwhile goals. Indeed, they speak of crime as a sort of disease that criminals are at risk of catching, through no culpability of their own, and for which the police have no responsibility or ability to prevent. I hold that these proponents are very much removed from the reality of the practitioners’ experiences and cannot possibly see what we see, up close and personal everyday. On a daily basis, we see that committed cops are making a difference out here in the real world laboratory, far removed from the sometimes sterile and controlled academic environment. What some refuse to see and acknowledge is what I know to be true, and that is: *cops count!*

We got it right in the 1990s—partnership, problem solving, and preventative community policing. We can continue to get it right in the 21st century. We know that the above factors influence crime but do not cause it. The cause of crime is illegal or inappropriate behavior. In a democratic society, we the police are the arm of government authorized to control that behavior in a constitutional, consistent, and compassionate manner. I know as you do that when given the resources, motivation, training, and strategic focus, ‘better policing’ is a causal variable and catalyst that drives crime reduction.

As we enter the new millennium, there is no denying that the role of the police and criminal justice community must continue to change and expand. It is incumbent on us all, practitioners and researchers alike, to continue in useful and practical ways to advance the field of knowledge, so that we are better able to shape that advancement and expansion into continued, meaningful, and sustainable positive change for the people whose lives and environment we seek to improve. We are in this together and our continued success will rely on our ability to be inquisitive, forward thinking, and constructively critical of the status quo. We need to balance the new challenges of counter-terrorism and cyber crime with our traditional crime-fighting role and need to talk, listen, challenge, debate, and ultimately work together for the betterment of our society and civilization.

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**About the author:**

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