

Evidence-Based Policing for crime prevention in England and Wales: Perception and use by new police recruits.

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Abstract.

Evidence Based policing is an integral part of the police approach to crime prevention work being closely associated with the problem solving approach as developed by Herman Goldstein (1990) This research explores the effect of the new initial police entry programmes, co-delivered in partnerships between Higher Education and police forces, on the application of evidence-based policing (EBP) in the workplace. It also considers the impact of team leaders and supervisors on this adoption. The study utilised a survey of new student police constables undergoing the new higher education qualifications programme from five different police forces in England and Wales. Findings suggest that EBP appears to be applied in the workplace, and that the combination of higher education and work-based practice will continue to influence the adoption of EBP by new police constables. In particular is the role of police leaders in this aspect. This in turn may embed it into practice despite any cultural resistance, thus enhancing the crime prevention role of the police.

Introduction

Preparing a policing workforce for the future, whilst understanding the impact of possible or likely developments in society, is an important role for leaders at all levels of policing organisations. Whilst it is tempting for leaders to concentrate on the ‘here and now’ problems for policing, police leaders should face the challenges of driving forward and managing change (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2014). They should attempt to position the organisation to succeed as conditions and social requirements change. To meet these challenges, police leaders need to be well equipped with knowledge, understanding, skills and behaviours, along with the appropriate resources, so that they can effectively guide the workforce, championing good practice, whilst continuing to serve communities and preserving their own wellbeing. The wider policing workforce requires similar skill sets, being supported and encouraged in their development by their leaders. However, police leadership is limited sometimes to reactively dealing with the challenges faced today, ignoring the fact that preparing for the future is vitally important (Schafer *et al.*, 2019)

Future challenges for the police and their partners working in Criminal Justice Systems include calls for service becoming increasingly complex. Consequently, there will be a need for a more adaptive and informed approach able to blend advanced technical skills with interpersonal skills such as empathy, creativity and collaboration. Current policing structures are essentially modelled on the early industrial period, with vertical, hierarchical fragmented and bureaucratic methods of dealing with issues (College of Policing, 2020a). These tend to hinder the way in which dealing with emerging threats and challenges are dealt with. In part, this has been recognised as being problematic for the future (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, 2015: College of Policing, 2020a). Both organisations appear to appreciate that there is a need to add critical skills to the police workforce, along with a change in culture and leadership if policing is to meet future challenges.

One core aspect of meeting and dealing with future challenges for policing is the wide adoption of Evidence-Based Practice, as a proactive approach to applying accumulated evidence of what works into policing practice (Sherman 1998). Sherman (*ibid.*) called for the establishment of links between higher education or research institutions to assist in enabling the transfer of research into policing practice. It has been suggested that Evidence-Based Policing (EBP) should play an important part in the education of new police recruits

(Mitchell and Lewis 2017). In England and Wales, therefore, EBP is now seen as an essential component of the Policing Education Qualifications Framework (PEQF) (Brown *et al.*, 2018), directing education and training programmes for new recruits, and is considered as being a component of the broad vision of reform for establishing policing as a profession (Lewis, 2017). Indeed, the professionalisation of police education has been part of a general trend in Europe and other parts of the world for some time, with differing results (Frevel and Rogers, 2018). One of the most compelling reasons for adopting EBP lies in its application to crime prevention approaches.

Evidence based policing in crime prevention context.

Evidence based policing is highly compatible with approaches to crime prevention. For example, the Problem Oriented Policing approach as espoused by Goldstein (1990) requires police and other agencies to engage in a scientific approach to reducing or eradicating crime problems within communities. Problem-oriented policing is an approach to policing in which discrete pieces of police business (each consisting of a cluster of similar incidents, whether crime or acts of disorder, that the police are expected to handle) are subject to examination in hopes that what is freshly learned about each problem will lead to discovering a new and more effective strategy for dealing with it. Problem-oriented policing places a high value on new responses that are preventive in nature, that are not dependent on the use of the criminal justice system, and that engage other public agencies, the community and the private sector when their involvement has the potential for significantly contributing to the reduction of the problem. The analysis of the problem must be thorough and police officers and other agencies must routinely and systematically analyse problems before trying to solve them. An essential part of the problem solving process as espoused by Goldstein is that of the SARA model (Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment) (Goldstein 1990). In particular the analysis aspect of this approach requires the identification of the events and conditions that precede the problem, identifying relevant data and researching what is known about the problem. In order to achieve this aim, evidence based policing techniques assist in the crime prevention approach utilising the Problem Oriented Model.

One of the main drivers for change which will undoubtedly influence the receptivity of EBP by the police organisation lies within the new police professional degree curriculum with its emphasis upon EBP projects, linked to the police workplace. The evolution of modern criminality will see policing deal with increasingly diverse and complex communities including those communities that exist online. Developments in technology coupled with the availability of such technology to many, mean that new constables must be ready to call upon

a range of skills, graduate attributes and knowledge (Martin et al 2017). This is recognised in *Policing Vision 2025*, which articulates the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners (APCC) and the National Police Chiefs' Council's (NPCC) strategy for the professional development of policing. As we have seen, those recruited as police constables will enter the profession through one of three routes and follow a national policing curriculum. The new national policing curriculum seeks to prepare those entering the service as police constables for the challenges they will face. It also aims to develop police practitioners who have the ability, knowledge and skills to operate autonomously and with sound decision making skills based on a sound evidence base.

Evidence based policing is not a panacea but should be art of a decision making process for the police. Its tenant is that policies, decisions and practices should be supported by evidence and analysed, not blindly determined.

Given the importance of the adoption and use of EBP to assist in dealing with future challenges, an examination of how this approach is being delivered to students of policing and their use as new constables is important. Lum and Koper (2017) suggest the wider acceptance of EBP requires its incorporation into everyday use, but they also point out the problem that resistance through the organisational culture can bring to a new concept such as this. The police occupational sub culture has to be acknowledged as having an impact upon the way in which the police operate and can affect the way in which service is developed and delivered to communities. Police culture is seen as being made up of multiple cultures within the police organisation such as canteen culture, shift culture, headquarters culture etc. and these are now commonly used to describe various internal parts of the police organisation (Westmarland 2008). The recent Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) report into allegations of misconduct in the Metropolitan police for example suggests that this culture remains strong (IOPC 2022) and as Reiner (2020) points out this culture affects the way the police carry out their work and is particularly resistant to change.

It has been suggested that the role of the team leader/supervisor (those who directly lead operational units) is pivotal and central to the development of approaches to policing and indeed to assist in overcoming police occupational sub culture opposition (The College of Policing 2015). It therefore seems imperative that team leaders/supervisors understand and apply EBP in practice, whilst championing its use by others.

Initial Police Constable Education in England and Wales

A UK Government commitment in 2019 to recruit an additional 20,000 police constables by March 2023 (Home Office, 2021) has led to an ‘uplift’ in the number of new recruits joining the service. One of three initial entry routes to policing are options for the new or aspiring police constable, the content of their study being directed by the PEQF, which is a component of the National Policing Curriculum (NPC). The NPC governs all police education and training, being set and maintained in ongoing consultation with the police service by the professional body for the policing across England and Wales, the College of Policing. The three new initial entry routes were evolved by the College of Policing in consultation with the wider police service as an important element of standardising the practice of police education and training, whilst aiding the recognition of policing as a profession (Pepper and McGrath, 2019). The three routes are the Police Constable Degree Apprenticeship (PCDA), Degree Holder Entry Programme (DHEP) and a pre-join BSc/BA honours degree in professional policing. It must also be acknowledged that there are PEQF routes of entry for police community support officers (PCSOs) and volunteer special constables (SC).

The first of these routes of entry as a new police constable, the PCDA, was initially commenced with new undergraduate learners in 2018 and led to the first graduates in 2021. The PCDA is a work-based programme co-created and delivered in partnerships between higher education and police forces. It is studied over three years by learners who are also employed full-time as police constables.

The second entry route for a new constable is the DHEP. This is funded by a police force and once again the learners are both employed and study a co-created and delivered work-based programme. As these DHEP learners are existing graduates from a discipline other than policing and have already studied and achieved graduate level skills, their programme of study is condensed over two years with a focus on policing practice.

The final route of study, leading to the possibility of recruitment in to policing as a police constable, is the self-funded, knowledge based honours degree in professional policing, during this programme learners are not employed, and not guaranteed employment with a police force on graduation, but they are equipped with the knowledge and understanding to allow them, if recruited by a force, to study for and achieve the practical skills required for frontline policing.

Learning about EBP

The College of Policing (2021) provide a broad definition of EBP which focuses upon police officers, staff and volunteers both creating and reviewing good quality evidence to inform

practices and decisions. The creation of such evidence requires the use of the most appropriate research methods available, which are applied carefully and transparently, with limitations reported and the conclusions reached being peer reviewed (ibid.). However, little published research exists exploring the effectiveness of transferring EBP taught within police education programmes.

Those studying any of the initial entry routes to policing develop subject specific knowledge and understanding across a range of policing disciplines including the roles and responsibilities of those involved in response, community and roads policing, information and intelligence, along with the conduct of investigations. One of the key themes throughout the study for the initial entry routes to policing, whether employed as a police constable or aspiring to be so, are the benefits to policing of adopting an evidence-based research approach, such as strategically enhancing a national body of quality, ethically approved and evidence informed professional practice, whilst at the individual level enhancing the confidence of new constables in making the best possible evidence informed decisions (Pepper *et al.*, 2021).

Leaders are important in the process of learning and using EBP. Telep and Lum (2014), for example, identify how the receptivity of those in policing to EBP is likely to be influenced by its emphasis by executive leaders. This not only adds value as an authentic and practical perspective to EBP, but also demonstrates support for new learners, whilst consolidating their vision of adopting an EBP approach to deal with future policing challenges. In addition, a Police officer's awareness and enthusiasm towards EBP seems to be affected by their previous education (Grieco, 2016; Telep, 2017), along with previous experiences of research (Telep, 2017). A similar link between the level of education and awareness of EBP was also found amongst experienced police officers in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Spasić and Simonović, 2018). When conducting research in Australia on the transference of police interviewing skills from training to workplace practice, Mount and Mazerolle (2021) found that some of the key influencers for success were the motivations of the learners, their perceptions of the relevance of the training and their willingness to apply the new knowledge and skills.

The last 40 years have seen an increase in the educational levels of senior police leaders, which in turn has fostered an understanding in the value of research (Sherman 2013). There now appears to exist a significant body of research which continues to grow, and supports senior leaders within policing to make evidence-based decisions on policies and procedures

focused on the existing evidence rather than culture or preferred practice (Mitchell and Lewis 2017). Such practices of making the best-informed decisions can easily be aligned to the expectations of the public this highlights the importance of adopting actions by leaders which create outcomes of value for communities (Hartley 2018).

However, limited research exists on how police team leaders/supervisors across England and Wales assist in the adoption of EBP. Although Lum and Koper (2017) identify the criticality of team leaders/supervisors in influencing change, they also note how such roles can be challenging to convince the need for change. In the USA for example, the police identified positive attitudes of a number of new police recruits to EBP at the start of their training across two academies (Grieco 2016). However this willingness to adopt EBP approaches tended to decrease towards the end of their training, as their openness to adopting new ideas fell, perhaps due to experiences in the workplace or the lack of workplace support. Cox and Kirby (2018) also identifying in their research in an English university policing programme, the influential nature of academic lecturers with previous policing experience on the new police recruits. Similarly across Europe, Spasić and Simonović (2018) also found a significant number of police influencers/leaders in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina understood the concept of EBP, but that police practitioners in the field were far more hesitant to adopt the use of research data to inform practice.

Team leaders/supervisors, therefore, have a strong influence on the behaviours of those they supervise (Schafer, 2009). Mount and Mazerolle (2021) also observed the negative impact on the transfer of skills when supervisors do not reinforce the value of training received.

The influence of team leaders on those they lead should not be underestimated (Filstad and Karp 2021) and appears to be well documented across the world (Fleming and Wingrove 2017; Savignac and Dunbar 2014; Pearson-Goff and Herrington, 2014; Kalyal 2020; Schafer *et al.*, (2019)

Research Methodology

Position of researchers.

The researchers in this project could be considered to be what Brown (1985) refers to as ‘outsiders/insiders’ when conducting police research. This term is generally regarded as being ascribed to former police employees who are now academics and conduct research on policing. Such individuals have an intimate knowledge of policing but as academics are still viewed with some suspicion because they operate outside the police culture, yet are still viewed as being part of that culture by those outside the police. As Punch (1985) points out,

there is always the danger of 'going native' in police research, as he discovered in his study of examining corruption within the Amsterdam police, meaning a loss of independence, objectivity and becoming part of the research rather than remaining detached.

This poses the question as to whether or not it is possible to remain sufficiently independent so that we can challenge accepted assumptions in policing in order to critically examine them with academic rigour. The position of the researchers in this instance was a major consideration in this research, particularly that of maintaining objectivity. Whilst Durkheim (1938/1895) argued for a value free approach, with social facts being treated as things not objects and all precautions being eradicated, the authors in this case because of their experiences made a conscious attempt to set aside their own experiences and values in order to carry out the research from a neutral and value free position. However, there is a growing recognition that it is not completely possible to eradicate one's values. Despite that, adopting a reflexive approach the authors considered their position and ways in which their identity may have informed their findings. Reflexivity was considered essential in this research, as was maintaining professional objectivity, distance and scientific clarity.

The methodological strategy for this research was heavily influenced by the coronavirus pandemic and the Government's instructions with regard to social distancing, travelling etc. Consequently, the approaches to this research sought to deal with these issues by extensive use of IT for data collection.

Convenience sampling.

Convenience sampling is a method that is used because of its accessibility. It does not claim that the sample is totally representative of the population under consideration, and of course the results are indicative only of the way in which Evidence Based Policing is perceived by new recruits. What this research does is to provide a springboard for further research in this area. Ibrahim (2018), for example, used convenience sampling in their study of emerging social work professions in the Middle East and North Africa region, examining the impact and effectiveness in Arab universities to address social issues. This was due to having relatively easy access to these groups. Consequently this method was chosen for this research because of the accessibility afforded to the researchers, as well as the realisation that the results were indicative and not completely representative of the population, i.e. all police students undertaking the new qualifications.

Data collection.

Informed consent was paramount for the purposes of this research, given the fact that all respondents were police students. The researchers did not wish to put the respondents in a position where they believed they were legally or professionally obliged to complete the survey. Therefore a clear and understandable statement of informed consent including the fact that no one was obliged to complete the survey, was placed at the beginning of the survey itself. This was also made clear in a covering email distributed to all the students involved in this research.

Ethical approval was received by the University of South Wales ethics committee who had sight of all documentation as well as the survey questionnaire.

The survey was distributed via email to all students undertaking this course in five police forces across England and Wales, with a link to a VEVOX system of data collection. Vevox is a real time data gathering system which gives immediate data and feedback to the researchers. Once the survey was completed the data was downloaded into SPSS (Statistics Package for the Social Sciences) for further analysis.

During mid-2021 the online self-administered questionnaire was sent to 600 new police constables across five police forces, all of whom were students studying initial entry routes with the university conducting this research. This approach of course contains some problems for researchers, such as being unable to prompt or probe respondents, whilst respondents themselves may not answer all the questions, thereby leaving gaps in the data. However, this approach is more economic to administer and quicker to obtain results, whilst being free from interviewer effect. Importantly, given the respondents were working as full-time police constables, it was a convenient approach for them. In addition, as Tourangeau *et al.*, (2013) point out, respondents were more likely to report sensitive information in online questionnaires when compared to other methods such as telephone interviews etc.

The questionnaire initially collected individual demographic characteristics of the respondent, with participants then being presented with a series of statements, with their responses recorded via a Likert scale. Such scales allow for a measure of intensity in feeling and usually measures the intensity of agreement or otherwise to the statement under consideration. In addition, students were given the opportunity to provide free text comments regarding any aspect of this research. The results were analysed utilising SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) an IT package which allows for data to be managed and analysed.

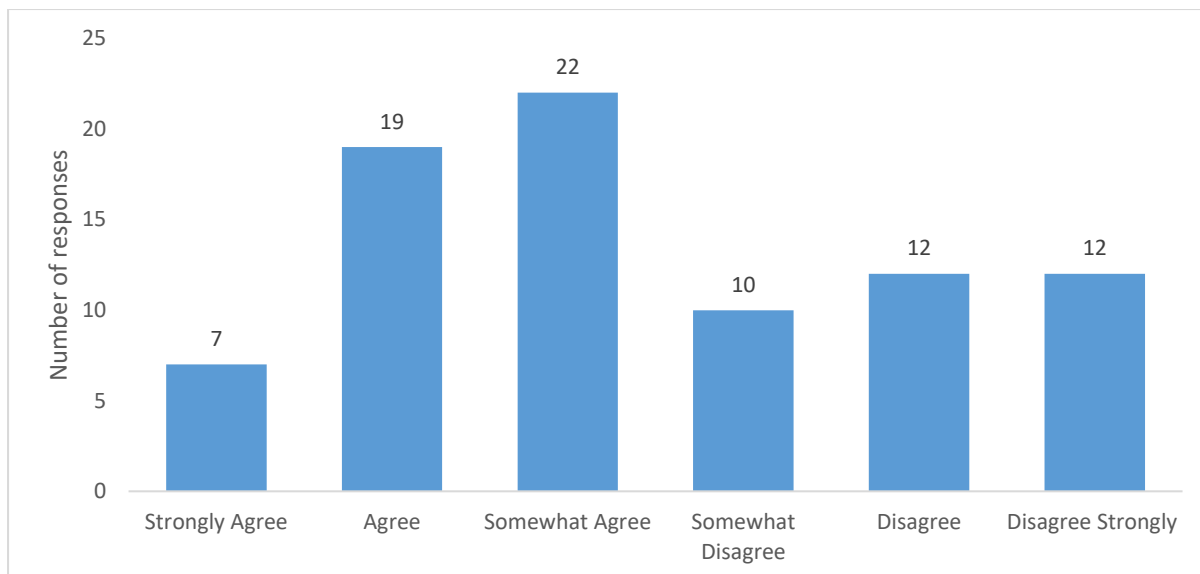
Findings and discussion

Of the 600 possible participants, 82 responses were received (13.6%) from five different police forces. This could be due to a number of factors ranging from the timing of the data collection to structure of the questionnaire, with some suggesting that police constables are suffering survey fatigue (Bevins, 2019). Palmer *et al.*, (2019) received similar limited response rates when researching EBP in a single UK police force, whilst Clark *et al.*, (2021) points out that much academic research has a low response rate. Therefore, the results in this current study should be viewed as indicative and informative rather than representative of all students studying the PCDA or DHEP across England and Wales.

Well over half (58%) of the respondents studying either the PCDA or DHEP across the five forces were female. This exceeds the 42% of female new constables of the 9,270 recruited nationally since April 2020 (Home Office, 2021). Over two thirds (67%) of respondents in the current research were 26 years of age or older, with a notable number (40%) already holding a first degree or higher. All respondents were in year one or two of a co-delivered programme, so had all experienced the operational policing workplace, having had a range of opportunities to apply their studies in practice. With over two thirds (67%) having experienced frontline response policing.

One of the first areas to be explored with the student was whether or not the new education programme had had an influence on students understanding of evidence based policing. The results can be seen in table 1 below.

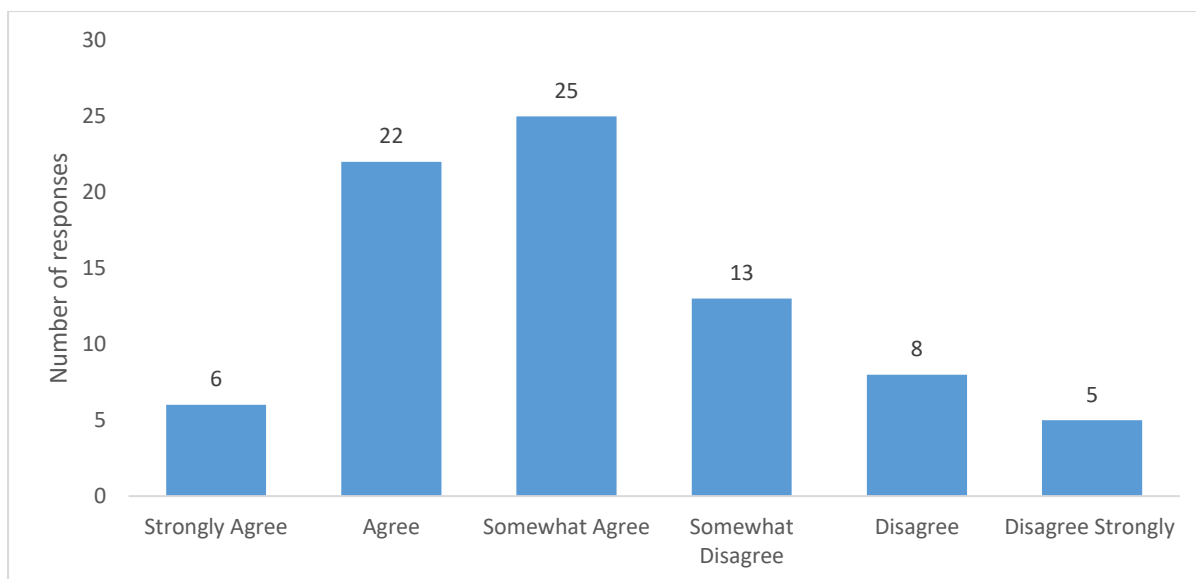
Table 1: The degree programme has assisted me in understanding the evidence-based policing approach



Over half of all respondents (48 or 58.5%) reported how their studies had, to varying levels, assisted their understanding of an evidence-based approach. This exceeds the 46% of police officers in a similar survey conducted across Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Spasić and Simonović, 2018).

This is encouraging, implying that over time more and more new constables on the frontline will understand EBP, although it must be noted that a significant number (34 or 41.4%) disagreed that the degree had assisted their understanding of EBP. This could be due to the notable number (some 40% of the sample in this research) of new police constables already holding a first degree or higher. As Mitchell and Lewis (2017) suggest, the service as a whole should embrace EBP thus enabling those new constables who have completed their studies to locally champion an understanding of EBP. This can be achieved through not only adopting the skills learnt as part of completing their problem-based research projects, whilst gathering new robust ‘evidence’ to inform their professional practice, build the evidence base for policing, and promote to others an understanding of its value in evidencing decisions. It was therefore important to establish how often students utilised the evidence based approach. The results can be seen in Table 2.

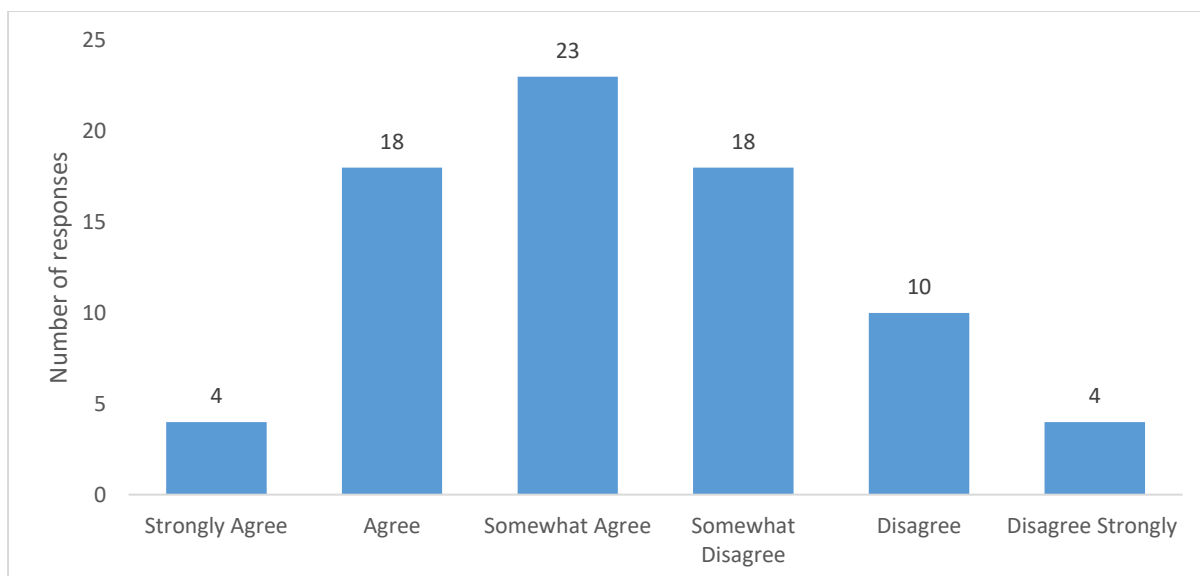
Table 2: As a new police constable, I use an evidence-based approach everyday



Evidence suggests that almost two thirds of the new police constable respondents (53 or 64.6%), are to a greater or lesser extent, applying an evidence-based approach every day, with slightly under a third of respondents (26 or 30%) somewhat agreeing and only a small number (5 or 7%) strongly agreeing. These findings encouragingly support the ideas of McDowall *et al.*, (2018) of the impact student attitudes have on the transference of EBP from their studies to the workplace, but also suggests their use of EBP needs further support and encouragement in order to solidify the adoption in everyday practice, more so perhaps by their team leaders/supervisors. This also adds weight to the idea that although a significant number of new constables disagreed that the degree had assisted their understanding of EBP, they already knew about the concept, perhaps through previous study.

To further explore the use of EBP in the workplace, students were presented with the statement that everyone in their workplace uses the EBP approach and asked to comment upon it. The results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Everyone in my workplace uses the evidence-based approach



It would appear that over half of all respondents (55 or 54.8%) reported that everyone in their workplace, to varying degrees, uses EBP. This is similar to but slightly exceeds the results from police officers surveyed across Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Spasić and Simonović, 2018). The findings of this question suggest that perhaps the use of EBP in practice is localised (McDowall *et al.*, 2018), and that there may well be local pockets of good adoption of EBP in practice, and also that police culture and its resistance to change and new practices varies between time and location and police teams (Cox and Kirby 2018).

Concluding remarks

When compared to the work of Telep and Lum (2014), who identified in their research across four US police agencies how some 25.1% to 48.4% of police officers had knowledge of EBP, the findings of this research suggest more students have knowledge of EBP. It may be that as Pearson-Goff and Herrington (2014) suggest, frontline operational officers are more focused on ‘doing the job’, only changing if it can be seen as valuable. It is here perhaps that the team leader/supervisor needs to create a shared team vision which embraces the organisational commitment to the professional practice of adopting EBP.

The current research indicates, however, that there are reasonable numbers of new constables who understand and apply EBP and as such should be encouraged and appropriately supported to apply this in practice. Palmer *et al.*, (2019) found that although those within policing were often familiar with the term EBP, the actual adoption of research informed practice across operational levels was somewhat limited. In addition, Mount and Mazerolle (2021) found in their research that for the majority of the first-year police constables, certain

modules were just an element of their recruit training programme to be passed in order to complete their training and probation. This is confirmed somewhat by the College of Policing (2020b) who suggest some learner's experience an initial disconnect between theoretical aspects and the daily context of policing. This is complicated somewhat if the police occupational sub culture has a negative impact upon new recruits and their learning (Cox and Kirby, 2018).

In addition, Palmer et al., (2019) suggest that local policing experience was often more valued by those constables on the frontline rather than having the time to adopt research informed EBP. Indeed, tacit knowledge in policing appears highly prized in the police occupation (Hartley 2018). New constables clearly have varying experiences of being able to apply new knowledge gained through theoretical study into practice (Williams et al 2019) and Hartley (2018) suggests that leadership should be active shaping and nurturing behaviours to influence others and combating any negativity. Such a requirement for effective leadership for the use of EBP is also identified by Savignac and Dunbar (2014). Lack of time and human resources also appear to impact upon the effective adoption and application of EBP (Kalyal 2020) and this is supported by the work of Fleming and Wingrove (2017). Further problems including a multi-tasking high workload of team leaders/supervisors is also considered to have a negative effect on the ability to apply new knowledge if team leaders/supervisors are unresponsive (Williams et al 2019). Clearly the role of the leader is an important one when it comes to the use of new knowledge, such as Evidence Based Policing to support crime prevention initiatives. The current research was undertaken to establish the knowledge and use of EBP by new recruits to the police service in England and Wales, particularly as it is closely associated with the crime prevention work that police carry out. The results tend to indicate that over half of new police constables understand more about EBP following their police educational studies, and almost two-thirds of new constables on the initial entry routes are applying new knowledge and skills about EBP in professional practice. These new officers faced by the challenges of the police occupational sub culture, need to continue to be supported and encouraged to do so. It is imperative, therefore, that current team leaders/supervisors are also professionally developed to understand the skills of EBP. This will support constables to implement EBP in their daily practice, whilst encouraging and supporting others to do.

There can be, of course, a substantial ‘time lag’ between the recruitment and development of talented leaders and they being in a position to impact on policy and practice (Sherman, 2013). Such influential leaders are integral in creating the shared vision and driving forward the required change (Pearson-Goff and Herrington, 2014). As the new probationer constables generate and apply new knowledge, it is important that this approach is shared and promoted widely, demonstrating the value of adopting an EBP approach to less motivated colleagues. As such the crime prevention aspect of EBP should become greatly enhanced. Future research should continue to explore the application of EBP in the workplace during and post completion of the new constables’ programme of study. In addition, research should also focus upon the influence of their team leaders/supervisors and their level of application in order to ensure its use is for the benefit not just of the police organisation, but also for the communities they serve.

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