Have you heard of evidence-based policing?

Evidence-based policing is a new way of working to improve police effectiveness and build trust in police. Some people think it is the future of policing.

It’s a confusing concept because of the word evidence. For police, evidence has always meant the collection of information or clues that help solve or prove a crime. But in evidence-based policing, evidence is the best existing research about what police activities actually work, and what don’t.

This information is based on careful evaluation of police work. It is regularly shared across the police service so that all policing is based on the latest knowledge.

How does evidence-based policing work? Here’s a 3-step example:

1. **TARGET**
   - Target police activities on certain problems or places, based on what we already know from research and experience. This could be how we tackle a specific crime or how we build public trust.

2. **TEST**
   - Test ideas and learn what really works instead of using methods that we think will work, or what common sense tells us could work. If something appears to work, test it elsewhere. If it works again, the evidence becomes stronger.

3. **TRACK**
   - Document, share and learn about what actually works and change how we work based on what we know. We must carefully evaluate practices to make sure that we only use methods that are likely to work.

Information gathered during the 3-step process can’t be random or disorganised, it has to be methodical, rigorous and useful for policing. Evidence-based policing is most effective when a good mix of policing and research/academic skills are used together.

What do you think really works to reduce crime and build trust in police? Is there something else we can do to be more effective?

A simple approach to evidence-based policing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT WE DO NOW</th>
<th>AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO THESE ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>RESULT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Cordon and search</td>
<td>Is this activity supported by research or evidence?</td>
<td>Best case for successful activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 Stop and search</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 Crime prevention fliers</td>
<td></td>
<td>An opportunity exists to build on and test the information</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Foot patrol</td>
<td>Does any information or evidence exist?</td>
<td>Consider doing more research to support this activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Warnings and cautions</td>
<td>Can we use it to support our activity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Rapid response</td>
<td></td>
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<td>7 Undercover operations</td>
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<td>8 Hotspot policing</td>
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<td>9 Police in schools</td>
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<td>10 Roadblocks</td>
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<td>11 CCTV</td>
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<td>12 Focused patrols</td>
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<td>13 Diversion for youth</td>
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<td>… Numerous others</td>
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Adapted from Martin, 2019.
Why do we need a new way of working?

It’s not easy to change the way we work, especially when we don’t think there is anything wrong with how we do things. But evidence-based policing in other countries shows that:

• Our traditional model of policing is not always effective, and we often waste our time and money without achieving the objectives that we wanted.
• Random patrol, rapid response and mandatory follow up investigation has limited impact on crime and safety.
• It is not clear that arrest and incarceration prevents crime beyond a certain level.

By embedding evidence-based policing in South African policing, we can achieve the following:

• Our policing becomes informed by the best possible research, or evidence, of what works to improve public safety.
• We can develop strategies and tactics based on information about what really works.
• Our actions will be able to withstand scrutiny if necessary because we have the evidence available to back up our decisions.

Three examples of police practices supported by good evidence:

1. HOT SPOT POLICING

Hot spot policing is when police activity targets small areas where crime is concentrated.

Evidence shows that it decreases crime and harm in and near affected areas.

2. PROCEDURAL JUSTICE IN POLICING

Evidence shows that when people believe that police treat them fairly they are more likely to have trust and confidence in police, cooperate with police, and obey the law when police aren’t around.

3. FOCUSED DETERRENCE

When police regularly interact with likely offenders to warn them that they are being observed but also offer them real assistance (for example, access to skills training or social support) it can significantly reduce crime. Impact occurs where offers of support and responses to crime are swift and reliable.

Why consider evidence-based policing?

Evidence-based policing is a new way of thinking about how we all do our job. It requires police and managers who are willing – and empowered – to question the way they work and experiment with new ways of doing things that could have more impact.

The more effective we are at our job, the more the public will trust and support us. Increased success means better morale and improved motivation in daily routines.

Evidence-based policing is most successful when ideas are tested, evaluated, shared, and re-tested. It should be police-led, but is strengthened by partnerships with academics and others.

The result is a win-win: happier more motivated teams, less crime and a supportive public.

Read more about evidence-based policing

Society of Evidence-Based Policing: https://www.sebp.police.uk/


New Zealand Evidence-Based Policing Centre: https://ebpc.org.nz/

Join the movement: www.issafrica.org/crimehub