INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

What works in South African policing?

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This report critically reviews the literature for the best available evidence on whether the South African police have achieved their mandate. It offers a reasonable but rigorous evaluation of research for evidence-based policing. Policing research questions should make systematic, empirical observation of a proposed relationship between policing behaviour and policing impact. The report finds that South African police and scholars do not ask the right questions for evidence-based policing.

Key findings

- Consensus is growing that it is not enough to base policy decisions on principle and subjective impression, even if informed by long experience. Instead, 'evidence' or documented empirical observation should take the lead.
- Researchers know a great deal about problems with South African policing but have not begun rigorously demonstrating whether anything the police do works.
- Research should explore a causal relationship between variation in police behaviour and variation in outcomes.
- South African evidence-based policing (EBP) should seek an understanding of which actions are likely to make a difference to crime levels, fear of crime, perceptions of safety, and satisfaction with the police.
- Interest, expertise, information and skills exist on how the South African Police Service (SAPS) affects the country. But no-one has demonstrated whether differences in policing have made a perceptible difference to crime, fear or perceptions.

Recommendations

- To use scarce resources effectively, policing practices should be evaluated on what is known – not suspected or hoped – of their ability to achieve the desired outcomes of policing.
- Assessing the impact of policing requires close observation of levels of crime, fear of crime, perceptions of safety and satisfaction with the police.
- For police and researchers to partner effectively, researchers' findings must translate into policing decisions. Consolidated results then need to be made accessible to the police.
- Only research based on a causal relationship between an independent variable (SAPS behaviour) and dependent variable (crime levels, safety perceptions, fear of crime and/or satisfaction with police) can determine what works in policing. For EBP, the research must be coherent, empirically sound and practically applicable.
- Research should not be understood as falling within a hierarchy of knowledge sources. Rather, it is on a spectrum of methods with different takes on understanding and accounting for the ways in which findings may be misleading.
- Above all, studies should 'show their working', demonstrate a good understanding of their limitations and account for how they may have got things wrong.

Introduction

To support the growth of evidence-based policing (EBP), this report reviews the knowledge on what works in achieving the goals of South African policing. It is distinctive in its effort to be inclusive and systematic. It aims to assess the widest possible range of relevant research, clearly and reproducibly. It makes the case for but also critiques the international evidence-based movement (pp 4–12) before presenting its review (pp 12–19).

Important to the evidence-based approach to policing is its insistence on critical reflection on how knowledge was derived. It differentiates between opinions and documented systematic and empirical observation – i.e. determined with reliable, scientific methods. As many sources as possible of misinterpretation and bias are eliminated and certainty of conclusions is sought. This is because reliable knowledge needed for life-or-death decisions is extremely difficult to generate.

The EBP take on knowledge requires thinking not like politicians or activists, but like scientists. Reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrate this challenge, as individuals and institutions must rapidly select and prioritise from incomplete, imperfect and often contradictory information, analysis and advice from different sources. What is best practice today may be superseded within a year. This is a strength, not a weakness.

What sets the scientific method apart is its openness to contradictory information. Science is not establishing one final answer, but continuously refining questions and methods, while regularly weighing up and summarising the best available knowledge to obtain the best possible outcomes.

But not all evidence is equal. The word of an acquaintance without scientific literacy is not equivalent to the peer-reviewed conclusions of a diverse team of epidemiologists using state-of-the-art analytical methods on a vast array of global data. Conclusions can and must be differentiated and weighted according to the quality of their methods of observation and reason.

Yet a common critique of the 'gold standard' approach to EBP evaluation is that its requirement of experimental (or quasi-experimental) research designs excludes knowledge that could usefully inform policing.[1] Experimental methodologies are also a hard sell to law enforcement. What, then, are appropriate parameters for research on effective policing? What goes beyond developing understanding of the contexts, challenges and imperatives of policing to make specific, evidence-based claims that apply to operational decisions?

In answer, this report offers a new conceptual foundation to guide the growth of research for EBP in South Africa. It makes two key suggestions. First, rigour should not be a question of research design as much as one of understanding and accounting for why findings may be biased, incomplete, incorrect, misleading or questionable for decision making. Secondly, the appropriate research question explores a causal relationship between variation in the behaviour of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and variation in impact.

Besides its scepticism, EBP builds from and towards a real and practical partnership between policing professionals (i.e. law enforcement officials) and knowledge professionals (i.e. academics or researchers). The evaluation that follows assesses whether the latter are doing what is useful.

Researchers need to conduct studies that directly and realistically inform policing decisions

For the EBP partnership to work, researchers need to conduct studies that directly and realistically inform policing decisions. Research results also need to be captured and consolidated in a way that is accessible to police. Translating research into practice can be broken into four phases. These are: 'does it work?' (primary research and evaluation), 'what works?' (synthesis and dissemination), 'how to make it work' (implementation and evaluation), and 'make it work!' (institutionalisation and sustainability).[2]

This report set out to synthesise local research on what works in South African policing, but found that this goal is some way off. There is, as yet, too little to synthesise.

Researchers know a great deal about problems with South African policing but have not demonstrated

whether anything the police do works. South African policing scholars are not uninterested, incompetent or looking in the wrong places. However, questions asked do not identify which differences in policing approaches make a difference to outcome. This report suggests a framework for an evidence base for policing.

Why evidence-based policing?

Governments have to do more with less. They are tasked with meeting ever-expanding demands within constraints. They are bound by norms of human rights and participation, limited budgets and fiscal discipline demands, and by the conflicting values of diverse electorates emboldened by social media microscopes and loudspeakers. Everyone is an expert and an activist and governments cannot manoeuvre without inviting outcry.

This raises the pressure for transparent and defensible decision making. One beneficiary has been the movement for evidence-based practice, which bases itself on a close and mutually reinforcing relationship between knowledge and practice. There is growing consensus that it is not enough to base policy on principle and subjective impression, even if informed by long experience. Instead, it is 'evidence' or documented empirical observation that should take the lead. Authority should derive not from force or tradition, but from sound knowledge and reason.

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Traditionally conservative policing is not spared. Police globally are shifting from the 'three Rs' model of policing – random patrol, rapid response and reactive investigations. There are now the 'three Ts' – targeting (narrowly focusing on a problem), testing (testing a hypothesised cure) and tracking (evaluating an intervention's impact to learn lessons and refine practice).[3] More broadly, EBP asks police to base their practices on the best available knowledge on what achieves their goals. Equally, it asks researchers to work around policing needs and priorities. This requires collaboration and partnership.

South Africa is a middle-income democracy with high rates of crime and violence, and many other urgent priorities for funding and intervention. It also has an established and growing community of criminal justice scholars. These are ideal conditions for a collaboration to maximise the impact of limited policing and scholarly resources. There is no time or money to waste in identifying and prioritising activities that can most reliably and efficiently improve public safety.

Since 2018, several engagements have conceptualised and promoted EBP in South Africa. The next logical step is to review the knowledge. To use scarce resources effectively, both existing and proposed policing practices should be evaluated against what is known – not simply suspected or hoped – about their efficacy in achieving the desired outcomes of policing.

Reviewing what works

How can we know what works? Impact evaluation determines the extent to which an intervention should be considered responsible for a difference in outcomes.[4] Unfortunately, it can be difficult to confirm whether an intervention (e.g. police roadblocks) or other factors (e.g. weather) shape an outcome. Use of randomised controlled trials (RCTs) establishes that a proposed relationship between intervention and outcome is causal.

In medical research, an RCT is typically necessary for anything to count as 'evidence'.[5] RCTs require randomly allocating subjects into two groups, applying an input/intervention to just one group and comparing the two outcomes.

RCTs attempt to mimic laboratory conditions where all other factors can be kept constant and bias reduced, so that observed differences in outcomes can be reliably attributed to the input or intervention. This process needs to be repeated by different people in different contexts, because what worked at one time and place may not work at another. Unfortunately, academic publishers are more interested in new studies than in those confirming or contradicting others, or with inconclusive results. Thus, experimental research comprises a few studies with positive results, leading to the misconception that these represent a general 'truth'.

To counter this, the gold standard of impact evaluation is a systematic review of several RCTs. This involves

clearly identifying the question, gathering all research, eliminating that of poor quality and summarising the best of what remains.[6]

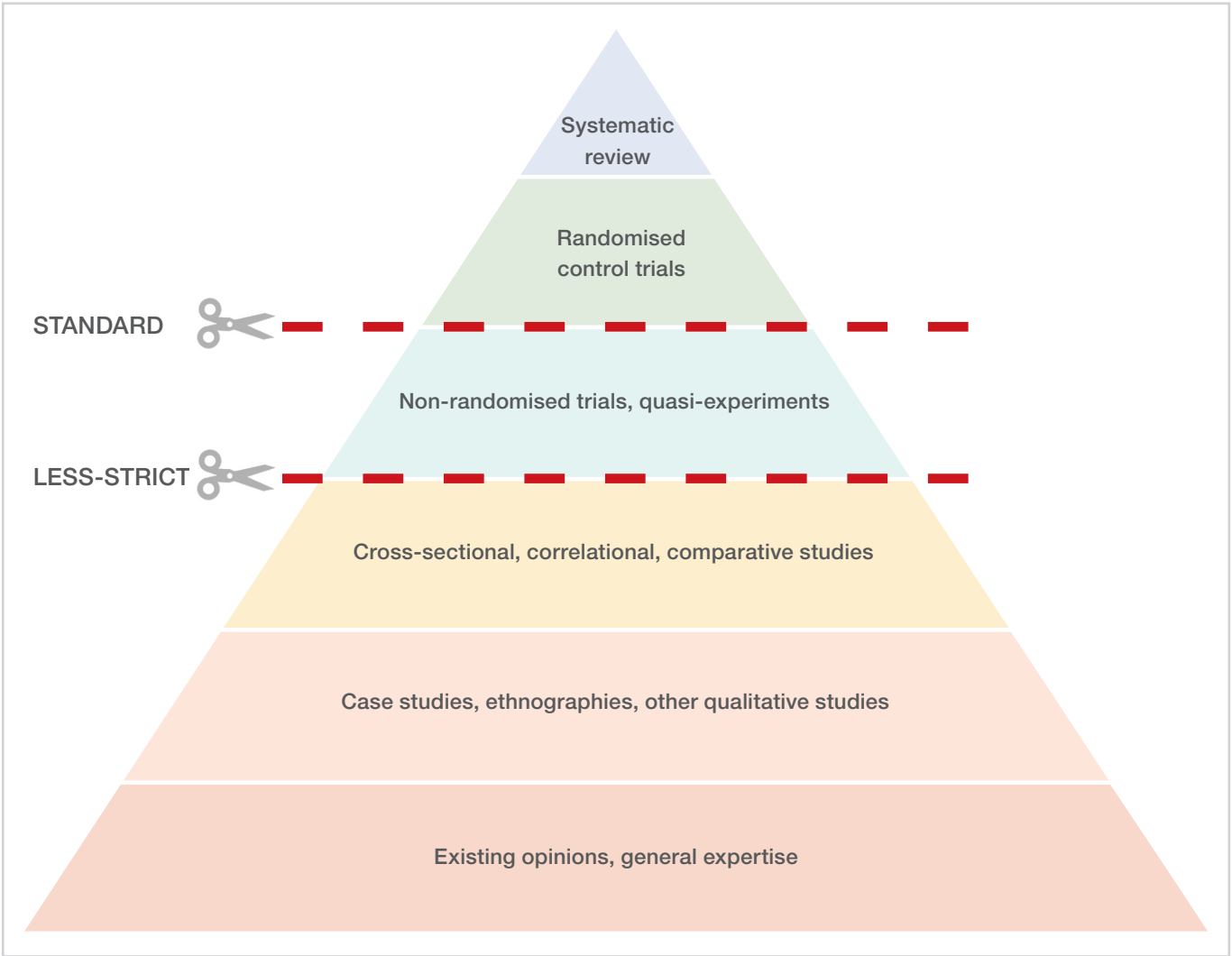
The trouble with a typical literature review is that it is not necessarily systematic, reproducible or representative of all relevant literature. Two reviews on a subject may reach different conclusions by piecing together evidence supporting wide, contradictory conclusions and recommendations.

The rise of evidence-based medical practice has made it necessary to find more consistent and reliable methods to synthesise the ever-evolving science for use in clinical decision making. Reviews aim to be 'systematic'. They 'answer a clearly formulated question using explicit methods to identify, select and assess relevant research for quality. Conclusions are drawn from their results to give policymakers and other stakeholders a transparent and unbiased picture of current research knowledge for informed decision making.[7]

Systematic reviews differ from narrative literature reviews in that they are transparent, verifiable and reproducible. This reduces the likelihood that relevant studies are omitted and that their assessment is subjective.

Systematic reviews of numerous RCTs are the gold standard of policing evaluation research, as promoted by the Campbell Collaboration and the UK's What Works College of Policing.[8] Sometimes non-randomised trials or quasi-experiments are included on the understanding that high-quality evidence resides on the upper rungs of the traditional hierarchy of research design.[9]

Figure 1: The traditional hierarchy of research design, showing threshold for a standard or less-strict systematic review



In 2015, Australian Research Council Centre for Excellence in Policing and Security authors reviewed all experimental and quasi-experimental evidence on policing intervention effectiveness in reducing interpersonal violent crime in developing countries.[10] This study should have been significant for South Africa, but strict criteria allowed only five studies on the effectiveness of policing interventions, none of which had been conducted in Africa.

Experimental research designs are time-, energy- and resource-intensive, and, therefore, relatively uncommon in criminal justice research.[11] They are especially rare in middle-income, high-violence contexts. Data, research and publication constraints render very little policing research in developing countries suitable for systematic review. This is despite the fact that developing countries are disproportionately affected by violent crime, with interpersonal violence a leading cause of death and disability.[12]

However, it would be absurd to conclude that there is no valuable research on the impact of South African policing. Since SAPS began transforming from a tool of racial oppression into one of widespread justice, numerous reviews, evaluations and audits of police performance have emerged.[13] These range from broad, impressionistic historical and theoretical narratives to extensive and well-funded, multimethod studies of how policing operates and is experienced in communities. Some have been internal, others conducted by formal commissions of inquiry, many more by researchers and activists. Countless people have formed and expressed their own assessments of the SAPS's performance.

It would be absurd to conclude that there is no valuable research on the impact of South African policing

Most assessments focus on what does not work. Countless systemic inadequacies are identified and described, from the unspoken attitudes of individual officers to the letter of national law. Common themes include ill-discipline, corruption and failures of management, resource distribution, training and accountability.[14] The field of South African police studies has arguably 'come of age' in its diversity, with one bibliography documenting more than 400 publications between 2000 and 2012 alone.[15]

A review methodology that can't recognise or make sense of this material is of little value, regardless of its scientific rigour or international prestige. Moreover, a rigid, hierarchical perspective on what counts as knowledge implies that the global North is the only source of high-quality research, even on the safety problems of the global South.

While many established disciplines grapple with their oppressive colonial histories and worldviews, South Africa's growing EBP community can chart a path for not only improved criminal justice, but epistemic justice. This report, therefore, tips over the hierarchy of research design into a spectrum, conducting a hybrid review that remains wide-ranging and systematic. It also looks beyond the obvious to propose a more workable conceptual foundation for the development of high-quality research on what works in South African policing.

A critical rapid review

The challenge, whether in a new study or a review of previous studies, is collection and presentation of information in a convincing and useful way. There is a trade-off between rigour and relevance. A statistical meta-analysis based on a comprehensive systematic review of experiments can take a team of people two years to complete,[16] only to produce inconclusive results. Reviews, therefore, usually compromise in their breadth and/or depth. Rather than seek everything of any possible relevance ever written, they look for work published at a certain time and place. They also limit information extracted and considered from each identified study.

A 'rapid review' provides a streamlined but balanced assessment of what is known (and not known) in the scientific literature about an intervention, problem or practical issue. It uses a systematic methodology to search and critically appraise empirical studies.[17] Compared to a systematic review, it does not claim to be exhaustive, but searches limited databases for studies published over a defined period. It may rely

on a single reviewer for data extraction and/or quality assessment.[18] Rapid reviews typically extract from identified studies only their results and enough information for a simple quality assessment, for example the study sample selection and size.

A 'critical review', on the other hand, 'goes beyond mere description of identified articles and includes a degree of analysis and conceptual innovation'.[19] It synthesises material from diverse sources, not to arrive at the best-supported answer or decision, but to 'take stock' of the previous work as a 'launchpad' for a new research phase.

The desired outcomes of South African policing are improved perceptions of safety and satisfaction with the police, as well as objective improvements in safety

This report combines rapid and critical review methods. It is rapid in that it relies on the judgment of a single reviewer and limits its search strategy by language and publication status and type. It is critical in that it goes beyond summary to propose a foundation for assessing and developing future research for EBP. First, however, it considers what kind of policing impact is desired.

What should police do?

What should South Africa's police achieve? The SAPS has several legally and organisationally determined goals and obligations. It derives its mandate from Section 205 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. This describes the objects of policing as being to:

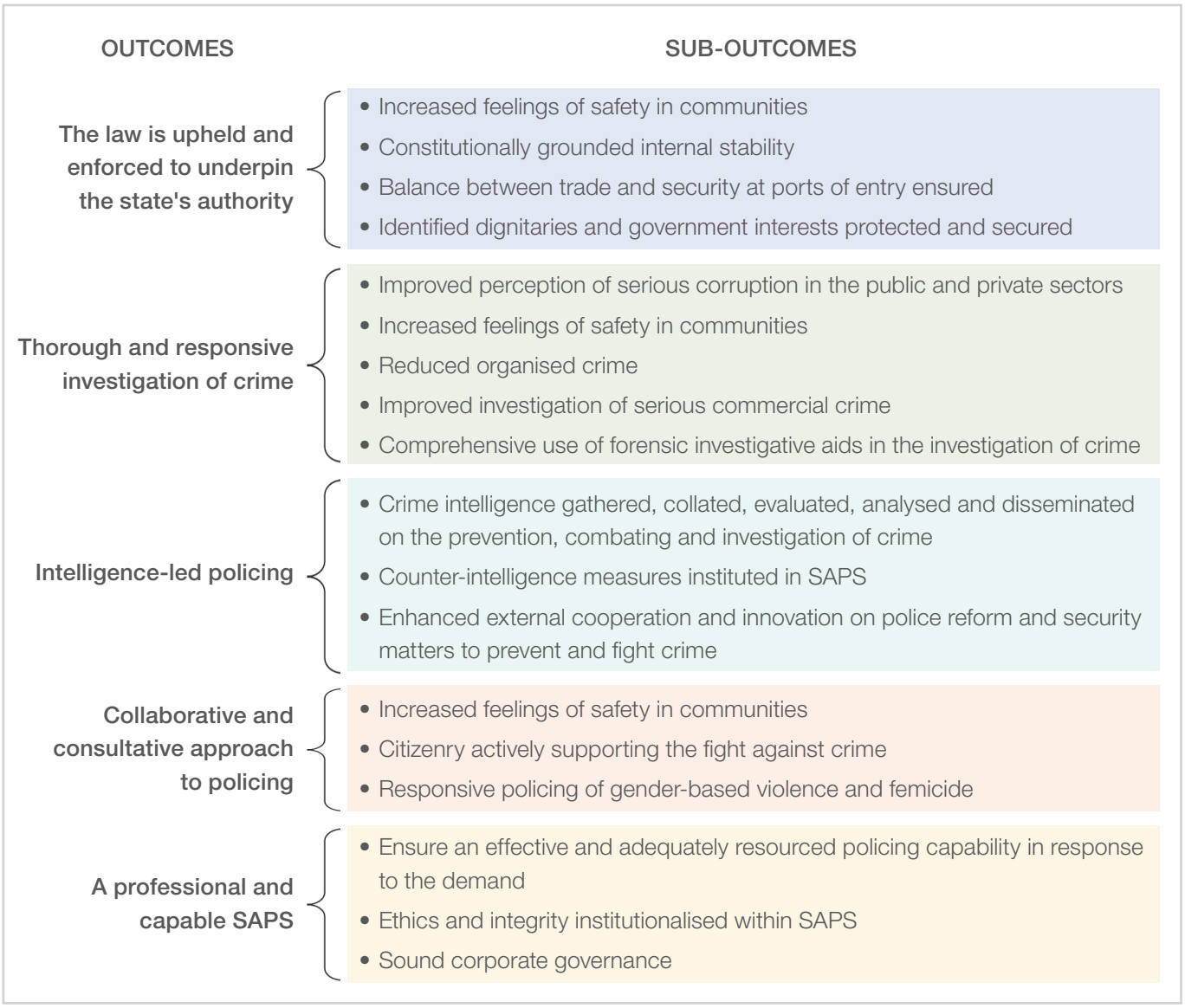
- Prevent, combat and investigate crime
- Maintain public order
- Protect and secure the inhabitants of the Republic and their property
- Uphold and enforce the law.

The SAPS strategic plan 2020–2025 gives a more specific account of the organisation's goals. It states that a 'safe and secure environment that is conducive for social and economic stability, supporting a better life for all' will be pursued against outcomes, sub-outcomes and performance indicators.[20]

The targeted indicators are wide-ranging – spanning official audit opinions, training, conviction rates and more. Each of these could suggest various possible questions for evidence review and development. Some will be easier to explore than others. Previous research and reviews of South African policing identify shortcomings requiring intervention. For example, a better SAPS would show improvements in discipline, management, resource distribution, training and accountability. There is no shortage of material on SAPS behaviour that is not working as well as it should.

SAPS DERIVES ITS MANDATE FROM THE 1996 CONSTITUTION

Figure 2: SAPS strategic plan 2020 – 2025



Broadly, however, the desired outcomes or impact of policing is a combination of objective improvements in safety, subjective perceptions of safety, fear of crime and satisfaction with the police. South Africa's legal system envisages this impact for police.

This means that levels of crime, fear of crime, perceptions of safety and satisfaction with the police all require careful and specific observation.

Perceptions of safety are often entirely,[21] even humorously, out of keeping with more systematic measures.[22] Insecurity reflects feelings of malaise, vulnerability and helplessness that can have many origins[23] — including the condition of the nation-state overall[24] and the immediate spatial environment.[25] Improvements in policing and safety are often matched or outpaced by increasing expectations, such that perceptions and satisfaction decline even as the situation improves.[26] Accounts of policing even seem to assume that any crime suggests that the police have failed, as if the only meaningful accomplishment would be the eradication of all crime.

An objective means to quantify safety could be the answer, but even the best crime-prevalence or public-perceptions data are highly imperfect and difficult to interpret. As even 19th century commentators knew well,[27] police-recorded crime statistics are inherently and tremendously flawed as reflections of the 'truth' about crime.[28]

The police are not an independent party interested theoretically in the validity of their crime figures.[29] Performance expectations introduce incentives for data manipulation at every turn.[30] Patterns of crime reporting and recording are extremely variable, thus crime statistics may entirely misrepresent the reality.[31]

Survey data also have problems. They tend to be based on a sample rather than the whole population of interest, which makes them sensitive to sampling errors.[32] This does not mean that recorded crime statistics, survey results or other systematic observation should be disregarded. It means that a thorough understanding must be demonstrated of the limitations of methods and measures.

Individual opinions about police performance in improving real and perceived safety are important and worth measuring, but they are plentiful and cheap. They are no substitute for statements based on rigorous empirical observation. South African EBP should understand what actions will make a difference to levels of crime, fear of crime, perceptions of safety and satisfaction with the police. Knowledge must be developed of specific behaviour changes that will enhance safety outcomes. This should be based on knowledge and reason.

Research design spectrum

This knowledge and reason should be as rigorous as possible. Although the strength of the EBP approach lies in subjecting research methods and reasoning to rigorous interrogation, its purpose is simple – to make the police as effective as possible. EBP research works only if implemented, which means it has to be practical, reasonable and balanced.[33]

This report suggests that rigour not be framed as a simple question of experimental research design. Rather, it is a question of understanding and accounting for the ways in which findings may be biased, incomplete, incorrect, misleading or otherwise questionable for decision making. Studies differ in their efforts to account for their limitations and eliminate alternative explanations.

At one end of the spectrum lies unsystematic observation – opinions or impressions formed more or less by chance while doing other things. This is how most conclusions are drawn in daily life. For example, a food allergy may be claimed if a new food causes feelings of sickness. But the observation and reasoning involved in such everyday accounts of cause and effect are opaque and vague, with no effort made to remove error or bias. No substantiation is offered that observations are true or to what extent findings are reliable and of value to others.

Several methods lend structure and transparency to observation and reasoning to produce more reliable conclusions. Observations can be made of how things work in a single case or of the differences or similarities between two or more cases at one time. Observations can also be made of one or more cases over a period of interesting change or where an intentional change has been made. Alternatively, the results of several studies can be combined.

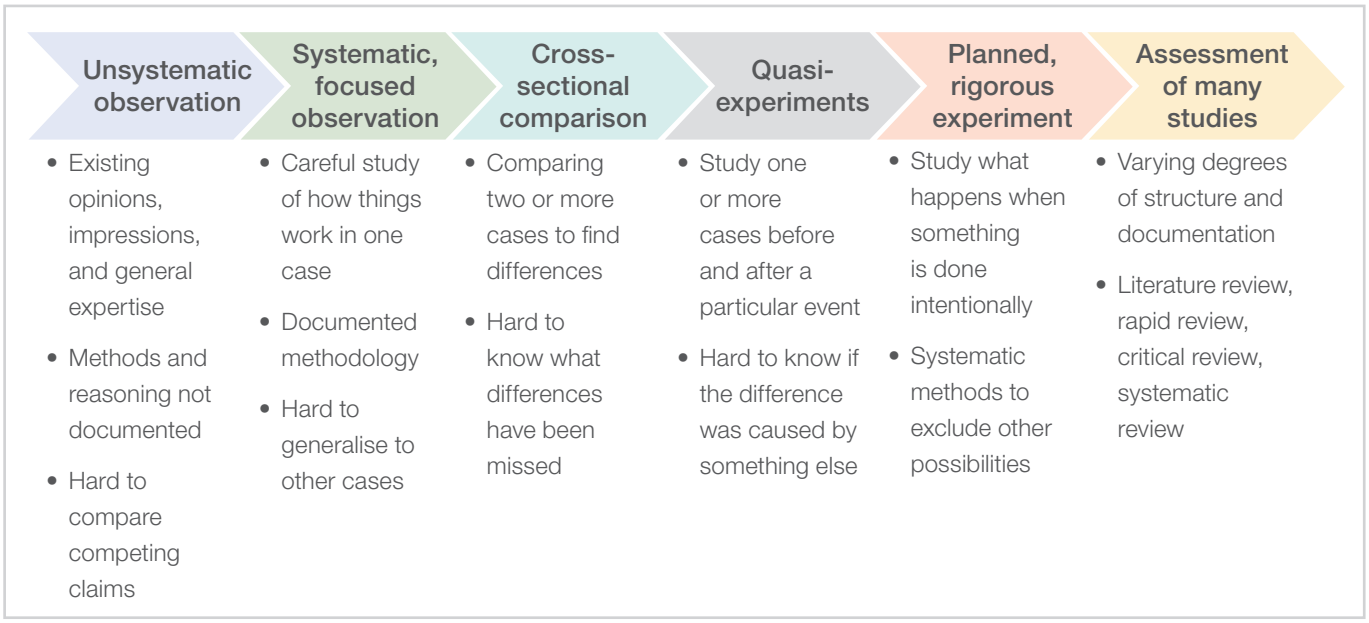
Opinions on police performance are important but cannot substitute rigorous empirical observation

The research spectrum seeks not to fit all research into the same mould, but to acknowledge the strengths of several disciplines, support various methodologies, and identify and pursue methods producing causal conclusions.

Generally, studies to the left of the spectrum are limited in their claims about causation. Causation requires correlation. Demonstrating causation requires comparison, within one case over time, between two or more cases, or between what happened and what we imagine would have happened in different circumstances. This is known as a counterfactual. Controlled experiments are powerful research designs for causation because they allow comparison of outcomes in situations that differ only in the intended ways.

But repeated experiments are not alone in producing useful knowledge about causation. Some causal explanations deal with effects on average (nomothetic causation), whereas others deal with the sequence of events leading to an outcome (idiographic causation).[34] Both are valid. RCTs are not required to establish

Figure 3: Research design spectrum for causal conclusions



whether the gunshot death of an otherwise healthy man was caused by the young man fleeing with the offending weapon or the unarmed elderly woman nearby.

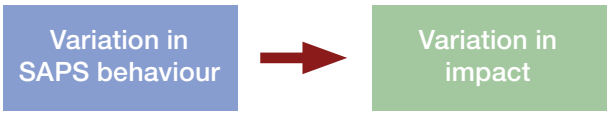
A detailed qualitative account of how police work at a certain time and place can be invaluable to understanding their impact. However, such studies make it difficult to determine whether the actions identified are the most important ones. They also make it difficult to identify and account for possible bias. Reviewing studies that make both kinds of causal argument through various methodologies requires consideration of what kinds of questions EBP requires.

The differences that make a difference

Causal research needs to explore a relationship between cause and effect, input and output, independent variable and dependent variable, or explanans (contains the explanation) and explanandum (needs explanation).[35] EBP requires figuring out which differences in policing affect impact. A causal relationship must be explored between variation in the behaviour of SAPS and variation in impact.

To explain something is to provide information that justifies the claim that the proposed cause explains the proposed effect. Put another way, the explanation makes the outcome expected. But an explanation is more than two things next to each other. A pair or list

Figure 4: The structure of causal research for South African EBP



of purportedly, even demonstrably, correlated variables equals an explanation no more than a stack of bricks forms a building.[36] A causal claim requires a proposed account of the relationship between at least two things.[37] This relationship must be in some sense causal, whether strictly and implying hard determinism, or probabilistically and implying soft determinism.

Observed variation in both independent and dependent variable is essential. It transforms the question from 'what happens?' into 'what works?'. Questions for impact need to ask not whether something works the way it should, but whether one way of doing things works better than another. More fundamentally, variation suggests that a thing is variable – that is, subject to change. Description of conditions that are (at least imagined to be) unchanging can reveal what is not working but cannot tell what works.

This report proposes that searching for differences that make a difference bridges the gap between the strict

requirements of experimental research designs and the limitations of descriptive studies in establishing causation. The variation may be over time or space. It may be observed through various measures and explored through various research designs. However, the minimum viable requirement for EBP is systematic observation of variation in both policing behaviour and policing impact.

At the very least EBP requires the systematic observation of variation in policing behaviour and impact

Despite possible law enforcement concerns about the risk of experimenting with the lives and livelihoods of the public, non-experimental research designs are by no means a perfect substitute for experiment. In the absence of an RCT, it remains entirely possible that the variation observed in impact is caused by something other than the variation observed in policing action. The likelihood of this must be acknowledged and addressed.

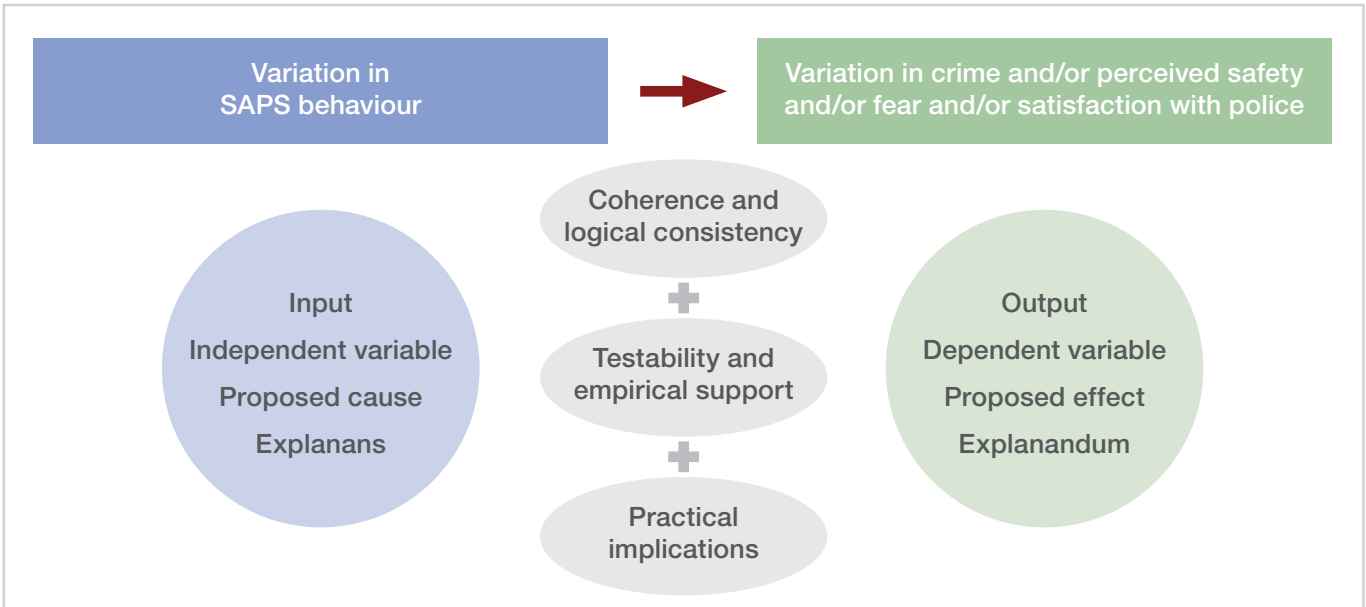
Furthermore, whereas quantitative experimental designs are relatively easy to assess, non-experimental research quality assessments are more challenging. Experimental studies can be assessed according to internal validity – the degree of confidence that the observed outcome is indeed the result of the treatment rather than some other factor. They can also be assessed on external validity – the extent to which the observed results can be generalised to populations in which the intervention was not originally tested.[38] In non-experimental research, these are harder to assess. What convinces one reader may not convince another.

However, useful criteria for the evaluation of any explanation include coherence and logical consistency, testability and empirical validity, and practical implications.[39] Whatever its research design, an explanation should be clearly stated and make basic sense. It should be possible to subject it to empirical observation and produce supporting evidence (or rather fail to find contradicting evidence). It should be practical in guiding decisions. Above all, studies should 'show their working' to be taken seriously as more than unsubstantiated opinion. They should demonstrate a good understanding of their own limitations and consider how they may have got things wrong.

There is value to studies that look entirely different. But to create and assess knowledge for direct guidance on police behaviour, results must be based on a causal relationship between a variation in SAPS behaviour and a variation in impact. Impact variation would include variation in levels of crime, perceptions of safety, fear of crime, and/or community satisfaction with the police). It should do so in a way that is coherent, empirically sound and practically applicable.

This should be the foundation of South African research for EBP. They are the minimum viable criteria for research that can tell us what works.

Figure 5: Factors in the causal relationship between behaviour and impact



The following section reviews, inclusively and systematically, the extent to which existing research has done so thus far.

Review methodology

This critical rapid review identified and evaluated existing statements about whether variation in SAPS behaviour had achieved a variation in impact. The research question addressed was:

> What causal relationships have been demonstrated between variations in SAPS behaviour and in the following: crime levels, safety perceptions, fear of crime and perceptions of or satisfaction with the police?

The inclusion criteria were:

- Language: English
- Type of study: Any
- Date of publication: Any (although in practice 1994 to 2020)
- Unit of analysis: Any
- Outcomes: Official crime statistics, any measure of crime victimisation, fear of crime, perception of safety, or perception of or satisfaction with SAPS.
- Type of source: Published scholarly journals, ebooks, reports, conference papers, dissertations and theses. Excluded were paper books, unpublished papers, blogs, podcasts, websites, magazines, newspapers and wire feeds.

This is an extremely broad question and relaxed criteria for a typical rapid review. Eligible studies could use any research design, unit of analysis or outcome measure, if it explored a causal relationship between variation across space or time in the relevant factors. These relationships could be observed through case studies, comparisons in cross-section, or unintentional or intentional changes over time (in other words, quasi-experiments or experiments). To avoid bias towards positive results, observations of variations sought but not found were also included. A degree of bias remains, as negative or inconclusive findings are less likely to have been publicised.

The search criteria imposed limitations on language and publication status and type. The Covid-19 pandemic precluded literature not already in the author's personal library or electronically accessible from the University of Cape Town. Research material in Afrikaans and indigenous languages was not considered, which also undermines the completeness of the review and the epistemic justice principle. However, only Afrikaans publications are likely to have had significant bearing on the results. Although English is the dominant language of South African scholarship, historically Afrikaans or dual-medium universities have enjoyed a more comfortable relationship with the police.

The greatest limitation was relying on a single reviewer for the entire process of conceptualisation, search, categorisation and assessment. This is justified by the 'rapid' nature of this review, but it undermines reliability. This is exacerbated by the unconventionally broad question.

No research would have been eligible had this study used the standard systematic review method

Whereas papers of a certain research methodology may often name it explicitly, qualitative works rarely specify their proposed independent and dependent variables. Their causal reasoning and claims are vaguely implied. Untangling woolly prose to identify an argument was subjective.

> In short, despite striving for a systematic, transparent, reproducible process, both the rapid and critical aspects of this review seriously constrained objectivity and completeness. Nevertheless, an important step was taken in collecting and developing research for an evidence-based approach to policing. Online databases and key journals were searched for all potentially relevant studies (the search term was 'South African Police Service' AND (crim* OR safe* OR fear OR perception OR satisfaction).

The keywords were combined using brackets and the Boolean operators 'AND' and 'OR'. The asterisks were used to include terms with multiple iterations from a stem word (e.g. crime, crimes, criminal).

The following abstract and citation databases yielded results:

- EBSCOhost (all 43 databases) – 1 429 results
- ProQuest (all 18 databases) – 1 187 results
- JSTOR – 273 results
- Scopus – 777 results
- Web of Science – 49 results

Most results were irrelevant and quickly excluded because although the full texts included the search terms, the title and key words clearly indicated that these were incidental to their focus. Many were duplicates. Hand searches were also conducted of article titles and abstracts on the online archives of three key journals, namely *South African Crime Quarterly*, *Acta Criminologica: Southern African Journal of Criminology* and *African Safety Promotion*.

If one study had generated numerous publications, an exemplar was selected. This search strategy yielded 435 abstracts for review. Articles were screened against whether they discussed the behaviour of SAPS and levels of crime, perceptions of safety, fear of crime, or community perceptions of or satisfaction with the police.

In most of the papers, only one relevant factor was observed, the other mentioned in passing or provided as context. Many papers on the police also included cursory description or a few tables of crime statistics. Those on the impact of policing also referred to challenges or failures. Ultimately, 140 papers were selected for full-text examination and were assessed against a final question:

> Does the article claim a causal relationship between variations in SAPS behaviour and in levels of crime, perceptions of safety, fear of crime, or community perceptions of or satisfaction with the police?

Personal judgment influenced the final screening. In a few instances, both factors were substantively discussed, but a causal link between the two was, at most, implied. In a few, the causal impact of a police-related intervention was assessed, but driven by another party, such as Business Against Crime South Africa[40] or Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading.[41] Crucially, almost none of the articles that explored a causal relationship between policing and its impact focused on variation in both – on differences in both policing inputs and outputs.

Ultimately, only five papers met the inclusion criteria, directly addressing the review question. This is extraordinary and disappointing. Widening the scope of eligible studies so far beyond experimental conditions should have produced a far larger body of research. The standard systematic review method would have found no eligible research.

Assessment

The five papers identified were:

- Firoz Cachalia, Operation Iron Fist after six months: Provincial police strategy under review, *South African Crime Quarterly*, 19, 2017.
- Doraval Govender, Reflections on the strategic leadership in the South African Police Service on violent crimes and policing, *Acta Criminologica: Southern African Journal of Criminology* 2, 1–16, 2012.
- Guy Lamb, Murder and the SAPS' policing of illegal firearms in South Africa, *Acta Criminologica: Southern African Journal of Criminology* 31 (1), 34–53, 2018.
- Richard Matzopoulos et al, A retrospective time trend study of firearm and non-firearm homicide in Cape Town from 1994 to 2013, *South African Medical Journal* 108 (3), 197–204, 2018.
- Claire Taylor, 'Gun control & violence: South Africa's story, Report for Gun Free South Africa, 2019, https://www.gfsa.org.za/take-action/resources/category/13-research.

Each of these is described and assessed below according to the criteria. In keeping with a critical review, they are ordered to allow comparison and demonstrate specific features of interest. Their inclusion does not imply endorsement or suggest that their conclusions be taken at face value.

	Study: Govender, 2012
Proposed cause	Differences in the strategic leadership styles displayed by national commissioners George Fivaz, Jackie Selebi and Bheki Cele during their terms of office as executive head of SAPS. These are described as follows: • Fivaz (1995–1999): He actively involved subordinates in the decision-making process, shared problems, solicited inputs and shared authority. He was people-centred. • Selebi (2000–2008): He provided strict leadership and dictated on the things he wanted done by his management. He also used his charm in controlling union activities within SAPS. He used his power to compel senior officers to deliver on performance targets. He was a leader who made decisions on his own and told his subordinates what to do. • Cele (2009–2012): Created his own mission…Considered this mission more important than convention (rules/principles). His aim was to conquer armed criminals. He considered himself a person who leads from the front; built a special team of followers. He was advised on strategy from a higher level. He believed in conquering criminals where no one else has conquered before. He believed he understood crime problems on the ground; Appreciated world technologies and strategies but was not prepared to change his mission; trusted his CEO and the newly appointed top management.
Proposed effect	National changes in the police-recorded number of violent crimes. From 1994/95 until 1999/2000, there was a general increase in violent crimes in South Africa. From 2000/2001 until 2002/2003, there was a general increase in violent crimes in South Africa. Between 2003/2004 and 2005/2006, there was huge decrease of 82 091 cases of violent crimes in South Africa. From 2006/2007 until 2010/2011, there was a decrease of violent crimes in South Africa. Statistics on violent crime for 2008/2009 compared to 2003/2004 show an increase, with exception of street robberies, which reduced by 26%. From 2009 to 2011, violent crime decreased. In the aggravated robberies category, only business robberies showed a small increase. The crime statistics from 1994 to 2011 speak for themselves.
Argument	The suggestion seems to be that autocratic leadership styles have reduced crime. The proposed causal mechanism is not specified.
Empirical support	Observation and reasoning comprised a literature, documentary study and the author's professional experience as a station commissioner, cluster commander and area commissioner while a member of the South African Police Service. Assessment of variation in the proposed independent variable depends on the author's word. No effort is made to address any error or bias, especially in the integrity of the crime data. This is a fatal flaw. It remains equally, if not more, plausible that the observed changes in the recorded crime rates were caused by measurement error or entirely unrelated factors. By no means was a convincing causal relationship established.
Practical implications	Not specified, but presumably national commissioners should be autocratic leaders.

	Study: Cachalia, 2007*
Proposed cause	A temporary provincial change in policing resources and priorities, namely SAPS Gauteng's *Operation Iron Fist* of July to December 2006, whose objectives were to: • Increase police presence by deploying 400 entry-level constables, doubling the number of police reservists, and increasing the number of police vehicle and highway patrols, vehicles searched and people searched • Increase the number of roadblocks and vehicle control points • Increase efforts to trace and arrest wanted and 'most wanted' suspects • Target police resources against and arrests for the more 'serious crimes' of business and residential robbery, vehicle hijacking, cash-in-transit heists, residential burglary and taxi violence • Recover more illegal firearms • Provide training and additional management capacity to improve the functioning of the 10111 emergency response centres • Deploy reservists to improve safety on the railways • Promote community mobilisation against crime by increasing the number of school visits, distributing pamphlets on crime and police contact information, and supporting and publicising the work of community policing forums.
Proposed effect	Changes in provincial monthly recorded SAPS crime statistics compared to those of the corresponding period in the previous year. These showed: • Fewer vehicle hijackings • A 27% reduction in cash-in-transit heists • A slower increase in business robberies • No reduction in residential robberies • A substantial reduction in residential burglaries • A substantial reduction in taxi violence.
Argument	The argument implied is that an increase in policing resources and/or a redeployment of existing resources to priority crimes and/or an effort to support community engagement can reduce recorded crime levels. Given the timing and nature of the changes, a relationship between the proposed independent and dependent variables is superficially plausible. However, the number of simultaneous interventions makes it impossible to identify which might have been responsible. No attempt is made to explain why some crimes reduced, but not others.
Empirical support	The year-on-year comparison in police-recorded crime figures is suggestive but far from conclusive. No evidence is provided that the observed trends were any different from the longer pattern or that observed in places without intervention. The same crime patterns could have been observed elsewhere in the country. The Gauteng areas targeted for interventions were perhaps not those that experienced declines. *Continues on pg 16*

	Study: Cachalia, 2007* *(continued)*
Empirical support *Continued*	There is no attempt to identify, allow for or eliminate alternative explanations. No reference is made to possible problems in crime data integrity, for example incentivising station commanders to demonstrate success by discouraging or downgrading crimes. The observed changes in the proposed dependent variable could have been caused by measurement errors, unrelated factors or by only one or a few of the components of the proposed independent variable.
Practical implications	The range of simultaneous changes in policing behaviour is extensive. The only real lesson for police decision making is to do everything already being done, but do more of it.

* Authorship of this article is attributed to Gauteng's then-Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Community Safety, the most senior member of that portfolio in the provincial government cabinet. It was not submitted by the MEC, but adapted by South African Crime Quarterly from a media statement.

	Study: Lamb, 2018
Proposed cause	Station-level changes in prioritisation of action across 132 high-crime police station areas to detect illegal firearms, measured by recorded number of incidents of illegal possession of firearms and ammunition, from 1994/95 to 2014/15. These stations were prioritised for crime prevention and combating through day-to-day police actions and high-density police operations.
Proposed effect	Station-level changes over time in recorded number of murders.
Argument	In a number of station areas, there appeared to be a significant inverse association between the murder and illegal possession trajectories. Increases in the annual number of illegal possession cases (which presumably reflects the number of firearms seized) corresponded with a decline in the number of reported murders during the same or subsequent years.
Empirical support	The presence of a corpse and involvement of a medical official mean that murder is widely regarded as one of the most statistically reliable crime categories. Confiscated arms and ammunition are subjected by the SAPS to various checks and verifications, mitigating the possibility of false and duplicate reporting and underreporting. The article notes possible reasons why the inverse relationship did not hold in all cases. It does not account for selection bias or possible displacement. Nor does it consider that other crime prevention initiatives or entirely unrelated social interventions are responsible for shifts in the murder figures.
Practical implications	Station-level efforts to detect and remove illegal firearms from high-crime areas can reduce murder.

	Study: Matzopoulos et al, 2014
Proposed cause	Changes in national firearms control policy under the Firearms Control Act (FCA) and levels of related enforcement by SAPS from 1994 to 2013.
Proposed effect	Changes in recorded rates of firearm homicides (adjusted for age, sex and race) reviewed at Cape Town's two forensic pathology facilities – Salt River and Tygerberg.
Argument	Shifts in firearm homicide trends correspond with periods of differing restrictiveness in firearm licensing requirements. The period of decrease in firearm homicides coincided with the introduction of the FCA and the decrease accelerated with its implementation (from 2003). A subsequent increase in firearm homicides coincides with police fast-tracking new firearm licence applications.
Empirical support	Non-firearm homicide trends were used as a control group. These either decreased or remained stable over the period. Illegal supply (distribution of firearms by corrupt officials, particularly to gangs located in coloured communities) may have had a more pronounced effect on murder rates than legislative changes. No evidence is provided that changes in firearms policy had the expected impact on firearm availability. No alternative explanations are considered. No explanation is suggested for why there has also been a decrease in non-firearm murders.
Practical implications	Stricter firearm regulation reduces firearm homicides.

	Study: Taylor, 2019
Proposed cause	National changes in firearms control policy and levels of enforcement by SAPS. Key changes were those before the development of the new FCA, during its phases of implementation (2001 to 2009), and during the breakdown in its enforcement (2010 onwards).
Proposed effect	National changes in the number of firearm-related deaths and injuries and other firearm-related crimes, measured by data pieced together from SAPS, Statistics South Africa figures, and mortuary records collected by the Medical Research Council and from the Department of Health. The numbers increased from 1994 to 2000, decreased from 2001 to 2010 and again increased from 2011 to date.
Argument	Data on gun-related murders, injuries and other gun crimes in South Africa since 1990 show a distinct 'up-down-up' pattern. From a high in the late-1990s, all these crimes began to decline in 2000, dropping steadily until 2010, when they reverse. Data on gun availability show the same pattern.

	Study: Taylor, 2019 *(continued)*
Empirical support	The argument is supplemented by data on confiscated or surrendered firearms, approved licences, firearm leaks from the legal to illegal pool, unlicensed firearms recovery and changes in destruction procedures. It does not consider alternative explanations. Again, no evidence is provided that changes in firearms policy had the expected impact on firearm availability.
Practical implications	Stricter firearm regulation reduces firearm homicides.

Discussion and conclusion

This report starts to systematically identify and synthesise local research on what works in South African policing. It suggests, first, that research not be seen within a hierarchy of knowledge sources based on the sole criterion of internal validity. Rather, it is on a spectrum of methods with different takes on understanding and accounting for how findings may be biased, incomplete, incorrect, misleading or otherwise questionable for decision making.

Secondly, the research question for EBP should not necessarily be evaluated through an RCT but should explore a causal relationship between variations in SAPS behaviour and their impact. This is, principally, variation in levels of crime, perceptions of safety, fear of crime and/or community satisfaction with the police.

These are the proposed minimum viable criteria for research that can show what works. They should create a considerably wider range of evidence to 'count' for EBP – provided it is coherent, empirically sound and practically applicable – than would a traditional systematic review. This literature review found that only five studies from a wide net met the inclusion criteria.

Three of the five address the explanans of variation in firearms regulation. The other two are effectively insider accounts, one openly a product of politics rather than scholarship. None made use of an experimental research design. None addressed a dependent variable of variation in community crime perceptions, fear of crime or satisfaction with policing. In other words, no studies demonstrated that a difference in SAPS behaviour made a difference in any subjective measures of safety and effective policing.

The few papers identified vary a great deal in logical coherence, empirical support and practical use for police decision making. Yet these were the only studies that made an explicit causal claim about the impact of variation in policing.

This is not to say that the five are the best or only studies that offer useful insight on the impact of South African policing. Quite the contrary. Among those finally excluded were invaluable and far more rigorous accounts of the perceptions of police,[42] communities,[43] crime victims,[44] both police and communities,[45] nuanced historical perspectives,[46] detailed quantitative descriptions[47] and qualitative syntheses.[48] The methodologies and data sources suggest that there is a wealth of interest, expertise, information and skill applied to how SAPS affects the country. But in none of these cases was the stated goal to determine whether differences in policing have made a perceptible difference to crime, fear or perceptions.

To clarify what works, the right question must be asked and answered as precisely as possible

This is telling but unsurprising. Most of the 435 abstracts and 140 full text papers reviewed labelled their purpose as description.

Scholars of such complex issues as crime, who have some understanding of the limitations of their data and methods, are loath to suggest that one thing has caused another. They prefer to speak, at most, of conducive environments, vulnerabilities, distinguishing features or

risk factors. However, this is little more than semantic sleight-of-hand, which serves only to avoid disagreement or refutation. This points to a serious, chronic problem with policing scholarship: While the relatively ignorant and openly partisan are full of confidence and passionate intensity, the more careful and informed lack all conviction.

EBP involves basing decisions not on tradition, intuition or opinion, but on rigorous observation.[49] Vague ideas about whether the police having the desired impact are valid, but not sufficient to direct the work of 200 000 SAPS people and 1 149 police stations across the country.[50] Clarity is needed about what works or at least what is most likely to work in the circumstances. That cannot happen unless the right question is asked and answered as carefully and precisely as possible.

No studies showed that a difference in police behaviour made a difference in subjective measures of safety and effective policing

There is value for police decision making in many more studies than those proposed here. Knowledge is needed about continuities in relevant factors, about how policing behaviour in practice differs from policy and about how a community perceives its safety. Equally important is knowledge on factors other than policing that may affect crime rates, how communities communicate their dissatisfaction and how experiences of crime create fear and affect politics and society.

A vibrant field of study also requires abstract theoretical exploration, moral critique, historical description and contextual richness. All may help inform scholarship and policing positively. South Africa has much of this material, including dozens of texts that should be required reading for anyone who makes decisions about the police.

But there can be no EBP unless researchers take on research questions that are explicitly causal. Whether through RCTs, quasi-experiments, cross-sectional comparisons or purely qualitative case studies, relationships must be explored between variation in SAPS behaviour and variation in impact. Principally, the latter is variation in levels of crime, perceptions of safety, fear of crime and/or community satisfaction with the police. It needs to be done in a way that is coherent, empirically sound and practically applicable.

The SAPS needs to transform from a blunt, conservative instrument of force into a responsive and effective tool for justice, nation building and public safety. To achieve this, policing scholars and police practitioners must collaborate to conduct research that can identify and recommend differences that can make a difference. This will require boldness and a willingness to be proven wrong. There is no time to waste.

VAGUE IDEAS AREN'T ENOUGH TO DIRECT THE WORK OF

200 000

SAPS MEMBERS

Notes

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