ANNUAL REVIEWS

Annual Review of Criminology

Perspectives on Policing: Cynthia Lum

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Annu. Rev. Criminol. 2021. 4:19–25

First published as a Review in Advance on November 16, 2020

The *Annual Review of Criminology* is online at criminol.annualreviews.org

https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-criminol-093020-023221

Keywords

police, reform, Floyd, defunding, evidence-based, evaluation

Abstract

The Editorial Committee of the *Annual Review of Criminology* has launched a new section within the journal in which we invite one or more authors to write a more personal and yet scholarly article that puts forth their perspective on an important and timely topic. For Volume 4, we asked Dr. Cynthia Lum and Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff to provide their perspectives on policing.

We hope our readers enjoy this new and exciting series of "Perspectives."

THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSFORMING THE POLICE

The police are in a crisis today that they have never before experienced. This crisis was brought to a boiling point by the killing of George Floyd but fueled by many other deaths of Black Americans at the hands of the police before and since. What makes today's social movement feel different from past protests is its worldwide reach and sustained nature, the widespread support for Black Lives Matter, and the willingness of people to protest even during a pandemic. Calls for transformation and reform also seem urgent and long overdue. The protests have made clear that America historically and institutionally has not yet succeeded in ensuring that Black lives matter as much as their White counterparts. Disparities in criminal justice, as well as education, public health, and other social services, reflect this sad truth.

At the time of this writing, however, the momentum of the reform movement has been somewhat slowed. Congress and state legislatures have struggled to agree on policing reforms. Many have grasped at issues I would describe as low-hanging fruit and that reflect the bad apple theory of police misconduct. This low-hanging fruit includes the banning of chokeholds by the police, purchasing body-worn cameras (BWCs), disclosing data on the use of force, and implementing various training programs (e.g., implicit bias, de-escalation, use of force, procedural justice) for police officers. Even more provocative reforms, such as defunding the police, have been challenged by the realities of government and community capabilities and resources, increases in crime, violence from political unrest, and concerns from both community groups and police organizations.

But much of this low-hanging fruit neither reveals nor reaches the real challenges of American policing. Indeed, Minneapolis officers had been trained in many of these reforms before the killing of Floyd, and many agencies with BWCs or strict use-of-force policies still have serious problems. Nor will defunding the police fix the current situation either, a point to which I return below. The challenge is that much more comprehensive adjustments are needed across many policing subsystems for reform to occur. Police organizations have interdependent systems of training, deployment, supervision, management, leadership, incentives, accountability, technology, and social networks. These systems feed off each other and are so interlocked that reforming one subsystem is challenging without realigning the whole machine. For decades, this interconnected system has generated, promoted, and reinforced a reactive, arrest-based, and process-oriented approach to policing, which is gummed up by muck that impacts its flexibility to learn and change. Part of that muck is a mythology of what policing is about and what role police are believed to play (e.g., warrior against crime, impassionate sleuth, protector against evil, the case solver with multiple technologies at hand). This mythology is generated by both police and nonpolice alike. The muck is also created by what fuels the machine itself. Policing is, on the one hand, obsessed with rules and procedures and, on the other hand, filled with unsupervised discretion and individualism. These opposing forces, combined with organizational complexity and mythology, thwart change and mute reform efforts, insulate and hide the realities of policing, and block outside voices, even during significant crises.

In this regard, Chauvin's actions while killing George Floyd do not only reflect a bad apple. Instead, his actions offer a glimpse into this policing machine: his blank stare as if what he was doing was acceptable and normal; his disregard of the warnings from the people around him; the physical act of his knee on Floyd's neck; and the trivial circumstances that led him to arrest Floyd. If we were able to roll back time and do things differently, it would not be enough to find the Chauvins of the world and fire them or train them better, or even to have use-of-force policies in place that do not allow them to put their knees on citizens' necks. Other systemic adjustments would be needed. For example, Floyd's death partly reflects an overemphasis on crime reaction and arrest for minor offenses rather than on problem-solving, prevention, and community engagement in

patrol operations. We now know, from a great deal of research, that proactive, problem-oriented, targeted, place-focused, and preventative approaches can be effective in reducing crime and improving community satisfaction (Natl. Acad. Sci. Eng. Med. 2018, Natl. Res. Counc. 2004). Arrest and reaction are never enough to create public safety (Nagin 2013). One long-term approach, therefore, to mitigate another Chauvin is to readjust patrol deployment to be more focused on prevention and problem-solving, not arrest and reaction.

But to readjust patrol deployment to better align with these evidence-based approaches, adjustments across the systems of policing are necessary (Lum & Koper 2017). At minimum, officers must be carefully trained on evidence-based approaches that are not only effective in reducing crime but also do not increase the risks of exacerbating disparities, using force, or violating community trust. But training alone is never enough. For training to stick, experiential training in the field must be prioritized. To achieve experiential learning, such skills would need to be translated into actual interventions and actions that could be practiced regularly by officers. This also means that deployment (i.e., the physical way that officers are patrolling every day) would need to be reengineered to be more amenable to and facilitate those actions prescribed by training. This would require changes in both the way officers respond to calls for service and the tactics and strategies they use when not handling calls, which is where the opportunities for preventing future calls are found. Some of these tactics (like traffic stops or use of misdemeanor arrests) may not only fail to reduce problems but also carry high risks for disparate outcomes.

Training and experiential learning are also reinforced through the supervision of deployment. Changes in this area would require the current passive, transactional, and reactive first-line supervisory approach, which is prominent in American policing, to be much more proactive and transformational, with greater emphasis on coaching and mentoring to facilitate deployment changes. Strengthening supervision toward a more proactive and preventative approach would also require strengthening the analytic capabilities of the agency. Problem identification and analysis are not only prerequisites of preventative tactics but are also ways to more actively supervise officers. Advancing these analytic capabilities will require reconfiguring information technologies and computer-aided dispatch systems to collect previously uncollected data, including more systematic knowledge about reactions to, and feedback about, police tactics from the citizens who are most impacted by them (Lum & Nagin 2017). There would also need to be a greater commitment to these goals, which means that leadership systems would need to be strengthened. However, it is no secret that policing suffers from inter-rank conflicts and interference from police unions that significantly weaken police leadership at all levels.

Technology, such as BWCs, will also not stop the next Chauvin (Lum et al. 2019, 2020a). Some citizens and police leaders believed that BWCs could strengthen police accountability and even improve people's trust and confidence in the police. However, BWCs have also been heralded by the police as protecting them from frivolous complaints and improving evidence collection to help prosecute offenders. These two outcomes focus on increasing the accountability of citizens, not the police. Even if BWCs do help to capture that one rare instance of a police-involved shooting, it still does not mean that BWCs have affected the overall system of accountability. For example, if officers have ambiguous or high levels of discretion about operating BWCs, internal investigations cannot use BWC footage, agencies have weak strategies regarding the sharing of BWC footage, or there is no use of BWCs for everyday supervision and coaching, then BWCs cannot magically reform an already weak accountability infrastructure, let alone be a prophylactic against disparity.

Thus, to achieve policing reform, the systems of policing must be reengineered, realigned with the evidence base for effective policing, and unmucked from policing's mythology to deliver the outcomes reformers seek. Decades of research in policing have given us strong hints as to how police can be more effective, fair, and legitimate. But once we know what might work, we must

translate that research into actual operations and then readjust several policing systems (only some of which are touched on above) to facilitate and reinforce those operations successfully. Even with that translation, we need systems of supervision, management, incentives, discipline, information, technology, and leadership to be united in institutionalizing and sustaining those reforms (for examples, see Lum & Koper 2017, Lum & Nagin 2017). Furthermore, consistent tracking and testing of these new interventions would be required to evaluate whether the outcomes sought are being achieved (see Sherman 2013). These adjustments are achievable but need more research, work, and investment, not less. The grabbing of low-hanging fruit is only a superficial distraction toward these broader goals and may also feed the mythology that keeps this system from deeper transformation.

THE ROLE OF SCIENCE AND POLICING SCHOLARSHIP IN REFORM

Unfortunately, we have a long way to go to give science a seat at the table of law enforcement policy making and practice. But science is incredibly important to the vision I outline. First, research can help to unveil the mythology of policing and how the machine works, both of which are prerequisites to achieving transformation. My own research has focused on understanding the nature of what officers respond to, how they spend their time while on patrol, and whether that time is effectively spent. This research has revealed that police do not spend most of their time responding to people in serious mental distress, contrary to some arguing for shifting police responsibilities to public health providers. The vast majority of calls for service have to do with much more mundane aspects of life and everyday conflicts between people in which there is likely no other service provider (Lum et al. 2020c). Research has also shown that police have significant amounts of uncommitted time in which to practice preventative measures and sharpen their experiential learning on the job (Famega et al. 2005, Frank et al. 1997, Koper et al. 2020, Lum et al. 2020b, Weisburd et al. 2016, Whitaker et al. 1982). But we also know they primarily use that time for activities that may not be effective or related to outcomes that their communities seek, or that could be at high risk for generating criminal justice disparities (Lum et al. 2020b).

Research is also critical in determining whether existing practices or new reforms create the outcomes that either the police or reformers say they will create. Will the implementation of BWCs improve police–citizen relationships and strengthen police accountability infrastructures? Can training in de-escalation lead to less use of force and greater officer safety? Will adjustments to patrol deployment reduce crime without increasing the risk of disparity? Can hiring more (minority, women, college-educated, empathetic, or older) officers lead to better outcomes (and what should those outcomes be)? What are the consequences for public safety of shifting some responsibilities from the police to other service providers? Although we still do not fully have answers to many of these questions, researchers have been building knowledge in these areas for some time.

Although a few academics may disagree, I would also argue that the role of science is not to advance a political, moral, or religious ideology or activism but to provide objective information from rigorous research to inform democratic debates and policy development. Take, for example, recent discourse about criminal justice disparity. We already have a great deal of research that shows that racial and ethnic disparities and perceptions of disparities exist in the criminal justice system. The challenge is trying to understand the causes of those disparities and how to mitigate them. Research has found at least four possible causes that can exist alone or in combination. These four causes (in no particular order) are the implicit biases of both police and citizens, police deployment choices, differences in offending, and explicit biases and structural racism. However one feels about each, and which might be most to blame for our current crises, we still need sharper

and more accurate benchmarking research techniques to help decipher the relative impacts of these causes of disparities as well as the relative risk of various tactics in producing disparities. Relatedly, much more research is needed to test and evaluate interventions that intend to reduce criminal justice disparities. For example, does reducing the use of stop-question-and-frisk reduce disparities or exacerbate them? Just because we have less of something does not mean the underlying disparities are also reduced. Similarly, will transferring particular duties from public safety to public health providers reduce justice disparities? This is also unclear given that we know bias is alive and well in the delivery of public health services.

Of course, what matters is how people use this information. With disparity data and research, information is often cherry-picked and used for either attack or defense. But such information can also be used as a starting point to increase communication and reconciliation between police and communities of color and problem-solve disparities resulting from injustices, deployment, or real offending.

UNDER- OR OVER-POLICING?

One question that the *Annual Review of Criminology* Editors posed in preparation for this article was, "How important a problem do you think *under*-policing is in poor Black communities, both historically and today, and does under-policing reflect structural racism?" My response is that under-everything is a problem in poor Black communities. As a patrol officer in East Baltimore in the late 1990s, I saw firsthand the deprived quality of education, health, housing, access to employment, transportation, sewage and trash, and safety systems in some of our nation's poorest neighborhoods. Perhaps it is an overstatement to say that municipal and government entities do not seem to give a damn about some of these places. But it is certainly fair to say that the challenges in these places are so overwhelming that many agencies and municipalities do not have the capabilities to address them. The idea that these communities need resources to be shuffled around from one group to another to help them is frankly a privileged perspective. These communities need more resources across all services. The Pollyannaish belief that some other social service will suddenly care more about these communities and do so without disparity if given the responsibilities previously delivered by the police seems to be wishful thinking. Any police officer who has tried to get social services to respond to an abandoned or neglected child at three in the morning can attest to this directly.

Additionally, the problem is not about under- or over-policing, which implies a quantification of the problem. The issue goes back to what I alluded to above—it is about the quality of policing. I am often asked whether hot-spots policing leads to over-policing or targeting Black communities with aggressive tactics. My response is that hot-spots policing is only about where the police go, not what they do when they get there. In theory, police have a wide variety of activities they can undertake in crime hot spots. The problem is that, in practice, because common deployment choices come from the current approach to policing described above, police generally limit themselves to what they know best—pedestrian and traffic stops and arrests. In other words, the police can increase the number of stops and arrests in crime hot spots and still be under-policing in those places. Structural racism is a reflection of the quality and nature of police actions, not simply the quantity of it. At the same time, in some places where there are serious problems of gun violence, very targeted, focused, and deterrence-oriented policing tactics are absolutely needed and can be effective in reducing serious violence (Koper & Mayo-Wilson 2012). In these places, it becomes even more important that communication channels are strong between the police and the community, who can warn the police when they overstep their bounds. That system of communication, however, is currently very weak. Police agencies rarely have systematic and targeted

communication strategies and technology to regularly collect citizen reactions to their activities or the flexibility to dynamically adjust operations if given such information (Lum & Nagin 2017).

More generally, I do not believe the complexity of both the lives and perspectives of Black Americans has been well captured in the debates and calls for police reform. As an Asian American, I cannot speak to the Black experience. But it may be fair to say that some calling for reform may not understand what is going on in places like East Baltimore. I do not think such places that are struggling with crime want less of the police. But they want a higher quality of policing. This complexity is perhaps best captured by a resident in Baltimore during the unrests after the death of Freddie Gray who said, "We need the cops; we don't need the violence from cops, but we need the actual cop duty in the presence of our community. We need that" (Gerdau 2015).

HOW QUICKLY CAN POLICE CHIEFS MAKE REFORMS?

Policing is the mother of all Rubik's Cubes. The nature of American policing is such that without understanding it, we are unable to tackle it. However, once you understand it, the tasks to tackle it and their obstacles seem insurmountable because of the complexity of the problem and the need for simultaneous solutions. It is also hard to address complex issues during a crisis. Research that digs into the nature of policing or evaluates practices and interventions can loosen this Gordian knot and help reveal the realities that make reform discussions more meaningful. Leaders (and also activists) must be open to this body of knowledge and use their operational expertise to institutionalize it into practice. In this sense, policing needs to be treated as an intellectual profession. What I mean by this is that everything in policing requires a great deal of thought, especially in figuring out the link between actions and outcomes. This principle is the anchoring ideal of evidence-based policing (Sherman 1998) and the foundation for institutionalizing knowledge into practice (Lum & Koper 2017).

I cannot imagine the competing interests and political problems that police chiefs face in today's environment. The expectations for police chiefs to address the racial prejudice that is engrained in our history and throughout our institutions, reengineer the everyday policing infrastructure to address everyday problems, and then come up against officers, supervisors, and commanders who disagree about the role of policing is a daunting leadership challenge. However, were I to advise police chiefs, I would encourage them to carefully examine the causes and effects of systems of daily patrol and first-line supervision. These are the most impactful groups in a police agency, and their actions can reduce crime, improve police legitimacy, and increase community satisfaction with police services. I would focus on unpacking the long-standing operational activities of patrol officers during both their committed and uncommitted time, assessing their current deployment styles, and considering actions to realign that style with a more evidence-based approach. Supervisory systems would need to be activated to reinforce these adjustments, turning supervisors into coaches who regularly use information and accountability technologies in primarily educational ways. Information systems like computer-aided dispatch, records management, and crime analysis would need to be reconfigured to support these adjustments, including information systems that help people provide regular feedback to the police and help officers see the disparities that they might be creating.

But as mentioned above, many other systems must be addressed to change the everyday activities and tendencies of officers on the front lines. Such changes cannot be accomplished by either grasping at low-hanging fruit or reshuffling resources elsewhere. Any realistic plan to overhaul policing must be cognizant of the system-wide work and investment that need to happen. This includes the need to translate, build receptivity for, and institutionalize into these systems the research knowledge that has accumulated about effective, legitimate, and fair policing. The

motivation, urgency, and inspiration of the recent social movements must be captured to fuel and sustain what will undoubtedly be a difficult and slow-moving road ahead. Including the voices of not just activists and academics but also those living in communities who need, rely on, and are impacted most by police services will be critical.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author is not aware of any affiliations, memberships, funding, or financial holdings that might be perceived as affecting the objectivity of this review.

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