

What really matters in policing? And why “what works?” alone is simply not enough.

Auke J. van Dijk & Frank Hoogewoning, strategy advisors to the Dutch police, Amsterdam (CEPOL open session 7 October 2015)

‘What works?’ and the related ‘evidence-based policing’ have their value to the profession of policing. There is little doubt about that, and there are many examples of how this approach has enriched policing research as well as contributed to operational policing. However, there is the risk of a narrow, instrumental, calculative emphasis on ‘what works?’ accompanied by an over-valuation of the so-called Random Control Trials as the only genuine scientific research. This can be detrimental to research and to the police because:

- it does not appreciate the specific nature and culture of police work,
- it ignores the challenges that police organizations are currently facing in their institutional and operational functioning; and
- it does not take into account that police leaders have to juggle constantly in trying to cope with the dilemmas and resilient issues that confront them within a complex, shifting and at times perilous environment.

We recently wrote – together with professor Punch – a book on the current state of policing, based primarily on a comparison between the UK and the Netherlandsⁱ. The book is titled: *What matters in policing? Change, values and leadership in turbulent times*. We argue that policing is at a critical turning point. Several countries – including the UK, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian societies, Finland and Austria – have been going through major restructuring in the past years. Meanwhile Europe is facing huge challenges, for instance how to deal with mass immigration as a result of armed conflicts elsewhere; and its impact on the diverse communities and societies. These type of highly complex issues – under conditions of austerity – also pose dilemmas for police leaders: how to deal with safety and security while at the same time preserve and strengthen justice, equity, integrity, human rights, accountability and good governance.

How the police operate within a democratic society is an expression of the relationship between the police and the state, and that also shapes the relationship between the state and its inhabitants. How people are treated by the police and the criminal justice system influences their perception of the society they live in; and whether or not they feel they can trust the police. The incidents in the United States, with Ferguson as starting point, show us what happens if communities lose their trust in the police. And, to return to the issue just mentioned, how the immigrants are treated in European countries and by European police services, is indicative for how policing in European countries is – and will be – shaped.

The tendency to an exclusive emphasis on ‘what works?’ is linked to the current climate in both the UK and the Netherlands, and in some other countries as well, in which politicians and policy makers favour a narrow mandate for the police. In this narrow mandate, the focus is on crime reduction and counterterrorism. What is in fact happening is that policing is shaped according to the so-called *control paradigm*, which leads to a mostly repressive police force at arms length of the public. This in contrast to the alternative *consent paradigm* in which: ‘the police reflects, understands and enjoys the trust and confidence of all the diverse communities they serve’ⁱⁱ. Let us take a closer look at what is actually happening in the UK and the Netherlands, the two countries that we compare in our book.

In the UK there has been a paradigm shift from the traditional consent paradigm – based on the ideas of Peel and his followers – towards the control paradigm. Typically, Home Secretary Theresa May has said she wants the police to become no-nonsense crime fighters, taking their success in cutting crime *as the sole objective* against which they will be judged. A radical change took place in England and Wales in 2012 when the Police and Crime Commissioners took office; they ultimately have the power to appoint and dismiss the police chief. This effectively ended the long-standing tradition in British policing of the independent constable who was only accountable to the law. This can be seen as a climax of government policy that started at the beginning of the century and was geared at reducing the autonomy of the police chiefs and characterised by putting a strong emphasis on cutting crime. Also, the large numbers of Police Community Support Officers losing their jobs due to budget cuts seems to fit the Home Secretary's opinion that "the police are not social workers". Alternatively, in 2013 Scotland saw the introduction of a national force, Police Scotland. And, although the founding documents and even the law stress the importance of a locally embedded police service, what we see in practice is a move towards crime reduction and more repressive policing, which luckily attracts much criticism. However, what the future direction of Police Scotland will be remains to be seen.

In the Netherlands, where policing was until the 1970s based on the control paradigm, the situation is somewhat different. Consistently moving towards the consent paradigm and gaining international approval for this since the 1970s, this newly embraced paradigm seems to have got lost somewhere on the way and is – in spite of the rhetoric of politicians – gradually being replaced by the control paradigm again. With the start of the Dutch national police in 2013 organizational aspects and management were the main focus of attention and the nationalization process itself was presented as a panacea for all problems related to policing. Recently, in the so-called recalibration of the reorganization process, the emphasis is still on personnel management and finance, crime reduction and counter terrorism by the police as 'lean and mean crime fighting machine'. Community policing seems to have dropped off the agenda. A different police service seems to emerge, without much public or political debate about which 'kind' of police is preferred

From our comparison it becomes clear that the consent paradigm is under severe pressure. Politicians seem to favour the control paradigm, in the case of the UK explicitly and in the Netherlands it can be deduced from the political focus on efficiency and on so-called 'threats to security'. The much-heard expression of citizens who are fined by the police has now become the mantra of politicians: "go catch the crooks". This is based on the idea that crime fighting and maintaining order are what policing is all about. This idea has proven to be resilient and attractive to neo-liberal politicians, especially in times of austerity, and sometimes even to the police itself. However, if we look at what more than 50 years of police research has brought to light, we get quite a different picture.

For a start, there is a solid body of evidence that the police cannot do a great deal when it comes to reducing crime, because the causes of crime are fundamentally outside of their power. This is not to deny that the police play an important symbolic role in reducing crime, but there is more than meets the eye of some politicians. The police perform a broad range of tasks – often in response to calls from the public – that have little to do with crime. A heavy

emphasis on crime bears the danger of a police becoming detached from the public, and as research also shows: an alienated police is neither effective nor efficient.

Also, research shows that policing has two sides and that the police can be seen as two organizations in one: that of the daily routine operations and that of coping with crisis situations. The latter requires quick assessment of the situation, risk analysis and an immediate adequate response; in most cases officers have no idea in advance of what they will encounter at the scene. This makes policing very demanding for officers and police leadership at all levels in the organization. Consequently, a de-skilled and subservient 'crime fighting' police should not be seen as a viable option.

Police officers have the exceptional power to deprive people of their freedom and even – under extreme circumstances – of their lives; and the fact that the police operates in the front line 24/7 makes it a unique public agency. The front line character of policing makes that exercising exceptional powers starts with the first responding officer who usually is low in the hierarchy. This implies also that being accountable should be a core issue at all levels in the organization. And of course, in complex circumstances occasional mistakes are inevitable. While the nature of policing – as well as police culture – leads to a predisposition to cover up mistakes and see them as unavoidable collateral damage, within the consent paradigm *honest policing* is the only way to go. Accountability should be at the heart of police culture and police leadership.

Based on the consistent and overwhelming evidence produced by classic policing research we conclude that policing is characterised by three fundamental dimensions. The first is that of crime and security management in the widest sense, which is about criminal investigation, preparing prosecutions, court appearances, crime prevention, forensics etc. The second is that of social welfare and community outreach, which covers interagency cooperation, attention for vulnerable groups with public health risks, family liaison, problem oriented policing and community engagement. The third is order maintenance in the widest sense of the word, which includes public order situations, sports and events management, emergencies and disaster management etc.

When we take these three dimensions into consideration neither the control paradigm nor the consent paradigm does justice to the complex nature of policing. Moreover, the distinction between the two paradigms is simplistic and reductionist. As an alternative the two paradigms may be integrated into one, provided that consent has primacy. This is to say that we acknowledge that policing is about a broad range fundamentally related tasks that are performed in the community and to the benefit of that community. We propose a comprehensive paradigm – built on the three inherent and fundamentally related dimensions – as the basis for 'good policing'; and as the basis for police leaders to shape policing over the next decades.

Based on a comprehensive paradigm, policing becomes a true profession instead of a trade. A profession that by definition is values-based and highly favours accountability. In this context the quality of police leadership and their commitment is a crucial factor. The focus of the leadership should be on 'what matters?' and that is far more than crime reduction or management and finance. Accordingly, the research agenda needs to be broader than a narrow focus on 'what works?'. An instrumental agenda alone is not sufficient to understand

the broader policing landscape and the challenges the police leadership has to face in coping with complexity and rapid change. We might, for example, take a systems perspective, in which evidence is about ‘what types of strategies have what types of effects for different groups under certain conditions’ⁱⁱⁱ. We might need to focus on the relationships between mechanisms, contexts and outcomes. And this type of research should be very relevant for concrete operations as well, leading to practical rules or design principles, instead of prescriptive statements of ‘what works’ that neglect the time and place specific context^{iv}. Why this is important becomes all the clearer if we look at issues in which the police – reasoning from the comprehensive paradigm – have a crucial role but that at the same time require interventions by other organizations and disciplines.

An important example would be the intersection of law enforcement and public health, an issue that is of high importance to the Dutch police, especially in the bigger cities. There are many crucial issues at the intersection of law enforcement and public health. We will list here the themes that are the focus of the Third International Conference on Law Enforcement and Public Health to be held 2 – 5 October 2016 in the Dutch capital of Amsterdam^v:

1. Substance abuse (including legal substances like alcohol)
2. Infectious diseases
3. Mental health
4. Violence
5. Crises (including public disorder, disasters, pandemics, conflict)
6. Trauma (including road trauma and trauma related to work)
7. (cross-cutting theme 1) Vulnerable groups and marginalized communities
8. (cross-cutting theme 2) Leadership on the intersection of law enforcement & public health

While the methodology of Random Control Trials in policing research was in a way copied from the medical domain, it is interesting to see that all of the urgent health issues listed above require a broader research perspective. In the end, it is our strong conviction that while ‘what works?’ is important, it should always be superseded by ‘what matters?’.

ⁱ Auke van Dijk, Frank Hoogewoning & Maurice Punch (2015) *What matters in policing? Change, values and leadership in turbulent times*. Bristol (UK): Policy Press.

ⁱⁱ College of Policing (2014) *BME Progression 2018 Programme*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cameron D. Willis et al. (2014) ‘Systems thinking for transformational change in health’. In: *Evidence & Policy*, Vol.10, No.1, pp.113-26.

^{iv} A. Best et al. (2012) ‘Large-system transformation in health care: A realist review’. In: *Milbank Quarterly*, 90, pp.421-56.

^v <http://www.leph2016.com/>