The Cambridge Police Executive Program: Proportionality and Evidence-Based Policing against Harm

BY LAWRENCE W. SHERMAN

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On May 25, 2020, Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd over an alleged fraud amounting to $20. The shock of Floyd's death over such a minor underlying offense was felt around the world. There was no justification for what Chauvin did to Floyd. In a word, the level of force police used on Floyd was completely *disproportionate* to any element of the circumstances, such as the alleged crime, Floyd's dangerousness, or a specific threat to any of the many officers who responded to this $20 catastrophe.

Long before George Floyd's killing in Minneapolis, or Michael Brown's killing in Ferguson, the Cambridge University Police Executive Program was teaching and researching *proportionate* policing. Its 25-year history of teaching and research draws on 500 years of British law and values that have moved ever closer to the position that it is unethical, and potentially criminal, for police to act with disproportionality, in doing too much—or even too little—in relation to any specific threat, risk, or potential harm.

Now, more than ever, the Cambridge Program—and its affiliated open-access *Cambridge Journal of Evidence-Based Policing*[1]—offers a globally relevant framework for preserving and enhancing democratic policing in the face of understandably extreme public anger. Our commitment to precision in targeting, testing, and tracking police intrusions on public liberty using the best empirical and statistical evidence available (Sherman 1998, 2008, 2013) provides a key tool for the kind of public "dialogic" strategy for maintaining police legitimacy developed at Cambridge by Sir Anthony Bottoms and Justice Tankebe (2012). Our theoretical and empirical development of the concept of residual general *deterrence* (Ariel et al 2019; Barnes et al 2020) provides the basis for refuting claims that police can be abolished without major increases in violent crime. For the approximately 150 mid-career students enrolled each year in our part-time graduate courses—all police leaders or analysts from around the world—the Cambridge program offers an intellectual foundation for both police reform and public support.

1 https://link.springer.com/journal/41887/1/1/page/1

The Cambridge program offers four intellectual pillars: 1) "coupling" police intrusions with proportionately harmful risks; 2) measuring harm systematically with a crime harm index; 3) deciding how to make decisions using the "Triple-T" (Sherman 2013) of targeting, testing, and tracking as the basis for achieving a fourth "T" of transformation (Neyroud 2020); and 4) professionalizing police practice through the training of pracademics who will create, apply, and promote the use of research to provide better evidence for decision-making.

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Pillar One: Gladwell's "Coupling" and the "Power Few"

Malcolm Gladwell, the great "translator" of social science, wrote extensively about the research and teaching focus of the Cambridge program in his 2019 book *Talking to Strangers.* Starting with stories told by David Weisburd that brilliantly illustrate the fallacy of the displacement hypothesis (Gladwell 2019: chapter 10), Gladwell goes on to demonstrate the importance in targeting where the risk of harm is highest, and where intrusive tactics such as stop and search can be very effective (chapter 11). He then uses the death of Sandra Bland in police custody (chapter 12) to show how dangerous it can be for police to "uncouple" highly intrusive tactics from the highest levels of risk of high harm, such as hot spots of violence or the "power few" of victims, offenders, and places in any citywide distribution (Dudfield et al 2017). The Cambridge program is focused on this proportionality. As Gladwell quotes Sherman, "We have to appreciate that everything police do, in some ways, intrudes on someone's liberty. And so it's not just about putting police in the hot spots. It's also about having a sweet spot of just enough intrusion on liberty and not an inch—not an iota—more." (Gladwell 2019: 338).

Pillar Two: Precision Policing with a Cambridge Crime Harm Index

The challenge of negotiating priorities in policing is a central theme of the Cambridge program, to which we add the aim of precision. While many policing innovations of the 20th century emphasized consultations with communities about priority problems, the massive

cuts in UK police budgets from 2010 to 2018 encouraged much greater emphasis on deciding what *not* to do. For that aim, there is no more useful principle than our statement that "Not all crimes are created equal." (Sherman 2007) The Sentencing Council of England and Wales, a statutory body tasked with ensuring a consistent national approach to sentencing, has produced sentencing guidelines. They provide a highly precise weighting for the relative severity of each crime category compared to that of all others (Sherman 2013: 47) and have been a central tool of the Cambridge program (Sherman, Neyroud & Neyroud 2016). The Cambridge Crime Harm Index (CHI) uses English sentencing guidelines, later supplemented with a broader system for counting crimes separately if they are generated by proactive policing or suffer other threats to reliability (Sherman et al 2020a).

The CHI has had international impact. Since 2016, graduates of the Cambridge course have been developing crime harm indices for Western Australia, Denmark, California, and Sweden. In most of our recent and ongoing randomized trials, our colleagues have reported comparisons between CHI results and those from frequency or prevalence. Virtually all of these analyses have shown that CHI measures yield results that are somewhat different from traditional crime outcomes (see, e.g., Ariel et al., 2016; Strang et al., 2017). Reassessments of previous studies based on less sensitive measures of recidivism are also now underway using CHI.

Pillar Three: The Four "Ts": Targeting, Testing, Tracking and Transformation

Since the original formulation of evidence-based policing (EBP) (Sherman 1998), critics have claimed that the subject matter is narrowly about randomized trials. Yet, since 1996, the Cambridge course has taught broadly about applied criminology and police management. The centrality of hot spots (Sherman et al 1989) and the power few (Sherman 2007) was later given more visibility under the name of "targeting" for its equal standing with "testing" (as the aim of experiments and quasi-experiments). What we have long lamented, however, is the scarcity of research on "tracking," or measuring the degree to which police are doing what their policies require, as Sherman (2013) described its key role in the "Triple-T" of evidence-based policing.

Most recently, former Chief Constable Dr. Peter Neyroud, who is deputy director of the Cambridge Police Executive Program, has proposed a fourth "T." Reflecting our long-term emphasis on implementation of change, Neyroud's "T" emphasizes the use of best evidence in successful transformation of police agencies by implementing evidence-based policing across the board. Most importantly, it provides a means of asking many important questions, such as how many people (and what proportion of all staff) in a police agency should be trained or educated in EBP and at what pace. By what schedule, in effect, should any police agency try to equip its officers to use EBP in all the decisions they make? This question surrounds the fourth pillar of the course, with the answer in rapid development even as I write.

Pillar Four: Pracademics United

The term "pracademic" is widely used to describe active practitioners in any profession who are also engaged in research or academic teaching on matters about that profession. That was the vision of Metropolitan Police Commander Alex Murray (but at the time a police inspector in West Midlands Police) and other graduates of our program who founded the Society for Evidence-Based Policing (SEBP) in 2010. The "mother" SEBP was followed by the founding of the Australian-New Zealand SEBP and the American and Canadian SEBPs. These societies helped to develop the identities of members as police pracademics, and the *Cambridge Journal of Evidence-Based Policing* was established to publish articles written by them.

The theory of a growing a pracademic constituency in every police force is that an evidence-based approach creates a better climate for challenging a police agency to do better. This applies whether the challenge is to reduce disproportionate uncoupling of policing from harm, or simply to track practices more closely if they seem to threaten police legitimacy, such as stop and search. Our aim at Cambridge is to help make knowledge more accessible, increasingly through online training.[2] Knowledge alone cannot solve the global crisis of police legitimacy, but it may be the last best hope.

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2   https://www.cambridge-ebp.co.uk/training

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