

How EBP Applies to Law Enforcement

In its simplest form, evidence-based practice (EBP) is the objective and balanced application of scientific research to guide decision making to achieve successful outcomes in the justice system. From deciding whether to arrest someone to participating in multidisciplinary policy teams, law enforcement has a critical role in implementing and promoting EBP. Law enforcement's adoption of EBP impacts people who are justice-involved, community well-being and safety, and decisions, workloads, and costs throughout the justice system.

The following are some ways that law enforcement can support an evidence-based approach:

1. Train

staff in EBP. Law enforcement often views EBP as being “soft on crime,” and decisions (e.g., pretrial release and sentencing decisions) can have a negative impact on law enforcement's morale and on their view of their justice partners. Being trained in EBP will help law enforcement understand EBP's principles and the research driving decision making.

2. Use

evidence-based policing strategies. Just as the justice system has research-based evidence on what works with people who have violated the law, the law enforcement community has scientific evidence of what is effective in the field and in reducing crime. Law enforcement should engage in data-driven approaches that are specific to policing, such as hot spot policing, situational crime prevention, and problem-oriented policing practices.

3. Divert

eligible people prior to arrest, which would result in no arrest or charges. For example, rather than arresting someone and bringing them into the system, law enforcement can choose to “lecture and release” them. Or, law enforcement—possibly with the assistance of a crisis intervention team—might refer someone to a program or service to address factors that may be related to their law violation (e.g., mental health, substance use, lack of housing). The Law Enforcement Treatment Initiative (LETI) is an example of a diversion program available in many jurisdictions in Pennsylvania. LETI empowers law enforcement officers to divert people from the justice system and to connect them with the services they need.

Screenings and Assessments

The decision to divert or arrest can have a significant impact on the person, their family, the victim and their family, community safety, and public trust and confidence in the system. Therefore, many law enforcement agencies have begun to use screenings and risk/needs assessments to identify people's suitability for diversion based on their assessed risk level, criminogenic needs, and other conditions (e.g., protective and responsivity factors). People assessed as low risk are often ideal candidates for diversion. They usually self-correct and benefit most from minimal correctional intervention. In fact, increased intervention may raise their risk of recidivism.

Law enforcement also uses specialized assessments, such as the Idaho Risk Assessment of Dangerousness (IRAD), which was developed to be used at the scene of an intimate partner violence incident and then as an assessment as a case progresses through the justice system to assess dangerousness and lethality. The IRAD considers seven factors: history of domestic violence, threats to kill, threats of suicide, recent separation, obsessive/controlling behavior, prior police contacts, and drug and alcohol misuse. The resulting risk score can be used to aid in safety planning for the victim and to make pretrial release decisions.

4. Connect

people who have been arrested to resources. Many larger departments have employed social workers to help people access services.

5. Partner

with community organizations and probation and parole departments. Law enforcement can play an important role in promoting community well-being and safety by collaborating in problem-solving initiatives and in public education and crime prevention activities. Law enforcement can also participate in home visits, aid in the enforcement of conditions such as curfews, and assist with arrests and executing warrants. Participation in home visits, in particular, has great benefit. Law enforcement can identify changes in a person's appearance, behavior, or circumstances that may indicate a change in risk level or point to concerns that should be addressed; update a person's employment status and other important information; build rapport with the person; meet other household members; and remind the person of the importance of accountability.

6. Become involved

in multidisciplinary policy teams. As team members, law enforcement leadership, along with leaders of other justice system agencies and community organizations (e.g., the court, prosecution, defense, pretrial services, community corrections, victim services, treatment providers, community representatives), can learn about evidence-based practices that are applied across the justice system, develop and implement strategic plans for system improvements, and assess outcomes. Law enforcement who have been involved in the development of policies and procedures report increased understanding of the principles of EBP, greater "buy-in," and partnerships with treatment providers and others who can assist people who come in contact with the justice system.

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