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Take A Closer Look

Academic-Law Enforcement Partnerships: Benefits, Challenges, and Research Gaps

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INTRODUCTION

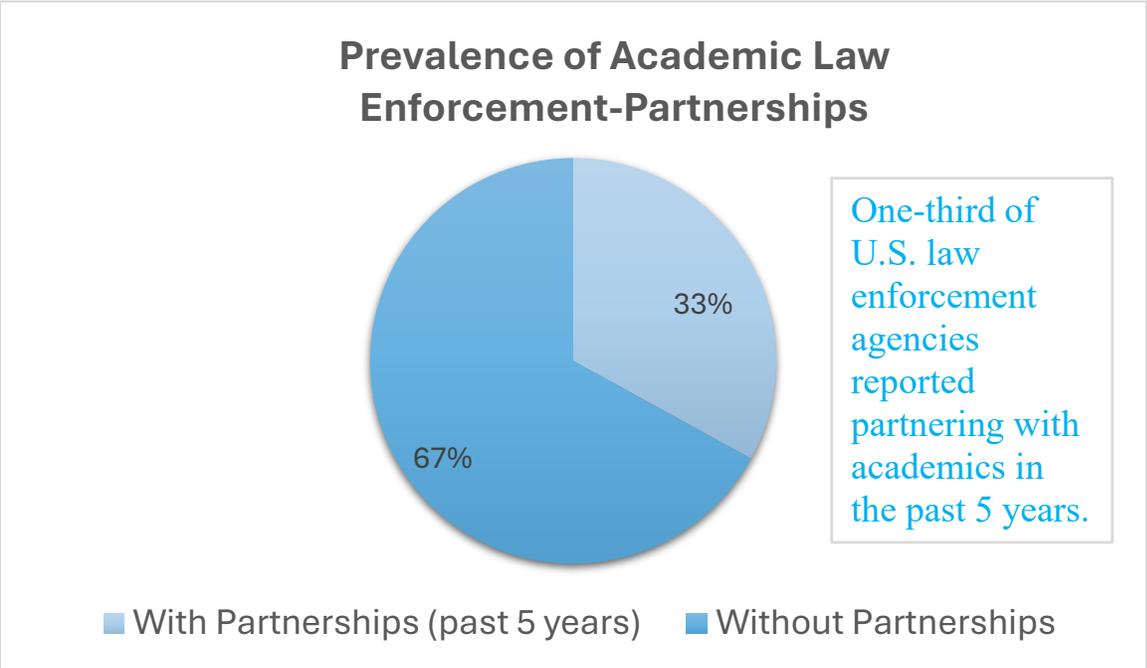
Since the early 1900s, law enforcement agencies in the United States, particularly police departments, have engaged in some form of academic-practitioner partnership, from informal collaborations to formal research projects. At their core, these partnerships provide several benefits to both sides. They help to better analyze problems, evaluate programs, and use evidence-based approaches (Piza & Welsh, 2022; Rojek et al., 2012). This best paper focuses on academic partnerships with law enforcement because these collaborations are the most established and well-documented in the criminal justice field. Law enforcement agencies often have access to large amounts of data and can test evidence-based strategies in real-world settings. Working together helps researchers apply what they know to real public safety problems, therefore producing findings that matter in everyday practice. Since academic-practitioner partnerships have been researched more than others, they give the clearest examples of how these collaborations work. Because of this, this paper focuses on summarizing the existing research on academic law enforcement partnerships rather than outlining best practices.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, these collaborations provide academics with access to real-world issues where research can be formally assessed, while offering police departments tools and insights that can strengthen decision-making. At the same time, factors such as limited resources, institutional differences between researchers and practitioners, and competing timeline, restrict how effective and sustainable these partnerships can be. However, while there is increased interest in evidence-based policing, the study of academic-practitioner partnerships remains limited, with much of the literature relying heavily on surveys or case studies as opposed to large-scale or longitudinal research.

This review examines what is currently known about partnerships between academic researchers and law enforcement practitioners, highlighting how these collaborations operate in real-world policing environments. First, the review examines the benefits that these collaborations can provide, then looks at the possible challenges and barriers that limit their success. Next, the review addresses the gaps in the existing research literature on police-academic partnerships and emphasizes the need for more systematic studies. Finally, the review points out gaps and suggests how future studies can support stronger police-academic partnerships.

BENEFITS OF ACADEMIC – LAW ENFORCEMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Figure 1



Source: Rojek, J., Smith, H. P., & Alpert, G. P. (2012). The prevalence and characteristics of police practitioner–researcher partnerships. *Police Quarterly*, 15(3), 241-261.

Several studies emphasize the value that partnerships bring to both researchers and law enforcement agencies. Rojek et al. (2012) conducted one of the first national surveys in the United States to measure the prevalence of police practitioner and academic partnerships. They found that police departments which partnered with researchers helped police analyze problems more effectively, use scientific methods they would not have had on their own, and explain their strategies more clearly to policymakers and the public. Since many departments do not have their own research staff, working with academics gives them access to tools and knowledge that will improve their work.

Grieco, Telep, and Koper (2014) show how partnerships can give both researchers and agencies benefits. Their survey of criminal justice researchers found that these collaborations helped departments gain access to evidence-based practices and improve how they approached problem solving. At the same time, researchers were able to evaluate programs in real world settings, which made their findings more

practical and useful for agencies. Partnerships also make police more transparent and accountable. Lum and Koper (2017) found that evidence-based policing gives agencies a stronger foundation for decision-making because it is guided by research as opposed to going off intuition. This not only improves how police respond to problems but can also build trust and rapport with communities, especially in places where people may be skeptical of law enforcement.

More recent research has shown that partnerships are becoming more innovative. Piza and Welsh (2022) notes that some models now include officers taking on roles as researchers themselves. This gives practitioners a chance to participate directly in the research process and strengthen their own skills. These newer approaches show how collaborations can go beyond traditional roles and make research a more permanent part of how agencies operate.

CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC – LAW ENFORCEMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Even though the benefits of these partnerships are clear, partnerships are not always easy to manage. Rojek et al. (2012) point out that structural differences between academics and practitioners can often create tension. Police operate in environments where timelines and action are prioritized, while academics focus on presenting accurate methodologies, resulting in longer timelines. As a result of this, research has the potential to be overlooked because it failed to respond to the urgent needs of police officers.

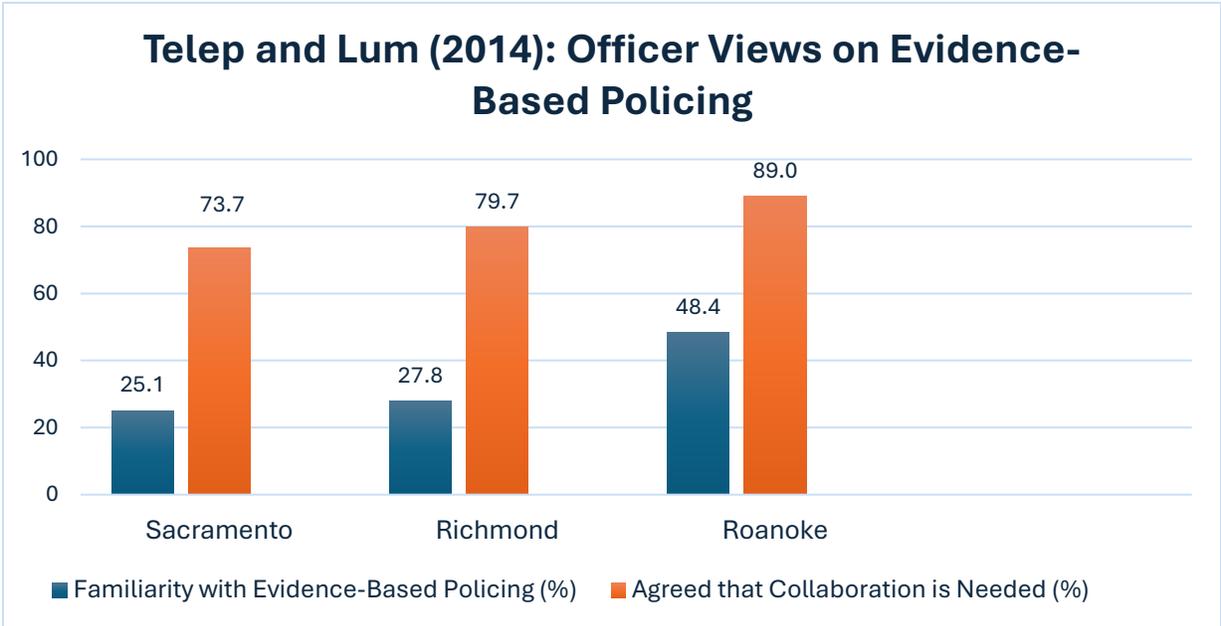
Power imbalances also present challenges. In some cases, researchers create the agenda, while in other cases, agencies restrict access to data, both can lessen the trust between partners. Head (2015) adds that similar challenges exist when bringing research into policy, because groups want different things. Additionally, external forces can affect how long partnerships last. Oliver et al. (2014) found that changes in political leadership, funding, or community priorities can quickly affect collaborations. Many partnerships depend on temporary grants, which means they may not survive once funding ends.

PARTNERSHIPS AS A RESEARCH ISSUE

Partnerships are not only useful in practice but are also an important topic for research. Studying them raises questions that go beyond traditional evaluations of programs and policies. Partnerships bring together academics and practitioners who often have different priorities, incentives, and timelines. Looking at these collaborations helps us understand how knowledge is shared, how trust is built, and how goals are negotiated between two professional groups that do not always operate in the same way.

Rojek, Smith, and Alpert (2012) highlight why partnerships have become a critical area to study. Their national survey was one of the first to examine the prevalence and characteristics of academic-practitioner collaborations in the United States. They found that while many agencies had engaged in some form of partnership, the level of involvement and structure varied. Some were long-term and formalized while others were short-term and informal. This made it clear that there is no single model for how partnerships function or succeed. The study also revealed that even though agencies had collaborations, they often faced barriers such as limited resources and unclear expectations.

Figure 2



Source: Telep, C. W., & Lum, C. (2014). The receptivity of officers to empirical research and evidence-based policing: An examination of survey data from three agencies. *Police quarterly*, 17(4), 359-385.

Telep and Lum (2014) surveyed three U.S. police agencies, Sacramento, California; Richmond, Virginia; and Roanoke County, Virginia, to examine how officers view research and evidence-based policing. They found that only about one-quarter of officers had heard of the term “evidence-based policing,” yet over 70% agreed that collaboration with researchers was important for reducing crime. At the same time, most officers reported relying more on experience than science when making decisions, with the data showing 75% relying more on experience to 25% relying more on research. These findings show that even when there is support for collaboration, there are still major gaps in awareness and application, which highlights the limitations of the current research base.

Other research has pointed out that these collaborations are not always as stable as they appear. Bacon et al. (2021) describe them as “fragile alliances” that can fall apart due to different expectations in practice between academics and police, unstable funding, or even changes in leadership. Goode and Lumsden (2016) make a similar claim that because police work is often reactive, and agencies face changing priorities; it can be hard for academics to conduct long-term studies within departments. As a result, both researchers and practitioners miss the benefits that come from sustained partnerships.

Some recent programs have tried to strengthen these connections, but they also show how much work is still left to do. The National Institute of Justice’s Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) scholarship program is a great example of this, as it focuses on how officers are trained to carry out their own research while on the job, which is a step in the right direction (National Institute of Justice, 2024). Nevertheless, opportunities like this are still rare. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (2021) has also pointed out that even though partnerships are becoming more common, there is still a lot that is not known about how they fit into the daily work of policing or how they survive changes in leadership, politics, funding, or common community priorities. These gaps show why more research is needed to understand if these newer models can successfully last over time.

For practitioners, the main point is that partnerships can provide useful insights and tools, but they require commitment, trust, and long-term investment. For researchers, the challenge is to design studies that respond to practitioner needs while still producing accurate findings. More research is needed to look at not only successes but also failures, so that future collaborations can be stronger and more effective. Building and sustaining these partnerships will be key to the continued growth of evidence-based policing and to maintaining credibility and accountability in law enforcement.

BROAD CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATION OF THE LITERATURE

Despite many contributions, the literature remains underdeveloped in several ways. First, much of the existing work describes partnerships as opposed to evaluating their long-term effects, therefore leaving questions about whether they change policing practices or reduce crime. Studies tend to be concentrated on single agencies or case examples, which makes it difficult to generalize findings across jurisdictions. Much of the field has lacked movement beyond descriptive research to examine how partnerships approach work, how they operate across different settings, and what factors sustain them over time. Second, research often reflects the academic perspective more than the practitioner experience, and access to police data continues to restrict the depth of analysis. With unclear measures on what should be considered “success,” comparisons across studies will continue to remain uneven. Together, these limitations highlight why more multi-agency and longitudinal research is still needed.

Research on academic practitioner partnerships has grown; however, it is still limited. A key next step is to develop research that measures the real-world impact of these partnerships, including how they influence decision-making, agency practices, and community outcomes. Strengthening collaboration across multiple agencies, using shared data systems, and designing long-term evaluations would help build clearer understanding of what makes these partnerships effective. Until that happens, partnerships will remain more of a promising idea than a permanent part of everyday policing.

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