
This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

The McDonaldization of police-academic partnerships: observations on 'What works' and 'What doesn't work'

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://www.empac.org.uk/mcdonaldization-police-academic-partnerships-observations-works-doesnt-work/>

PUBLISHER

© EMPAC

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Lumsden, Karen. 2019. "The Mcdonaldization of Police-academic Partnerships: Observations on 'what Works' and 'what Doesn't Work'". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/21647>.

The McDonaldization of Police-Academic Partnerships: Observations on ‘What Works’ and ‘What Doesn’t Work’

Police and academics ‘rubbing shoulders’

A strategically driven impetus for police and academics to collaborate has emerged in recent years in the UK. Examples of collaborations include the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR); the N8 collaboration between police forces and universities in the North of England; the Universities’ Police Science Institute (UPSI) in Wales, the East Midlands Policing Academic Collaboration (EMPAC), the Society of Evidence Based Policing (SEBP), and various police-university collaborations funded via the College of Policing Innovation Fund in 2014, and the College of Policing/HEFCE Policing Knowledge Fund in 2015. The College of Policing promote the use of knowledge and research to develop an evidence-based approach to policing, for instance hosting the ‘What Works Centre for Crime Reduction’.

In addition, a series of developments have occurred in response to political and public imperatives, including not only the debates concerning professionalization of the police, but also what has been referred to by Heslop (2011) as the ‘McDonaldization’ of the police. This consists of an emphasis in organizational terms on calculability, efficiency, control, and predictability, coupled with the production of irrationalities. Alongside this we have witnessed the increasing politicization of policing in via the introduction of locally elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) in 2012. It is against this backdrop that the evidence-based movement has also spread to the realm of policing. In this blog we discuss findings from interviews conducted with police officers and staff from forces in England in order to glean insight into their views of police-academic partnerships and research.

Drivers and Barriers to Partnership Working

Financial constraints were viewed as the main driver behind police-academic partnerships and they were also viewed as having the potential to contribute to a strategic, future-scanning agenda. Police-academic partnerships could bring teams together to identify priorities and plan an overall strategic approach, or allow for the commissioning of particular projects. However, barriers were identified which may account for frustrations felt by some of those to whom we spoke. When ‘police culture’ is the subject of academic writing, it is typically referring to a kind of ‘macho’ approach to the characterisation of, attitude towards and treatment of ‘criminals’ by ‘rank and file’ officers. Some aspects of operational policing – being ‘on response’, dealing with a crime scene or being reliant on colleagues in high risk situations, lend themselves to the development of what is typically ‘bundled up’ as ‘police culture’. However, we encountered occasional references to how a particular mentality, driven by the need to make unreflective on-the-spot decisions in challenging situations, can percolate *upwards* to inform approaches to the management and leadership of a force more generally.

What was evident in the accounts of the (managerial level) personnel was an organizational culture characterised by calls for accountability, the pervasiveness of performance management and measurement, and a proliferation of bureaucratic systems as a form of micro-management. Frustrations arose in relation to a perception that in some places organizational structures and bureaucratic procedures had been created that were a response to *a need to be seen to be managing effectively* but which were not actually the outcome of sound decision-making. The significance of this culture in relation to collaborative working was the impact it was seen as having on any research that is undertaken.

Others spoke of the need for ‘instant success’ and an associated lack of space for *learning* and *reflecting* as militating against the effective use of research. From various quarters, we identified a clear message that any proposed research must map on to forces’ strategic priorities. However at the same time we were struck by the difficulties external researchers might have in identifying what these are for individual forces at any one time. PCC strategies, targets and research plans also played a crucial role in shaping the research conducted, or supported, by particular forces, and fed into force research priorities.

Cops as researchers

Police officers who were undertaking research found their internal processes less than transparent and communication with key personnel less than timely. Even where knowledge, experience and support for research is held by a number of people spread across a force, this may not represent in practice the kind of valuable human resource it could be if they are unaware of each other and work in silos. This impeded police conducting research in-house, raising questions about what kind of asset they might become and what kind of institutional support they might expect. Are they seen as an asset or a liability by forces? And if the former how should this be managed? In times of austerity, it is all too easy for investment in research to be seen as abstraction and this highlights a paradox of police-academic partnerships: that the main driver for their development also represents one of the biggest hurdles.

Where officers and staff had received support for undertaking research it had often come from a key individual in a senior position. The risk here is that people move on. There were several instances of officers reporting this – promotion, transferring to another force, or

retirement. The longer-term thinking and planning that was seen to be compatible with the co-production, exchange and utilization of research knowledge in collaboration with academics was inhibited by a lack of organizational stability. In the face of such barriers, officers engaging in research/collaborations while still 'doing the day job' reported becoming discouraged.

Evaluation and crime reduction

A need for proper evaluation was also cited, with academics seen to offer a robustness that has been lacking, or lending weight to efforts to influence current methods of measuring performance. For others working closer to the ground, it was not so much evidence of 'what works' that was needed, but empirical evidence of 'what is' – an accurate picture of what is actually going on, before coming up with a more evidence-based operational design to deliver a service.

Crime reduction in particular was seen by officers as more complex than producing satisfactory performance figures. What was needed was an enhanced understanding of the causes of crime in order to inform programmes of intervention. The implications of officers' analyses of what research might offer – a better understanding of the causes of the crimes they are trying to tackle and an opportunity to participate in the design and delivery of effective interventions - are that a multi-factorial mixed-method approach is needed. Not everything can be measured and there is a need to recognise the social construction of phenomena.

What does this tell us about partnership working?

Police-academic partnerships are interesting in a number of ways: at a *political* level, in terms of what they reveal about the spread of the ‘what works’ and evidence-based practice movement; at an *institutional* level, as a means for police forces to rationalise their service delivery in response to austerity-driven cuts in public funding; and at an *individual* level, for researchers and police to engage in reflective practice about ‘what works’ well in partnerships.

There was genuine interest in the use of research to inform and enhance policing. There are indications that this will become increasingly formalised in the future if the College of Policing becomes more established and influential. However, there are also clear indications that a particular model of ‘what’ constitutes research/evidence in the tradition of crime science and ‘what works’ is dominant amongst police officers who might be regarded as the pool from which leaders of the future will be drawn, regardless of whether other kinds of research might be more suitable in certain contexts. The *knowledge needs* of policing are much broader than ‘what works’ and the dominance of this model risks missing out on knowledge exchange and research collaboration in areas of academic expertise that do not exclusively use these methods and in areas of policing where there is a concern to ‘unpack the box’ of interventions, to understand why initiatives work (or do not), using theories of human behaviour and qualitative methods to counterbalance the empiricism of pure experimentation.

Going forward – building sustainable partnerships

Interviewees viewed themselves as professionals committed to delivering a high quality service to the public, a number of whom were investing personally in acquiring the kind of

research skills they saw as enhancing their ability to do so more effectively. What was impeding them – and potentially impeding the development of police-academic partnerships – was not merely the ‘professionalization’ of the police, but the ‘McDonaldization’ of the police. This presents risks for police-academic partnerships, if careful attention is not paid to how the identification and prioritization of research, its conduct, and aspects of evaluation are managed and supported. This must be accompanied by open and transparent dialogue between police and academic partners. The quantification of research ‘outcomes’, ‘performances’ and ‘successes’ risks leaving inadequate room for learning and/or reflecting on what ‘*doesn’t work*’. It therefore presents real barriers to the construction and sustainability of partnerships.

Resilience for police forces today includes being *outward facing*, being able to engage in *longer-term thinking and planning*, and being allowed to take the kind of risks inherent in genuine *learning*. The barriers and drivers to collaboration are underpinned (both for police and academics) by economic forces and public management principles, promoted and privileged by evidence-based policing.

For a full version of the above see: Goode, J. and Lumsden, K. (2016) ‘The McDonaldisation of Police-Academic Partnerships: Moving from Research on Police to Research with Police’. *Policing & Society*. iFirst. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/22427821/The_McDonaldisation_of_police_academic_partnerships_organisational_and_cultural_barriers_encountered_in_moving_from_research_on_police_to_research_with_police

Biography

Dr Karen Lumsden is Senior Lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. She leads the Policing Research Group at Loughborough University and is the Academic Lead of the EMPAC Network – *Victims' Witnesses and Public Protection*. She is the author of a number of journal articles including in *Policing & Society* and *Policing*, and books including *Boy Racer Culture* (Routledge, 2013) and *Reflexivity in Criminological Research* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). You can follow her on Twitter @karenlumsden2 or @EMPACVictims