What works in policing? David Weisburd, Cody W. Telep, Joshua C. Hinkle, and John E. Eck (2010, this issue) sought to answer this core question in their review of problem-oriented policing. Herman Goldstein proposed the problem-oriented approach in 1979 as the means by which the police could achieve their objectives more effectively and, thereby, improve the overall police institution. Weisburd et al. set out to put the problem-oriented approach to the test some 30 years later. Given the ambitiousness of Goldstein’s proposal, it follows that Weisburd et al.’s study is equally ambitious and important. If problem-oriented policing is proven to work, then it would stand to reason that police and the local governments should commit to the approach more fully. If it is proven not to work, then reconsideration of the approach—either to better understand why it is not working or to pursue alternative approaches to policing—would be warranted.

Weisburd et al.’s (2010) overall conclusion was that reliable evidence, albeit modest in strength and limited in quantity, indicates that problem-oriented policing is an effective approach to reducing crime and disorder. Accordingly, they recommend that police agencies and government funding agencies alike maintain or strengthen their commitment to the problem-oriented policing approach.

As important and interesting as Weisburd et al.’s (2010) conclusions are, how they reached them is nearly equally so. Their study—a meta-analysis of problem-oriented studies and interventions—was conducted under the auspices and guidelines of the Campbell Collaboration (an international research network dedicated to reviewing the knowledge basis of the efficacy of social interventions in the criminal justice, education, and social welfare realms). The research guidelines of the Campbell Collaboration strongly favor experimental and quasi-experimental studies that include comparison groups and research designs that generally are regarded as yielding more reliable inferences about causal relationships than alternative research designs.
do. In the context of Weisburd et al.’s study, this process means proving that problem-oriented policing does or does not cause crime and disorder to decline. The research guidelines of the Campbell Collaboration permit the consideration of other research designs—which Weisburd et al. did—but such research designs are deemed less reliable and, therefore, inferior.

Given the rising interest in evidence-based practice among many professional fields—criminal justice included—the question of how we know what does and does not work is hugely interesting and important. Indeed, in a broader sense, few topics are more important or more interesting than what constitutes the basis for human knowledge. Weisburd et al.’s (2010) study stands then as a contribution to the age-old and perpetual exploration of the matter, albeit in the narrower context of modern policing.

As one reads Weisburd et al.’s (2010) article, the policy essays by Nick Tilley (2010, this issue) and Anthony A. Braga (2010, this issue), as well as this introduction, it is worth noting that whatever critiques are made of problem-oriented policing and of this study, all the writers in this volume undoubtedly would consider themselves among the leading proponents of the problem-oriented approach to policing. Accordingly, this volume constitutes less vehement debate among scholars with adversarial positions and viewpoints than a spirited exchange among scholars committed to problem-oriented policing. The theory and core principles of the problem-oriented approach to policing have been endorsed nearly universally by scholars; no scholar has argued that the approach is fundamentally flawed, which is remarkable in the scholarly world where debunking theories is the norm. Why problem-oriented policing has been spared such harsh criticism turns out to be important to understanding the discussion and critiques of this study.

Weisburd et al.’s (2010) study posited that it is logical and appropriate to evaluate the problem-oriented policing approach by determining the extent to which it can be proven that the approach has reduced crime and disorder. On this count, Weisburd et al. concluded in the (qualified) affirmative. To those of us heavily invested in problem-oriented policing, this result is indeed welcome. However, it is worth considering the possible implications if the conclusion of the study was negative—insufficient evidence that problem-oriented policing reduced crime and disorder. Would such a conclusion prove that the theory and principles of problem-oriented policing are wrong? Or would it prove that the application of the theory and principles in the cases studied was inadequate? Or would it prove that the metrics employed to detect an effect were flawed?

If one understands the problem-oriented approach to policing to be, in essence, a process theory about how police should seek to be effective rather than a substantive theory about what policing methods reduce crime and disorder, then it is easier to understand why the problem-oriented approach has received little criticism; it does not depend on its substantive outcomes to justify its processes, just as the scientific method is not judged on the specific outcomes of scientific experimentation. Indeed, the failure of the process to achieve specific outcomes reasonably could be understood as confirmation of the process theory’s validity; it
merely proved what did not work—a finding that might prove useful in the continuing search for what does work.

My own view is that the problem-oriented approach to policing should be measured not on the results of each application but rather on the degree to which its process and principles improve the prospects for more effective policing, particularly as compared with alternative policing approaches. As to applying the theory and principles to each discrete problem the police seek to address, I concur with Weisburd et al. (2010), Tilley (2010), and Braga (2010) that it is logical and appropriate to subject each theory application to as rigorous an outcome evaluation as possible or as is practical.

Weisburd et al.’s (2010), Tilley’s (2010), and Braga’s (2010) arguments and critiques regarding the relative merits of applied research methodology in the policing context speak well for themselves, and I encourage the reader to give them careful consideration. As one reflects on the particulars of this study and its critiques, one must also bear in mind that the police institution and the police research institution alike remain in the relatively early stages of developing a robust and rigorous evaluation tradition. Much work remains to be done to improve the capacity of police to undertake problem-oriented policing and of evaluators (internal and external) to assess it properly. It is hoped that Weisburd et al.’s study as well as Tilley and Braga’s policy essays will contribute to that goal.

References

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