



Evidence-based policy in a new era of crime and violence prevention and social justice

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ABSTRACT

The present state of calls for and efforts to implement evidence-based policy provide a powerful foundation for propelling a movement toward bringing about rational, cost-efficient, and humane policies for reducing aggression, crime, and violence. The main aim of this article is to report on new developments in evidence-based policy (EBP)—what we view as giving rise to a new era in crime and violence prevention and social justice. The article describes major advances, both in research and policy, and discusses pressing challenges that confront EBP in crime/violence and justice, drawing on key findings from a new, comprehensive book project. The overall conclusion of the findings is heartening and yet sobering. Research and policy have made substantial progress, but there is much more to be done. The specific details of this work are organized around three questions that are foundational to evidence-based crime/violence and justice policy today: (a) How is research contributing to and guiding EBP? (b) What are productive and new ways to think about EBP? and (c) What are strategies for promoting greater use of EBP?

1. Introduction

Crime and justice policy is at a crossroads.¹ While calls for and progress in developing effective programs, policies, and practices has occurred (Weisburd et al., 2016), there continues to be substantial investment in policies based on anecdote and political ideology (Mears, 2017). That has left communities and states with a patchwork of efforts, some effective and many not. Worse yet, some approaches may create harms rather than benefits (McCord, 2003). They also may waste resources (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2019) and divert attention away from pressing crime/violence policy issues (Mears, 2010), assisting victims (Herman, 2010), and preventing and reducing inequities in the treatment of different groups (Unnever & Gabbidon, 2011). More widespread identification and adoption of evidence-based policy (EBP) can happen, and it is needed, but it will not do so of its own accord.

EBP can be defined in different ways. We view EBP in the broadest sense possible, as including decision-making, informally or formally followed practices, rules, programs or interventions, laws, or informal or

formal policies that are grounded in credible theory and empirical research (Baba & HakemZadeh, 2012; Mears, 2010; Mears & Bacon, 2009; Rossi et al., 2004; Weiss et al., 2008). Some accounts restrict the notion of EBP to evidence of the effectiveness of a program in achieving a particular outcome. However, EBP can include agency decision-making, informal but routinized practices, laws, and more. It also can go well beyond evidence of effectiveness. For example, use of credible empirical research to demonstrate the need for a given practice, program, or the like, or to demonstrate its implementation with fidelity to how it was designed (see, generally, Rossi et al., 2004), can be viewed as constituting a form of EBP. Indeed, it would be odd to restrict EBP to evidence of effectiveness and ignore the problem of implementing unnecessary policies or failing to implement ones that are needed (Mears, 2010).

If we take seriously the voluminous body of scholarly and policy writings, it is clear that this ideal is indeed possible and can lead to desirable outputs and outcomes. What can be done to advance EBP and adoption of it? Answering that question and a logically prior one—What does the evidence-based movement have to show for three decades of

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¹ As a shorthand, we have used “crime and justice policy” throughout the article to capture the broader context of policies directed at crime/delinquency/criminal violence and criminal/juvenile justice. This is in keeping with similar usages in the field, including the Campbell Collaboration’s Crime and Justice Group.

incremental changes in preventing crime and violence and furthering social justice?—is a major focus of a new volume on the subject (Welsh, Zane, & Mears, 2024). This article draws on the volume to discuss leading efforts that have been implemented in the United States and across the Western world.

As a prelude, we note that an example of an area of substantial progress in EBP comes from the larger literature on juvenile justice interventions. In a recent—and longstanding—debate over brand-name or commercially developed evidence-based programs, often represented by Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development (see www.blueprintsprograms.org), compared with a more generalized strategies model, known as the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP), we learn that both of these approaches (sometimes working in concert) have achieved wide scale implementation and yielded rather impressive individual-, community-, and, in some cases, system-level impacts on aggression and criminal violence (Elliott et al., 2020; Lipsey, 2020; see also Welsh & Greenwood, 2015; Welsh et al., 2014). In brief, Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development is an online clearinghouse or registry dedicated to identifying and disseminating evidence-based programs to prevent youth violence and other behavioral problems (Fagan & Buchanan, 2016). The SPEP is a model or framework that draws upon the results of large-scale meta-analyses to provide generalized strategies for improving existing practices to prevent and treat criminal behavior (Lipsey, 2020).

In addition to the impacts of these different approaches in delivering evidence-based interventions for serious, chronic, and violent juvenile offenders, it is important to reflect on the wider context of the evidence-based movement. As has been noted: “it is quite an achievement that we have reached a state of intervention science and implementation science where we can begin to evaluate the merits of alternative models for delivering effective, economically efficient, and humane interventions to improve the life chances of young people who have come in conflict with the law” (Welsh, 2020, p. 1348).

At the same time, there is a good amount of work to be done to address any number of challenges that confront an evidence-based approach, whether it is applied in the context of juvenile justice or crime and justice more broadly. This includes, for example, exposing and countering the for-profit panderers and political rhetoric (everything is “evidence-based”; Greenwood, 2006), completing the work to make implementation science evidence-based (an effort that is well underway; Fixsen et al., 2017; Fixsen et al., 2013), ensuring a high degree of rigor and transparency in registries of evidence-based programs (Fagan & Buchanan, 2016), overcoming the obstacles to scale-up evidence-based programs to achieve population-level impacts (Fagan et al., 2019), and promoting greater use of EBPs when there is a need for them (Mears, 2010). In many respects, this is some of the hard work that is needed to make the ideal of an evidence-based approach a reality, in addition to making it sustainable over time.

Against this backdrop, then, the main aim of this article is to report on new developments in evidence-based crime and justice policy—what we view as giving rise to a new era in crime and violence prevention and social justice. The article describes major advances, both in research and policy, and discusses pressing challenges that confront EBP in crime and justice, drawing on key findings from *The Oxford Handbook of Evidence-Based Crime and Justice Policy* (Welsh, Zane & Mears, 2024). It is organized around three questions that are foundational to evidence-based crime and justice policy today: (a) How is research contributing to and guiding EBP? (b) What are productive and new ways to think about EBP? and (c) What are strategies for promoting greater use of EBP?

2. How is research contributing to and guiding evidence-based policy?

It goes without saying that research serves as the foundation of EBP. This is true for EBP in crime and justice, medicine, agriculture, and so on. Without a research base we cannot begin to talk seriously about

policy that claims to be evidence-based. As noted above, this can be in sharp contrast to policymaking more broadly, whereby, the hope is that research will be used in the development of public policies, but it is all too often the case that research is ignored or altogether absent from the process. It is also important to emphasize that an evidence-based approach privileges rigorous or high-quality research designs (observational and evaluation); not all research is methodologically sound, free of bias, or implemented with integrity, a theme to which we return in more detail further below. Closely tied to this is the need for research designs to be guided by the research questions being investigated, not the other way around.

This brings us to the question that is the focus of this section: How is research contributing to and guiding EBP in crime and justice? In addressing this question, we are guided by a handful of important themes drawn from the book project (Welsh, Zane & Mears, 2024). It is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Instead, the themes capture the state of knowledge of and pressing challenges facing evidence-based crime and justice policy today.

2.1. Expanding what works and advancing knowledge on conditions for effectiveness

Research is contributing to and guiding EBP by identifying more and more policies and programs that can be effective and identifying the conditions under which they can be effective. One of the most well-evaluated areas is policing. In their chapter on evidence-based policing, Lum and Koper (2024) document the alternatives to the standard policing model that have emerged over the past 50 years, some of which have been rigorously evaluated and shown to reduce and prevent property and violent crime. We know, for example, that “when police proactively target specific high-crime places or high-risk people with problem-solving and deterrence measures, they can reduce crime at those places or among those individuals” (Lum & Koper, 2024, p. 252).

Evidence-based corrections, as shown by Rocque (2024), has also been the subject of much research attention. Most notably, there is now a substantial body of high-quality research indicating that correctional programs that adhere to the “risk-need-responsivity” paradigm are most effective at reducing recidivism. Cognitive-behavioral therapy stands out as a treatment model that has been shown to be effective across multiple correctional contexts. Research has also shown that some correctional treatments do not work or may even cause harm, such as punitive deterrence-based approaches (e.g., boot camps) and increased (or more intense) supervision without additional programmatic support. Importantly, there is substantial variation in the effectiveness of correctional programs, in some cases owing to implementation fidelity but in other cases owing to individual responsivity, where identifying appropriate treatments for individual clients represents a “complex task.”

EBPs are perhaps most visible in the juvenile justice system, where the treatment-oriented mission of the juvenile court has made this focus a key priority. In their chapter on evidence-based innovations in juvenile probation, for example, Myers and Orts (2024) document the many evidence-based programs that have been adopted for the juvenile justice system's workhouse—community supervision. High-quality impact evaluations conducted over the past several decades have produced a knowledge base that shows, demonstrably, that some programs can effectively reduce juvenile recidivism. Most notably this involves four “model” Blueprints programs (e.g., Multisystemic Therapy), which “have a deep and broad evaluation evidence base, with additional evidence they can be ‘scaled-up’ and still maintain their effectiveness” (Myers & Orts, 2024, p. 166). As with evidence-based corrections, a central insight to guide these programs going forward is the risk-needs-responsivity principle.

2.2. Focusing on systems of change to generate population-level impacts

Research is also contributing to and guiding EBP through (a) an improved understanding of the need for and (b) assessments of real-world examples of system-wide changes that are striving for population-level impacts (Mears, 2017). One view holds that systems of change for population-level impacts should be the prime objective of an evidence-based approach; anything less is not able to deliver lasting improvements to society (Dodge & Mandel, 2012). Currently, there are a growing number of examples of systems of change—taking place at different units of analysis (e.g., state, region, country)—that are beginning to produce population-level impacts.

The volume profiles two states that are leading the way on this front: Washington and Pennsylvania.² Just focusing on Washington State, beginning in the 1990s, the legislature has made significant investments to develop an evidence-based juvenile justice system and for more than two decades the state has required juvenile courts to use evidence-based programs (e.g., multisystemic therapy, functional family therapy) to address the needs of juvenile offenders and reduce recidivism. (The state has also rolled out evidence-based prevention services for children and youth and treatment services for adult offenders who are at risk for offending or further involvement in the juvenile or criminal justice system.) The Washington State Institute for Public Policy, the non-partisan research arm of the legislature, has been central to this effort, conducting evaluations and benefit-cost analyses of programs and policies.

Communities That Care (CTC) can also be considered a system of change, and this is the focus of a chapter by Fagan (2024). CTC is an empirically based approach (also referred to as an “operating system”) that aids communities in implementing evidence-based interventions targeting risk and protective factors to prevent delinquency, substance abuse, and violence. The scope of interventions is wide ranging, from early developmental prevention programs for children to community interventions with youth who are at high risk for offending or further justice system involvement. CTC provides community coalitions with a structured process, training, and consultation to improve their knowledge, adoption, and high-quality implementation of evidence-based interventions. Importantly, CTC is itself an evidence-based system—a product of a randomized controlled trial (RCT) and multiple quasi-experimental evaluations demonstrating its ability to increase the use of evidence-based interventions and reduce youth problem behaviors across the U.S. and in other countries.³

While system changes for an entire country are far less common, the volume reports on Norway's experience in adopting, implementing, and scaling-up the evidence-based early prevention intervention known as Parent Management Training—the Oregon model (or PMTO). This is the focus of a chapter by Ogden et al. (2024). Designed for children who are at risk for antisocial or delinquent behavior (ages 3–12 years) and their parents and tested through a series of randomized controlled trials, PMTO has produced significant and sustained improvements in parenting and child externalizing behavior for a wide range of groups across all regions of Norway. Key to the intervention's effectiveness has been the maintenance of high treatment fidelity across generations of therapists.

² This is the focus of chapters by Drake and Knoth-Peterson (2024) and Peck et al. (2024), respectively.

³ PROSPER (Promoting School-Community-University Partnerships to Enhance Resilience) is another example of a practitioner-scientist partnership model designed to aid communities in implementing evidence-based interventions targeting risk and protective factors to prevent conduct problems, delinquency, and substance abuse (see Redmond et al., 2009; Spoth et al., 2015).

2.3. Advancing social justice and prioritizing equity

One of the major concerns with population-level impacts of EBP, as Schindler (2024) observes, is that such impacts are not *equitable*. Relatedly, there is the important question whether evidence-based practices are advancing the goal of social justice. Notably, there is a possible concern that narrowly conceived EBP may incentivize “statistical significance over meaningful change, average impacts over discovering subpopulation impacts, and rigidity in implementation over flexibility and cultural relevance” (Schindler, 2024, p. 77).

As a general matter, as Ross et al. (2024) describe in their review of evidence-based practices for preventing urban street violence, there is a need to understand that certain communities “face unique challenges, such as resource deprivation (e.g., food deserts) and service access (e.g., transportation), as a result of historic systemic issues (e.g., redlining, poverty)” (p. 459). Their account echoes those of a broader literature that highlights different ways in which systematic or structural discrimination affects certain groups, including African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and underserved communities (see, generally, Buckley et al., 2023; Hirsch et al., 2023; Murry et al., 2022). This larger point about historical and structural injustice must inform the application of evidence-based models, such as the need to consider unique cultural experiences of certain groups when thinking about risk and protective factors. As an example of this, the authors point out that while poverty can be considered a “risk factor,” doing so itself risks ignoring barriers to resources and overall systemic marginalization facing such “at risk” youth. Sanders et al. (2024) echo these arguments in their discussion of the unique experiences and challenges (including discrimination) faced by diverse groups of criminal justice populations, including African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, individuals in poverty, women, juveniles, and other historically marginalized groups.

In terms of specific programs, one important consideration is that evidence-based programs are not typically developed by members of the communities in which they are implemented, possibly creating a disconnect between the programs and those they are intended to serve. Going forward, Schindler (2024, p. 83) suggests that EBP must “pay particular attention to the historical and present social, political, and cultural contexts in which the program is being implemented.” Indeed, one concern, and a point of debate, is the extent to which EBP mandates might indirectly contribute to further marginalization of groups and communities that have experienced persistent disadvantage and discrimination, and who have had little direct involvement in producing knowledge about what is needed or effective for groups or communities like them. This concern is not readily addressed by increased EBP but rather by greater involvement of affected groups and communities (Mears & Frost, 2024). Doing so can ensure attention to ways in which EBP must rest on a process that can produce relevant insights and that will be recognized as such. This notion is captured in part by Schindler's discussion of the importance of *legitimacy*, a topic that is addressed by Tankebe and Bottoms (2024). Research indicates that distrust of the criminal justice system can arise from perceptions of “distributive injustice,” or that some persons or communities are treated differently by those holding power. Focusing only on “what works” can ignore the full distributive consequences of certain programs, practices, and policies, especially for those with less access to resources.

While many of the above concerns relate to macro-level themes of social justice and equity in terms of how EBP might be applied to certain communities, there is also the matter of how evidence-based programs may themselves *produce* disparities that are masked by a focus on average effectiveness. In her chapter on reducing social inequality through EBP, for example, Rodriguez (2024, p. 514) highlights that “juvenile court actors view family functioning, including family support and cooperation as most influential in informing court outcomes.” Evidence-based practices may focus on the predictive validity of risks and needs assessment for such youth, but may not focus sufficiently on

the possibly racialized attributions of family structure and family supervision that inform such assessments (see, e.g., [Bridges & Steen, 1998](#)).

There is also the concern that an overly technocratic evidence-based approach may actually widen the scope of criminal justice in a way that fails to advance social justice. The concern with “net-widening” in diversion presents one such example. [Smith \(2024\)](#) argues that diversion is a *philosophy* as much as a (potentially) EBP. More specifically, it is a philosophy of offense resolution through community problem-solving and system change that prioritizes the reduction of overall social harm. This broader question—whether youth diversion has a positive impact on the community—requires that we step back and apply “the wider test of whether and to what extent diversion can and does contribute to the achievement of social justice and the reduction of social harm” ([Smith, 2024](#), p. 154).

2.4. Applying economic analyses

Integral to an evidence-based approach is consideration of value for money or economic efficiency (also referred to as cost efficiency). It is one thing for a program or policy to lower crime rates, lead to improvements in other important life-course outcomes (e.g., education, employment, mental health), or bring about more socially just or equitable outcomes for marginalized and disadvantaged populations. It is quite another matter if these desirable effects translate into cost savings—for government, program participants, crime victims, other parties (public or private), or society at-large. A key point to note here is that, despite a great deal of wishful thinking on the part of some decision-makers, there is not a one-to-one relationship between program effectiveness and economic efficiency. For example, some effective programs require large capital or operating expenditures that can dwarf any monetary benefits associated with desirable effects over the short-, medium-, or even long-term. It is also the case that knowledge about value for money can go a long way to obtaining and sustaining support for as well as improving evidence-based programs and policies. It cannot be overstated that some of the political and policy interest in EBP is driven by the potential for cost savings.

A fair and reliable assessment of the monetary value of a program or policy begins with an economic analysis. An economic analysis (e.g., cost-benefit, cost-effectiveness) can be described as a policy tool that allows choices to be made between alternative uses of resources or alternative distributions of services ([Knapp, 1997](#)). Increased application of economic analyses is contributing to and guiding EBP. Exhibit A of this work is the cost-benefit model that is guiding Washington State's evidence-based initiative. So important is this work to EBP that it has now been adopted by 26 other states in the U.S. and in some other countries.

Several chapters in the volume examine the role of economic analyses in contributing to and guiding EBP. Other recent research on developmental crime and violence prevention, mental health interventions in criminal justice, and correctional treatment ([Knapp & Wong, 2023](#); [Koegl et al., 2023](#); [Zane et al., 2023](#)) captures the growing application of economic analyses and its contribution to EBP. In the context of crime prevention effects of video surveillance cameras in public and private places, [Piza \(2024\)](#) draws attention to the need for greater application of cost-benefit analyses to allow for consideration of both its absolute and relative economic impact. We need to know how the monetary value of camera systems compare with other situational crime prevention techniques that are competing for scarce public resources. [Welsh, Paterson, and Farrington \(2024\)](#) examine the extent to which early prevention provides economic returns to society and whether the returns make it a more worthwhile policy alternative to imprisonment. Based on the highest quality research evidence, the authors find clear and substantial support for policy options that emphasize early prevention and limit the use of imprisonment. The findings also demonstrate that the economic returns of early prevention

compared to imprisonment are sizable, wide-ranging (i.e., cascading over multiple domains), and long-lasting, with some studies showing economic benefits accruing well into midlife.

2.5. Understanding and overcoming institutional resistance to change

In his seminal work on evidence-based policing, which drew heavily on the experiences of evidence-based medicine, [Sherman \(1998\)](#) discussed the grave and persistent challenge presented by institutional (or a culture of) resistance to change—even in medicine, a field that had long been (and still is) viewed as the promised land of EBP (but see [Millenson, 2021](#)). This remains a serious challenge to adopting and implementing evidence-based programs and policies in crime and justice today. The good news is that some research—through an improved understanding of the problem and efforts to address it—is beginning to contribute to and guide EBP. In no small measure, this is part of a longstanding research program on understanding how research influences policy (see [Weiss et al., 2008](#); [Zane & Welsh, 2018](#)).

Efforts to overcome institutional resistance begin with building receptivity to research and institutionalizing evidence-based practice. Evidence-based policing is at the forefront of this work. [Lum and Koper \(2024\)](#) argue that receptivity and institutionalization are closely connected in evidence-based policing. The authors also make clear that “receptivity goes beyond winning the hearts and minds of police officers about evidence-based policing. It is inextricably linked with research implementation and institutionalization, specifically the development of agency infrastructure to facilitate receptivity and implementation of evidence-based practices” ([Lum & Koper, 2024](#), p. 255).

Receptivity and institutionalization are also deeply woven into Norway's evidence-based initiative and the state-wide evidence-based initiatives in Washington State and Pennsylvania (and closely tied to the application of CTC in the latter). In the case of Pennsylvania, one of the important lessons learned is the need to involve stakeholders early on to support and sustain a culture and infrastructure of evidence-based practice.

3. What are productive and new ways to think about evidence-based policy?

The discussion to this point has highlighted good news—EBP is occurring across a wide range of criminal justice and alternative approaches. What, though, is next? As researchers and the policymaking and practitioner community move forward, what are productive and new ways to think about EBP that may advance both research and policy? Here again, a number of themes can be identified and demonstrate the vitality of the EBP movement.

3.1. Rely on the evaluation hierarchy to guide the development and evaluation of policy

Despite substantial advances in EBP, the fact remains that far too much policy lacks any grounding in credible research and goes unevaluated ([Mears, 2010, 2022](#)). One productive way to correct this situation is to institutionalize reliance on what [Rossi et al. \(2004\)](#) termed the evaluation hierarchy. That entails the creation of research capacity among law enforcement, courts, and corrections agencies, as well as legislatures, with a focus on five inter-related questions. First, what exactly is the social problem and what is its size and location? Second, what theoretical or causal logic guides the policy? Third, how well implemented is the policy? Fourth, what is its impact? That is, how effective is it? And, fifth, how cost-efficient is the policy, and what is its cost-efficiency relative to alternatives?

The logic of the hierarchy is simple—do not proceed with a policy response until you know exactly what problem you are seeking to address, how large that problem is, and where it is located. Skipping this step can result in action bias, where policymakers or practitioners

implement programs, interventions, or the like, but do so without a research-based foundation. That can result in ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Given a problem that may warrant addressing, we need a credible theoretical logic, and empirical research on its assumptions, for designing a policy. Creating policies that ignore extant theory and research, and that builds on incorrect assumptions, gives rise to ineffectiveness and inefficiency as well. If the policy is well-designed, we can proceed to implement it, but want to document that the implementation aligns with what was intended. Given full and quality implementation, it then makes sense to evaluate whether the policy produces intended impacts and avoids potential harms. Not least, if the policy is found to be effective, we then would want to identify the return on investment by evaluating the policy's benefits relative to its costs, and how the policy's cost-efficiency compares to others.

The need for relying on the evaluation hierarchy can be seen in many of the book's chapters. [Fixsen et al. \(2024\)](#), for example, highlight the critical importance of a science of implementation, one that provides guidance on how we can ensure full and quality implementation of diverse policies. Even the best-designed program will fail if poorly implemented. Yet, all-too-frequently, research places a priority on assessing impact, not systematically identifying what contributes to implementation. This theme surfaces in [Smith's \(2024\)](#) account of diversion as well. With diversion, we can see clearly, too, the importance of assessing need. One critique of many diversion programs is that they contribute to net-widening, that is, intervention in cases that do not require it and that, as a result, achieve little and increase costs. Importantly, these examples underscore the importance of using the hierarchy not just to evaluate policy but also to guide it. As [Butts et al. \(2024\)](#) emphasize, it is not helpful to take identified EBPs "off the shelf" and apply them willy-nilly. Far more effective can be to use research to identify the nature and causes of crime/violence or justice problems, as well as to design and test ideas for what may be needed and effective in particular contexts or for specific groups or populations.

One way that research is contributing to and guiding EBP is through a concerted effort to better understand the need for prevention interventions and how they are crucial to bringing about social change without involvement of the formal justice system. Here, then, is another benefit of the hierarchy—it can lead policymakers to attend more to crime and violence prevention. A substantial amount of discussions about EBP center on interventions for individuals who have already committed crime and have been convicted. Many of the chapters indirectly implicate this idea. [Lum and Koper \(2024\)](#), for example, describe new approaches to law enforcement, such as problem-oriented policing, that include efforts to proactively address crime and violence by policing places rather than people. At the same time, it is clear that such approaches generally constitute the exception rather than the norm. If our goal is to increase public safety by reducing crime and violence, the hierarchy asks us to examine the causes of this problem. That necessarily leads to thinking about and addressing a wide variety of social conditions that contribute to crime rates and that require an emphasis on preventive rather than reactive policies.

3.2. Monitor and improve policy implementation

Implementation is essential for accountability and effectiveness, as both the evaluation hierarchy and [Fixsen et al. \(2024\)](#) highlight. If taxpayer dollars are to be used appropriately, they should not just support EBPs; they need to be implemented with fidelity to their design. For example, a drug court is supposed to provide a certain amount of supervision and drug treatment or testing. These actions should occur. The accountability is important in its own right. It also has direct implications for justice. We typically want to ensure that a policy is implemented in an equitable manner and that it does not inadvertently advantage some groups and simultaneously disadvantage others. For example, [Sanders et al. \(2024\)](#), [Kosc and Kirk's \(2024\)](#) discussion of reentry initiatives, and [Rodriguez's \(2024\)](#) account of social inequality

in criminal justice highlight the real and present risk of discriminatory or unfair ways that policy is implemented or used.

Implementation constitutes the third step in the evaluation hierarchy. Because of its importance for accountability and justice, it arguably warrants special consideration. There are, though, additional reasons for prioritizing it. As many of the chapters highlight, poor implementation frequently occurs. Without fidelity to policy or program design, we almost always end up with a failure to produce intended impacts (see, e.g., [Drake & Knoth-Peterson, 2024](#); [Rocque, 2024](#); [Kosc & Kirk, 2024](#); [Butts et al., 2024](#)). Without sustained and high-quality implementation, we are left with large-scale policy ineffectiveness, and that is true even if we rely on policies that have repeatedly been found to be effective under a variety of conditions.

There is an additional reason for systematically monitoring and evaluating implementation. As [Telep \(2024\)](#) identifies, an emerging body of work on translational criminology underscores the critical importance of identifying ways to build policy that can realistically, in real-world settings, align with theory and research. For that to occur, two ingredients—a science of implementation and institutionalized mechanisms for monitoring implementation and identifying ways to improve it—are essential for contributing to accountability and effective policy. A third ingredient, incorporating insights from those responsible for or affected by a policy, also is important (see [Mears & Frost, 2024](#)). Front-line prison officers, for example, may have unique insights about factors that affect the implementation of a given program, and so, too, may incarcerated persons who might be eligible for the program. Ultimately, improved implementation contributes to accountability and policy effectiveness.

3.3. Continue efforts to identify effective policies

Of course, a central concern lies with identifying policies that can be effective. We need much more work that generates the equivalent of a library of policies that can be effective, and have been so identified through high-quality impact evaluations. Despite being an obvious point, evidence-based crime/violence and justice policy simply is not possible without a high-quality evidence base. Of course, high-quality evidence is not sufficient on its own, but it is necessary for producing desired improvements in public safety and justice.

Unfortunately, many "evidence-based" interventions still rely on non-experimental or weak quasi-experimental evidence where selection bias is a serious threat to internal validity. This is a point emphasized throughout the volume. In response to this situation, more RCTs and high-quality quasi-experimental design studies (e.g., those that take advantage of naturally-occurring experiments) with high internal validity are needed to establish what works, what does not work, and what is harmful ([Welsh et al., 2013](#)). Such work needs to prioritize inclusion of effect sizes, not simply whether a program was found to be effective. Without greater rigor and reliance on strong evaluation designs, "evidence-based" phrasing can become a misleading marketing slogan rather than an accurate indicator of extant research.

3.4. Identify conditions of effectiveness and potential conditional effects across groups or areas

A central theme across many of the chapters is that even the most effective policies may only be effective under certain conditions. As we discussed above that insight stands as one of the central ways that research has contributed to and guided EBP to date. This insight, though, is essential for thinking more broadly about EBP. More pointedly, we can improve policy by creating knowledge about (a) the conditions under which policies are effective, and (b) the extent to which they are more or less effective for some groups or in some areas.

For all stakeholder groups—policymakers, agency officials, the public, and researchers—a productive approach to improving EBP is to identify the conditions that must be present for policies to be effective.

This approach can lead to better targeting of policies in ways that may increase their effectiveness. Relying on the evaluation hierarchy can aid in this effort. For example, as a general matter, full and quality implementation constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition for policy effectiveness. Policymakers frequently enact laws or fund programs under the assumption that implementation will not be problematic, but all-too-frequently these assumptions are incorrect, leading to ineffectiveness and wasted resources.

Beyond thinking about the conditions under which a policy is effective, there are benefits to thinking about conditional effects. This approach requires moving beyond estimating average effects of a given policy or program. An effective policy might, for example, produce a reduction in officer use of excessive force. That average effect is just that, an average. It can mask variation, such as the possibility that the program has much greater effects for certain groups or in certain areas. [Rocque \(2024\)](#)'s discussion of rehabilitative programs, and how they may be effective for groups at high risk for crime or justice system involvement and potentially iatrogenic for groups at low risk for crime or justice system involvement, illustrates that this possibility is not hypothetical. [Lum and Koper \(2024\)](#)'s discussion of evidence-based policing illustrates that the point holds for areas as well. For example, a particular policing strategy may be effective, "on average," but it may be especially effective in areas where positive relationships between the police and citizens exist. [Tankebe and Bottoms' \(2024\)](#) account of legitimacy further underscores that policing strategies may well vary in their effectiveness depending on the level of trust or perceived legitimacy among residents in particular areas. Not least, [Mitchell's \(2024\)](#) survey of incarceration-based interventions points to a similar idea—namely, treatments may vary in their effectiveness.

Thinking carefully about conditional effects also can be used to identify and address potential disparities. For example, if research shows that a policy reduces crime or violence in predominantly white neighborhoods but has little impact in neighborhoods with larger concentrations of racial or ethnic minority groups or individuals, policymakers and practitioners would know that steps must be taken to modify the policy in the latter areas if commensurate crime/violence reductions are to occur.

Researchers can play a critical role in promoting efforts to systematically consider conditional effects. Unfortunately, graduate school training and an emphasis on parsimony can lead scholars to focus on net effects and avoid examining conditional effects. Why? Our theories frequently do not anticipate conditional effects and looking for these effects is viewed by some as counter to the general axiom that the simplest, most parsimonious explanations are best. This perspective puts up blinders and leads to a failure to consider what may happen in the real world, such as the possibility that policies and programs do not have only one effect. They instead may have variable effects. Accordingly, researchers can lead the way in encouraging policymakers to consider, when designing the study, how the policy may affect different groups or areas. Researchers can lead the way as well in undertaking studies that empirically evaluate these possibilities.

3.5. Listen to front-line practitioners and those directly affected by policies

There is an unfortunate tendency among policymakers and criminal justice agency officials to take a top-down approach and devise policy from "on high," without considering the views of front-line practitioners or those who likely will be directly affected by the policy. This problem may be obscured when at least some passing reference is made to these groups, but that does not alter the fact that the policymakers or officials may not have a representative sampling of perspectives of those on the front line or most affected by the policy. A similar and also unfortunate tendency can be seen in many policy evaluation studies. For example, researchers assume that they understand the policy—its theory and logic, the factors that affect implementation or selection effects or the

like, and so on—and undertake a study.

[Mears and Frost \(2024\)](#) highlight the benefits of listening to the front-line personnel and talking to members of the public and others most directly affected by the policy. This approach can result in critical insights about what might be causing the particular social problem to be addressed, as well as lead to insights about ways to address that problem. It can also lead to insights about challenges that may arise in attempting to implement the policy. Importantly, it can facilitate greater trust and perceived legitimacy among all stakeholder groups in the process, findings, and proposed solutions, and ensure that research and EBPs are culturally appropriate. Not least, it can help researchers to identify critical dimensions that should be considered in an evaluation of policy implementation or impact. [Schindler's \(2024\)](#) account of systems-level change and equity, and [Sanders et al.'s \(2024\)](#) discussion of the experiences of diverse criminal justice populations, further underscores the importance of a "bottom-up" perspective. Not only can this approach improve policy design, implementation, and effectiveness, it also can contribute to and promote equity by ensuring that the voices of different groups help contribute to and shape policy and its evaluation.

3.6. Prioritize efforts to respond to and support victims

It remains the case that the United States has a criminal, not a victim, justice system. Despite advances in assisting victims of crime, there remains a substantial need to improve efforts to respond to and support individuals who have been victimized. [Turanovic et al. \(2024\)](#) highlight this issue and identify promising avenues for improving victim-responsive services. Many victims do not report crime or know that services exist for them. Addressing this situation constitutes an obvious priority area. In addition, there are principles that can guide efforts to improve victim support. [Turanovic et al. \(2024\)](#) discuss such principles as being responsive as early as possible, providing a coordinated response that links services from different agencies and organizations, listening to and collaborating with victims, relying on trauma-informed and victim-centered services, being culturally competent, and emphasizing confidentiality. Other scholars have echoed these arguments and call for systemic approaches that institutionalize a victim-oriented approach to justice and serving victims (see, e.g., [Herman, 2010](#); [Mears & Cochran, 2015](#)).

4. What are strategies for promoting greater use of evidence-based policy?

Building on what we know about current use of EBP, along with new and productive ways to think about EBP, we argue that a number of concrete and general strategies should be pursued to promote greater use of EBP.

4.1. Prioritize evidence-based policy, but acknowledge what is and is not known

Perhaps most important, is a general strategy to reframe major criminal justice policy issues and debates in terms of the best available evidence and point toward areas where more and better evidence is needed. While many, perhaps most, people share the goals of reducing gun violence, scaling back on mass incarceration, and reducing racial disproportionality in the juvenile justice system, among others, high-quality evidence regarding how to do so is sufficiently limited that public debate over these issues often produces more heat than light.

The first step to addressing these persistent social problems with an evidence-based approach is to acknowledge our limited knowledge, and to proceed with humility but also with resolute focus. Calls for criminal justice system reform have become ubiquitous. But not all of these calls are created equal—and some may be as motivated by political ideology and even "quackery" as the flawed systems they wish to replace. It is thus critical that system reform be solidly grounded in an evidence-

based approach. This includes commitment on the part of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to establishing and relying upon the most rigorous evidence in responding to social problems. It also may require an institutionalized commitment to the evaluation hierarchy described above—ensuring that system resources are efficiently allocated based on empirically-based assessments of the problems being addressed.

4.2. Invest in data

A second, and related, strategy: invest in the collection and management of high-quality data to inform decision-making. The logic here is straightforward. To respond to social problems, it is necessary to understand them. In turn, to understand them requires that we are properly measuring them. This strategy aligns with the oft-ignored “needs” prong of the evaluation hierarchy—what is the size and scope of the problem we are addressing? As one example, [Rodríguez \(2024, p. 518\)](#) suggests that better metrics are needed on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity “to both document the scope of inequality as experienced by these groups and target responses to reduce such inequality.” In the area of gun violence, as [Donohue \(2024, p. 571\)](#) describes, “there are challenges in the effort to provide high-quality research that can generate sound evidence-based policy to address firearm violence.” Short of randomized experiments, research on large-scale policy impacts must thus find creative ways to “estimate[.] the counterfactual” with observational data and quasi-experimental approaches ([Cook & Donohue, 2017, p. 1261](#)). Data issues also plague research on racial disproportionalities in the criminal justice system, as [Zane \(2024a\)](#) documents, where most observational research suffers from omitted variable bias and sample selection issues.

Not only in the areas of gun violence and racial disparities, but also in many others, most research to date does not clearly answer fundamental questions about what causes the problems or what policies will be most effective and cost-efficient in addressing them. A crucial strategy to rectify this situation involves the collection of original data that addresses specific research questions—rather than the typical reliance on administrative data (see [Baumer, 2013](#)). Returning to one of the examples above, we know that racial disproportionalities in the juvenile justice system largely involve differences in system referral—yet most archival data involves only post-referral processing. No shortcut exists: more data is needed.

Administrative data is routinely collected by criminal justice agencies, but typically tell us nothing about the actual decision-making of criminal justice officials. Again, more data is needed. One of the obstacles here involves how social scientists are trained. The emphasis on publishing research in order to get hired and promoted “creates pressure for faculty to ‘publish or perish,’ which in turn creates a premium on using extant data sets rather than collecting original data.” As a result, graduate students and early career researchers “have little experiential learning in how to create original data” ([Mears & Frost, 2024, p. 659](#)). In addition to the need for collecting original data, there is a need to leverage naturally occurring “big data,” as argued by [O’Brien \(2024\)](#). There is a need to shift focus from the size of data sets to the “naturally occurring” origins of the data, which frequently include non-research processes and systems. Such data are “generated incidentally by digital administrative systems,” resulting in “large, detailed, and rich” sources of information that “could rarely be studied in such scale by intentional data collection efforts” ([O’Brien, 2024, p. 599](#)). Both kinds of data—original and “big”—represent important components of the more complete evidence base that is needed to address the many crime/violence and justice issues where high-quality data is lacking.

4.3. Mandate evidence-based programs

A third strategy to promote greater use of evidence-based policy involves legally mandating the consideration or use of proven evidence-

based programs. As described by [Zane \(2024b\)](#) the “imposed use” path to research utilization has gained in popularity of late. As of 2017, 24 states have “developed a framework of laws to support their actions” with respect to evidence-based policymaking in the context of their criminal justice systems ([Pew, 2017, p. 29](#)). Similarly, as of 2017, 16 states have developed similar legal frameworks for their juvenile justice systems. And states can “impose use” of evidence-based programs and practices in a variety of ways.

At one end of the spectrum, some states mandate the use of evidence-based programs within their justice systems. Other states have imposed evidence-based programs less directly, requiring that a certain amount of funding must be dedicated to evidence-based programs. Some states have elected to direct special funding toward evidence-based programs, sometimes in the form of grants, while others have restricted or eliminated funding for ineffective programs. Several states require agencies to create inventories of funded programs according to evidence of effectiveness, but do not necessarily require use of evidence-based programs. Also, many states encourage the use of evidence-based programs and practices in criminal or juvenile justice—without creating legal mandates, funding requirements, or even financial incentives for doing so. Finally, this practice is now being actively encouraged by the federal government in its promotion of evidence-based policymaking, such as the bipartisan Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act of 2018 ([Ellor, 2024](#)).

This situation can be perceived as a promising sign that more policymakers are recognizing the importance of pursuing evidence-based policies in criminal and juvenile justice, such that these statutory requirements reflect a commitment to scientific research informing the policy process. Advocating for laws and regulations that require the use of research in a variety of justice system programs and practices may thus be an effective strategy for increasing evidence-based policy at the state and local level.

4.4. Pursue system-level reforms that prioritizes a strong evidence base

Finally, and responding to one of the limitations of imposing use of specific evidence-based program and practices, is the need to pursue system-level reform that promotes evidence-based crime/violence and justice policy more generally (see [Mears, 2017](#)). One possibility is performance monitoring. This represents a fruitful avenue for making sustained improvements to justice systems beyond intervention programs ([Mears & Butts, 2008](#)). Another related but more ambitious possibility would be for states to commit, not only to using evidence-based programs and practices, but also to evaluating their entire systems in terms of needs, theory, implementation, outcomes, and cost efficiency—possibly involving new institutions charged with coordinating and evaluating state justice systems ([Mears, 2019](#)). As [Mears \(2010, 2017\)](#) has suggested, perhaps 5 % of all program funding could be dedicated toward systems evaluation research. For example, [Mears and Cochran \(2024\)](#) argue that lawmakers and criminal justice and correctional systems would do well to systematically align practice with rhetoric. This shift will require a political and economic commitment to creating the research infrastructure necessary for generating credible research that can ground all aspects of policy. Taking EBPs to scale requires the capacity to undertake need, theory, implementation, impact, and efficiency evaluations of existing policies and programs and proposed ones.

5. Conclusions

Evidence-based policy is here to stay, as indicated by the increased state and federal support for taking evidence seriously in the design and implementation of programs, practices, and policies.⁴ In this article, we have reported on key findings from a volume dedicated to charting a path for a new generation of EBP-focused research and efforts to promote greater use of EBP in crime/violence and justice. The overall conclusion is heartening and yet sobering. Research and policy have made substantial progress, but there is much more to be done. First, we need more research on what works, scaling up EBP to generate systems changes with population-level impacts, identifying evidence-based policies that can advance social justice and equity, conducting economic analyses that contextualize the benefits of effective initiatives, and understanding and overcoming institutional resistance to change. Moreover, beyond crime and justice, there is a need to foster meaningful and sustained collaboration between the research and policy communities to ensure lawmakers' use of scientific evidence (Crowley et al., 2021), as well as efforts to better understand the use of research evidence in the legislative process more broadly (Haskins, 2018; Scott et al., 2022).

Second, a variety of options exist to think about evidence-based crime and justice policy, going beyond simply identifying “what works,” including: relying on the evaluation hierarchy to identify policy need and to develop and evaluate policy design, implementation, impacts, and cost-efficiency; monitoring and improving policy implementation; supporting continuous efforts to identify effective policies and weed out those that are ineffective; identifying which policies work best for certain groups or areas; listening to front-line practitioners and those directly affected by policies; and prioritizing efforts to support victims.

Third, a range of strategies exist to promote greater use of EBP, including: acknowledging what is and is not known; investing in data to support and enable rigorous policy evaluation; mandating reliance on EBP; and promoting systems-level reforms. An embrace of these advances holds the promise for creating a society that more effectively reduces crime and violence and increases justice. It is time for researchers and policymakers to build on the progress of recent decades and make this happen.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Brandon C. Welsh: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Steven N. Zane:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Daniel P. Mears:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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⁴ For example, since 2013, there has been a “30-fold increase” in federal grant money dedicated to agencies and programs “that have defined, prioritized, or encouraged evidence of effectiveness,” as well as a substantial increase in the number of evidence clearinghouses established by the federal government (from one, involving education, to more than ten, including criminal justice; Ellor, 2024, pp. 8, 92).

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