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A shortage of 'copaganda fascists' and the need for more police pracademics

Jerry H. Ratcliffe

Department of Criminology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

ABSTRACT
This essay examines the evolving relationship between policing and academia, highlighting the increasing significance of pracademics – police practitioners with scientific training who, like embedded criminologists, bridge the gap between research and practice. The historical development of police – academic collaboration has highlighted the challenges faced by embedded criminologists amid ideological polarization within universities. Academic hostility toward policing scholarship has combined with unstable research funding to hinder objective, data-driven reform from academia. Pracademics, positioned within police organizations, can translate research into practice, address operational needs, and foster evidence-informed decision-making more efficiently than external academics. I argue that increasing the number of pracademics within police departments is essential to improving policing quality, sustaining reform, and ensuring that criminological research and evidence-based policing remain empirically grounded and practically relevant to modern law enforcement.

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Another largely mundane gathering of the New York City Council's Standing Committee on Public Safety was proceeding as usual. The committee exercises oversight over various city agencies, including the courts, district attorneys, and the police department, and on this occasion was discussing the city mayor's 'Blueprint to End Gun Violence'. The Zoom call had drifted along innocuously for over an hour, and New York City Police Commissioner Keechant Sewell and her team were fielding largely routine questions from council members about police crime control strategies. Routine at least, until Council Member Tiffany Cabán's first question to the police commissioner: 'Are you familiar with the National Academy of Sciences?'

Council Member Cabán then proceeded to quote both a National Academy of Sciences Consensus Study Report (Weisburd & Majmundar, 2018) as well as a research summary from the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (Lum et al., 2016) concluding with the question: 'Why are you adopting a strategy that decades of experience in research shows doesn't work?' After a pause, Commissioner Sewell addressed the question reasonably, the meeting continued, and the exchange would have likely disappeared forever into the forgotten vault of post-COVID city council Zoom recordings. But NIJ

CONTACT Jerry H. Ratcliffe jerryr@sas.upenn.edu

LEADS scholar, John Hall, sent it to me, recognizing, like I did, that the exchange was illustrative of a sea-change in the role of research in modern policing.

Wonderwall, OJ Simpson, and CompStat

To put this in perspective, we should roll the clock back 30 years. *Wonderwall* by Oasis dominated the charts, the O.J. Simpson trial dominated the television, and I was learning to walk properly again after a mountaineering accident curtailed a decade-long career as a Metropolitan Police officer in London. Wondering what I would do for a living, I grasped at an offer to study for a PhD in the geography of crime and policing at the University of Nottingham and was fortunate to enter the research field at an invigorating time.

Crime data were just becoming available. Even though data existed in principle, as a new PhD candidate, it took nine months to establish an agreement with Nottinghamshire Police to access rudimentary crime information. At the same time, 3388 miles to the west, Bill Bratton and his team were developing CompStat. He was similarly lamenting how difficult it was to compile data into a simple DOS file and obtain crime statistics from New York City precincts on a monthly basis. But he noted, 'As computers became more powerful, as algorithms were developed to improve the visualization of dots on a map and information was provided in a more user-friendly format than a stack of paper, the benefit to a police commissioner, a department, a borough chief, a precinct commander became substantial, and eventually transformative' (Bratton & Knobler, 2021, p. 184).

Today, this data transformation has created possibilities for research and improving policework in almost immeasurable ways. But 30 years ago, the prospects were still largely opaque. One might think that universities, especially research institutions that thrive on data and research, would flock to this new opportunity; yet, while the number of collaborations between universities and police departments increased, they did so tentatively.

On 'bad news' bears, 'copaganda fascists', and the lack of 'critical friends'

The history of police-academic collaborations is a relatively short one. Certainly, some technical collaboration was undertaken early in the twentieth century (Wensley, 1930), and criminologist and police chief August Vollmer not only created the American Society of Criminology in 1941 but also encouraged his officers to pursue college degrees (Braga, 2013; MacDonald, 2025). However, the history of experimental research in policing is one largely contained within living memory (for some of us).

Police chiefs started allowing academics greater access in the 1970s, permitting not just access to rudimentary data but also some opportunities to design research studies within departments. Distinguished policing scholars such as Herman Goldstein, Larry Sherman, and David Weisburd started their careers in an era where law enforcement was a blank slate in terms of what worked and what did not. Policing academics recognize the Kansas City Preventive Patrol Experiment as one of the first policing experiments (Kelling et al., 1974), along with the pioneering work of its academic lead, George Kelling. While the study has entered the pantheon of 'classic' policing studies, closely followed by the Newark foot patrol experiment (also from Kelling, 1981), Kelling's findings were not popular within police circles. His research showed what did *not* work, and 'bad news' can be interpreted by some in law enforcement as personal failure (Braga, 2013; Weisburd, 1994). Kelling also struggled for recognition within mainstream criminology and was – according to Bill Bratton (Ratcliffe, 2021) – 'frequently vilified by the armchair academics who never get out of their offices'.

Policing scholars tend to be a robust crowd (used to the withering scorn of armchair academics) and, notwithstanding the frequent vilification, continued to help better understand police tactics and strategies. As Braga (2013) notes, the 1980s and 1990s saw more working partnerships between departments and scholars, especially in the areas of community and problem-oriented policing. A few became 'embedded criminologists' who – according to Petersilia (2008, p. 339) – are able to 'like journalists traveling alongside our military troops watch the action, unfiltered and "up close and personal."'

Anthony Braga's years of connection with the Boston Police Department (BPD) from the mid-1990s to 2006 stand as a primary example of the value of embedded criminology. As he notes, working with them on a range of projects allowed him to

> develop a very strong understanding of the internal BPD organizational structure, their crime control and prevention strategies, and their external operational environment. Most importantly, I was able to form strong working relationships with BPD command staff, midlevel managers, and street officers. Over time, most of the officers became very comfortable with my operational questions, requests for data, and general presence at strategy meetings connected to these projects. In short, *I had become a trusted research partner to the BPD*. (Braga, 2013, p. 5, emphasis added)

My own embedded connection to the Philadelphia Police Department started when I introduced myself to Deputy Commissioners Pat Fox, Charlie Brennan, and Jack Gaittens shortly after arriving in the US in 2001. It happily continues to this day with Police Commissioner Kevin Bethel. Some initial evaluations of technology implementation (Ratcliffe et al., 2009) and the aftermath of a police operation (Ratcliffe & Rengert, 2008) opened doors to conversations about designing studies *before* implementation by the department – often a key requisite to methodologically rigorous study. This created the opportunity for a randomized, controlled trial that became the Philadelphia Foot Patrol Experiment (Ratcliffe et al., 2011), work that won the police department a research award from the International Association of Chiefs of Police. It also generated opportunities for the research team to examine aspects of foot patrol beyond the simple question of whether foot patrol 'works' (Groff et al., 2013; Sorg et al., 2013, 2014; Wood et al., 2014).

As Nola Joyce, along with Chuck Ramsey and James 'Chips' Stewart, later wrote about our collaboration, 'The point that both Braga and Ratcliffe made was that researchers can add value not only in the evaluation of an operation or program but also in its design and implementation. Our work with Ratcliffe on foot patrols was the beginning of what has become an integrated collaborative effort between researchers and Philadelphia police commanders' (Joyce et al., 2013, p. 360). Being a trusted research partner (to use Braga's term from the last paragraph) allowed me to guide a few subsequent studies from 'the "coal standard" – not as good as what academics like, but an improvement over anecdotes' (Bayley, 2016, p. 169) and closer to the gold standard of experimental research.

But the role of an embedded criminologist can involve greater public criminology (Loader & Sparks, 2011), and a more prominent role in public debate around crime and policing. One challenge with public criminology was recognized by corrections scholar, Joan Petersilia: 'As I became more visible and, presumably, more powerful, I became the subject of public attack' (Petersilia, 2008, p. 353). Police chiefs reading this will likely roll their eyes; however, academics are not used to such negative attention. Most policing scholars who have any kind of social media presence have been on the end of public vitriol ('copaganda fascist' was one insult I received, posted by a brave soul from the safety of an anonymous account). Yet while much of the flak came from external sources, not all of it did. Prior to the troubles in Ferguson, Missouri, and the murder of George Floyd, criminology and criminal justice departments maintained an uneasy peace between policing researchers and more activist-oriented faculty. In the last decade, however, many criminology and criminal justice departments have become overtly enamored by activism over science, and more strident in ridding their ranks of the 'stain' of policing scholars.

As Loader and Sparks (2010, p. 776) note:

> To be a criminologist, to an important degree, is to have committed oneself already to the idea that crime problems can and should be subjected to reason, method, evidence, analysis, and knowledge and to have taken a stand against, or at least assumed some distance from, lay opinion and political judgment. It is thus often to have placed oneself on a collision course with social and political actors who advance their crime and justice projects in ignorance (willful or otherwise) of criminology's hard-earned lessons.

I couldn't agree more with Loader and Sparks, but what is one to do when the phone call is coming from inside the house? Academic criminology/criminal justice has embraced the contradiction that is the 'activist-scholar'. As Wright and DeLisi (2017) note, 'Surveys show a 30:1 ratio of liberals to conservatives within the field, a spread comparable with that in other social sciences. The largest group of criminologists self-identifies as radical or "critical." These designations include many leftist intellectual orientations, from radical feminism to Marxism to postmodernism'. It is hardly a surprise that police executives struggle to find research partners with whom to collaborate. And it is not surprising that critical criminologists struggle to coexist with people who try to help police departments.

Policing scholars have been shouted at in department meetings, and others have been castigated based on social media activity frowned on by activist 'scholars' in their own departments. Some have discovered that a tweet can generate secret faculty meetings to vote on punishments or even the removal from departmental leadership roles. Two renowned scholars have been forced to submit their personal cell phone records based on a freedom of information request following a call from campus colleagues to oust those who continue collaborating with police agencies. A couple of academics have had a job offer rescinded because a faculty member or grad student 'discovered' they had been involved in a lawful, on-duty shooting during their police service many years before entering academia. One had a student assigned to his class by the university's DEI office to report back on classroom discussions, while faculty and grad students surreptitiously released his personal health information to an anonymous doxxing website. Another policing scholar had to hire an attorney to prevent a department colleague from lying about his previous career in an attempt to discourage graduate students from taking his class. Others have been excluded from supervising PhD students for the sin of 'being a policing scholar,' while academic job opportunities have been redefined *mid-search* to eliminate from consideration established academics with police backgrounds who had already applied. One non-police-oriented department chair was forced out just for being 'too police-y', while several respected police criminologists have retired early, moved to work in policy arenas, or left scholarly work altogether. Policing graduate students have been insulted by peers, had their work belittled or diminished by activist faculty, struggle to get job interviews, and have been subject to far greater scrutiny than students working on more 'activist-approved' topics.

As Petersilia (2008, p. 351) noted, 'Public criminology is incredibly demanding, both personally and professionally, and the price is probably higher than many academics are willing to pay'. This is especially the case in policing scholarship. The result? Academia appears to be struggling to attract and retain quality policing scholars and students who have both the skill set to undertake effective evaluation work and the willingness to help police departments reform and improve effectiveness and performance. If this pattern continues, criminology and criminal justice departments will continue to hemorrhage policing's 'critical friends' (Weatheritt, 1989) from the discipline, with numerous potential implications:

- The value of scholarly criticism of policing will diminish in quality and relevance,
- Police leaders will ignore criticism from criminologists as coming from biased and less informed outsiders,
- Government institutions will see little value in funding policing research given the absence of objective and scientific expertise within the academy,
- Police departments will, ironically, receive less effective scrutiny given the diminishment of policing expertise in universities, and
- Police reform efforts will (also ironically) slow down due to a shortage of 'critical friends'.

Add to these problems challenges with the funding mechanisms for policing research, and the future would appear dire for the growth of embedded criminology. The scholarly grants system on which policing researchers often rely has long been 'contingent and uncertain' (Bradley & Nixon, 2009, p. 434). Recently, however, federal funding mechanisms that have long supported policing research have slowed or been curtailed. Thus, while embedded criminologists remain, they have not grown substantially in ranks. Even if universities grant some teaching respite under the guise of aiding 'public good', there remain numerous challenges with recruiting embedded criminologists (Piza & Feng, 2017).

Can pracademics save the day?

Pracademic, a rather unimaginative portmanteau of the words *practitioner* and *academic*, refers to a police employee (current or former) with a level of scientific training. 'As a practitioner, the pracademic works in an applied setting responding to "real world" problems. As an academic researcher, they have the requisite training to treat aspects of "real world" issues as problems amenable to measurement, systematic observation, intervention, and/or other forms of hypothesis testing' (Huey & Mitchell, 2015, p. 300).

Is a pracademic similar to an embedded criminologist? Perhaps in skillset, but not in access. However close an external academic gets to a police department, even to the stage of being a 'trusted partner', we remain outsiders. A change of administration or police chief, and circumstances can change. In contrast, pracademics are department employees. True, they may have an insider-outsider status, given that one police chief said to me that 'policing is the only field where the word "clever" is an insult' (Ratcliffe, 2023, p. 15). But they remain embedded within the department on a day-to-day basis, often in positions of responsibility. While the first use of the term is more than a quarter century ago, 'generally speaking, pracademics remain an underutilized resource within the field of policing research' (Huey & Mitchell, 2015, p. 301).

What can pracademics do? I see three main advantages over external researchers and embedded criminologists.

Pracademics can bridge the 'dialogue of the deaf' (Bradley & Nixon, 2009). In other words, they can help academics understand policing and help police understand academia. As Braga (2016, p. 308) points out, 'By virtue of their experiential knowledge, police pracademics can also enhance existing research partnerships with external academics by ensuring proposed projects are sensitive to real-world conditions and by translating the importance of scientific inquiry to their police department colleagues'.

Pracademics can fill the growing research need within policing. The opening story of this article is indicative of the need for more evidence-based policing scholarship within law enforcement. Internal capacity and necessity for not just data analysis but also knowledge synthesis are growing. This is a void that academics probably should occupy; however, 'there are simply not enough skilled and willing academic researchers available to meet the growing demands by policing departments for scientific knowledge' (Braga, 2016, p. 308).

Pracademics can work on a police department schedule. Pracademics, versed in insider knowledge of how the organization functions, can short-circuit lengthy data agreement arrangements, privacy concerns, and idiosyncratic knowledge siloed within the department. They can get things done. If they do not need external funding, they can work with timelines that are shorter than the often-glacial speed of grant-funded academia.

How do we get there?

First, police departments have to recognize the need. The transition to having more sworn and civilian members of a department who can act as research translators (Magnusson, 2020), able to understand and manipulate data, and help a department test and validate their own initiatives, will all be easier and smoother if recognized internally rather than imposed externally.

Second, there remains a role for federal and national funding. Just over 15 years ago, the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act pumped $1 billion into US law enforcement agencies and emphasized evidence-based policing as part of the funding mechanism (Burch, 2023). As Jim Burch notes, a few years later, the National Institute of Justice established the Law Enforcement Advancing Data and Science (LEADS) Scholars program, a successful venture that merged serving police officers and civilian staff with academic collaborators to generate useful, practical research projects grounded in the needs of policing.

But it is not all good news, and funding streams are fickle. This year, the UK's College of Policing announced that its bursary scheme, which has supported over 500 British police officers in their academic studies, would not be funded for next year. And as of the time of writing and nearly a year into a new administration, US federal funds for policing research are still largely absent, with no indication of when or if they will return.

Third, global societies can help. The Society of Evidence-Based Policing (SEBP) was formed 15 years ago, and since then, similar organizations have appeared in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, Canada, and the Netherlands. These are largely run *by* police officers and staff *for* police officers and staff, and they provide a community of like-minded police practitioners advancing science and understanding around policing research.

Finally, university education programs can step up and generate more scholarly opportunities that can provide pracademics with practical value. As mainstream criminology and criminal justice degrees lean away from policing, it is refreshing to see a few institutions buck the trend. In the UK, the MSt in Applied Criminology and Police Management (known as the Police Executive Programme) at the University of Cambridge started in 1996. Albeit weathering some funding gaps, it has remained a two-year part-time Master's degree deliberately pitched at police officers with a strong focus on evidence-based practice and a research-driven capstone. Approaching its 30th birthday, the program has trained nearly 1000 graduate students from across the UK and the world (Peter Neyroud, personal communication). And in the US, I am delighted to be the faculty director for the new *Master of Applied Criminology and Police Leadership* at the University of Pennsylvania. This graduate degree is modeled on the Cambridge program and is the first dedicated policing degree at an Ivy League institution. Other programs exist; however, few emphasize the role of evidence-based policing in modern law enforcement leadership and the skills necessary to develop pracademics.

Conclusion

Academic criminology can be fickle, with laborious and unreliable funding mechanisms, and vulnerable to the winds of progressive political expediency and critical theorizing. MacDonald and Weisburd (2024, p. 8) are right that academia should be a place of 'rigorous intellectual inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and neutrality'; however, like them, I am concerned about criminology's evaporating commitment to neutrality and scholarly, scientific rigor. Fortunately, there remains a cohort of policing scholars who are willing and enthusiastic to help police departments understand evidence-based practice, and who have the skills to help agencies reform and develop their capacities. However, the brutal reality is that this is a rather exclusive club that pales in number compared to the throng of critical criminologists who sit on the sidelines and snipe at those in the arena. Given the public transparency that now exists around crime and policing data, my colleague Anthony

Braga (2016, p. 308) is right that 'Increasing the number of pracademics in police departments and taking advantage of their considerable skill sets seems like an important step forward towards improving the quality of policing'. Increasing the number of pracademics might be more than an important step; it might be the giant leap policing needs.

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ORCID

Jerry H. Ratcliffe http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0730-6761

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