

POLICE

Magazine

NOVEMBER 1979—\$3



CRIME
PREVENTION
THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE

Also in this issue . . .

A Report from the Jury Room

Policing Three Mile Island

Sweeping Addicts Off the Streets

Birmingham and Cincinnati: Two Departments in Turmoil

A Case for The Research Police Department

by Lawrence W. Sherman

THE bookshelves are lined with treatises on statistics and research methods. A group of pipe-smokers argue in the conference room over the source of variance between two data sets. A computer terminal spews out complex tables and scattergrams. From all appearances the place could be a think tank, a university or the research center of a teaching hospital. But it is none of those things.

It is, rather, a police department—the Kansas City (Mo.) Police Department. Kansas City has one of a growing number of what might be called “research police departments,” meaning those that define their mission not only as serving their local communities, but also as advancing the state of scientific knowledge about how best to provide police services. Like the San Diego and Oakland police departments in California, and the New York City and other police departments in the East, Kansas City has institutionalized research and researchers as part of the ongoing operations of the department, and has opened the door to outside researchers.

From 1972 to 1978, the Kansas City police received \$3,608,687 in research funding, primarily from the federal Law Enforcement Assistance Adminis-

Lawrence Sherman is a professor of criminal justice at the State University of New York in Albany. He is also director of the Project on Homicide by Police Officers at the Criminal Justice Research Center in Albany, and the author of the book, Scandal and Reform: Controlling Police Corruption.

tration and the Police Foundation. The funds have supported a host of studies, ranging from the widely known preventive-patrol and response-time experiments to research on domestic violence, “proactive” patrol and peer counseling for trouble-prone officers. The results have often prompted national as well as local controversy, and have produced important changes in department practices. Equally important, they have caused the police field to rethink basic policies and procedures. Largely as a result of the Kansas City research findings, there has been more discussion of the methods of police work in the last decade than there has been since Patrick Colquhoun introduced the idea of uniformed preventive patrol in late eighteenth-century London.

What has happened in Kansas City bears some resemblance to the revolution in medicine that hit this country shortly after the turn of the century. The medical revolution was not all for the better, and police should be cautious in adopting the features of other professions. But one feature of medicine that seems to make a great deal of sense for police departments to adopt would be the teaching hospital, as a model for the research police department.

American medicine in 1900 was much like American policing in 1960. Entrance and training standards were minimal. Methods of practice were based on tradition more than on systematic empirical research. Like the present efforts of the criminal justice system to prevent crime and treat its victims, the health care system of that time was often a failure, especially in comparison to modern life expectancy.

In 1910 the Carnegie Corporation began to change all that by publishing Abraham Flexner's report on medical education. While the report criticized medical schools more than medical practice, the two were obviously related. Flexner recommended that medical schools 1) affiliate with universities, and 2) hire full-time faculty members to devote themselves to research and teaching. The recommendations were soon implemented through a selective program of Carnegie Corpo-

The Viewpoint feature appears regularly in *Police Magazine*. It is designed to give our readers a forum in which to express their personal views on law enforcement topics they deem important. No other endorsement of these views is implied. If you wish to submit an article for consideration, please send a typescript to: *Police Magazine*, 801 Second Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

ration grants. Those schools that followed the recommendations prospered, while most of those that did not went out of business.

The rise of a full-time medical faculty had a tremendous impact on the hospitals affiliated with medical schools. In addition to caring for patients, these hospitals became devoted to advancing and disseminating medical knowledge through scientific research and clinical instruction of new doctors. Within a few decades time, the teaching hospitals' role clearly distinguished them from other hospitals, a distinction that made them the most prestigious institutions in the profession of medicine.

Policing could clearly benefit from the three major functions that teaching hospitals have performed. One function is to give new doctors the most up-to-date knowledge about their field. Another function is to teach new doctors the value system of science — teach them to be skeptical about assertions made from “experience” and more confident about practices that have been carefully evaluated through empirical research. The third function of the teaching hospital is to conduct research on medical practices and disseminate the findings to the practicing profession.

The Kansas City Police Department seems to perform one and a half of the functions of the teaching hospital. It conducts and disseminates research, and it has made some, though not all, of its officers more scientific in their outlook toward their work. What it cannot do under the present structure of American policing is to train new police officers who will work in other cities with the latest police knowledge and teach them the values of science.

A Proposal

Federal, state and local policy makers could make the budding research police departments in this country even more useful by making them more structurally similar to the teaching hospital. Since almost every state now has a statewide police academy, the academies could contract with one or two research (or "teaching") departments to conduct field training for all new officers in the state. The research departments would be designated as such by a panel of indepen-

values could then hasten the current transition of policing from common-sense craft to a professional practice based on empirically derived principles of cause and effect. Police chiefs trained in a research police department might be much less defensive about research findings, and much more willing to accept negative findings about new programs and practices. Police officers trained in research police departments might be less likely to try to sabotage police experiments, as some have apparently done in Kansas City. Police union officials trained in research

and the police department given veto power over research, might be productive. Some examples of possible partnerships are John Jay College and the N. Y. City police, the University of Missouri at Kansas City and the Kansas City police, and the University of California at San Diego and the San Diego police. Southern Methodist University and the Dallas police, as well as the University of Cincinnati and the Cincinnati police, are examples of actual partnerships, now terminated. The problems that arose in these partnerships should be studied before any further affiliations are attempted.

There are many reasons why some might find this proposal unrealistic, not the least of which is the uncertain future of LEAA. The Flexner report would not have changed medicine without millions of dollars in financial aid to back it up. Similarly, the emerging research role of the Kansas City police and the few other departments has only followed the investment of large sums of LEAA money. It would be a great loss if police research funding were to be cut drastically just as an efficient means for spending it became available.

Whatever happens to LEAA, other funding agencies will still be interested in good police research. The National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health and local foundations may all be willing to fund well-designed studies. The capacity for high-quality research already developed in some departments should give them the edge they need to obtain the funds. The fact that police chiefs from research departments have established national reputations and moved on to better jobs should offer a further incentive to pursue the research department role. The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) will provide peer-group support for the chiefs of research departments, and could even take a leadership role in seeking the state-level designations I propose. Whether formally designated or working without recognition, the research police department might well have more impact on American policing than any other force for change. □

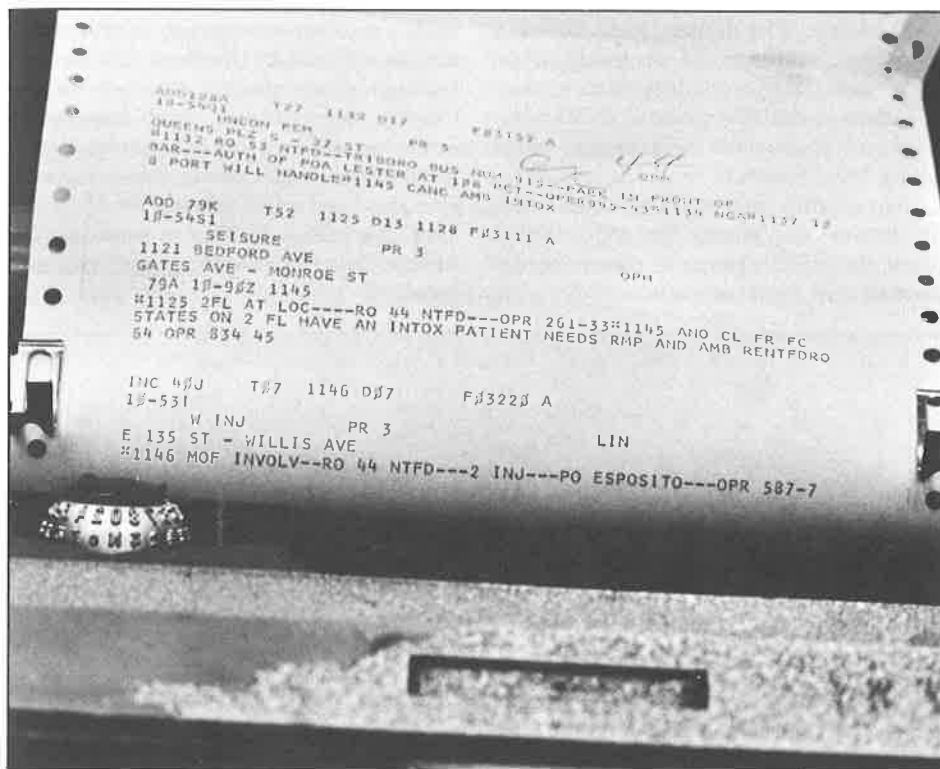


Photo by Bill Powers

dent professionals. Federal officials could follow these designations with a concentration of research funds in those departments. State officials could do the same with their authority over LEAA block grants. With enough research underway on a continual basis, the basic training of every police officer could include participation in a research project, either as a subject or as a collector and analyzer of data.

Both the direct participation in the research and the early police experience in a department heavily involved in research could make new officers internalize the values of science. Their

police departments might be less opposed to innovations based on research findings from other cities, such as assignments based on research about the relative safety of one- and two-officer cars.

The research police departments might even become affiliated with universities, as many municipally financed hospitals are. Faculty members need not hold appointments in the police department (although many police officials are already faculty members), but a close working relationship, with the academics given charge of degree-related instruction