



The N8 Policing Research Partnership: Examining the first four years

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Summary: The N8 Policing Research Partnership: Examining the First Four Years

This report presents findings from 20 qualitative interviews with senior police officers, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and national policy leads, all of whom were knowledgeable about the N8 PRP and evidence-based policing (EBP) and from a survey of staff in the N8 Policing Research Partnership (PRP) police forces. The qualitative interviews aimed to evaluate the benefits and challenges of the first four years of the N8 PRP from the perspective of regional and national policing experts. The survey was designed to assess uses made of N8 products and to see how the N8 PRP was seen by police officers and other staff.

Key points

- Interviewees thought that moving to EBP would involve significant cultural change, and that it would be wrong to expect any meaningful short-term changes in police use of research evidence
- Establishing the organisational infrastructure for the N8 PRP was seen as a significant achievement
- Interviewees thought that there needed to be more organisational support for embedding EBP
- Interviewees thought that more needs to be done to ensure that research gets used and its recommendations are properly implemented.
- Awareness of the partnership is high amongst senior staff, and lower amongst operational officers
- Those who had used N8 PRP 'products', such as research reports, conferences and courses, valued them
- Overall, attitudes towards EBP were very positive amongst senior staff, and positive amongst operational officers

Background

The N8 PRP secured funding for a 5-year programme of research and knowledge exchange through a Catalyst Grant from HEFCE. The N8 PRP is a collaboration between eleven police force areas, eight universities and one third-sector partner. The partnership has funded research grants and PhDs, organised conferences, supported a staff exchange programme, designed courses for police analysts and commissioned or otherwise stimulated various other activities. In 2015, the N8 PRP was one of several national and regional initiatives to encourage the police to adopt 'evidence-based policing' (EBP).

Methods

The project mapped the 'products' of the N8 PRP, conducted 20 depth interviews and carried out an on-line survey of staff knowledge of the partnership, their use of its products and, more generally, their attitudes to 'evidence-based policing'. The survey and interviews were carried out between May and August 2019. Police officers and other staff were encouraged to participate, but take-up was disappointing, and only 151 respondents completed

the survey¹. All qualitative interviews were recorded and transcribed and analysed thematically. Interviewees were interviewed under conditions of confidentiality and anonymity.

An examination of the first four years of the N8 PRP

The N8 PRP is one of the larger and better developed of partnerships between the police and universities. The common thread in such partnerships is the ambition of providing policing with the best available research evidence to help inform police practice and decision-making. A key aim of the N8 PRP was:

... to enhance the impact of higher education research in the policing sector through the development and testing of mechanisms of knowledge exchange to strengthen the evidence base on which police policy, practice and training are developed and so support innovation and the professionalisation of the police [N8 PRP Project Overview]

Awareness and impact of the N8 PRP

The survey suggested that awareness of the N8 PRP is low amongst junior ranks, with 35% being aware of it. Several interviewees thought that it was “just too early” to measure the impact of the programme. Both findings are consistent with our earlier research evaluating the College of Policing’s “What Works” programme (Hunter, May and Hough, 2017, 2019). Whilst making research evidence available to the police is straightforward, embedding its use within the fabric of police decision-making is a more ambitious and long-term agenda. Those interviewed in depth described the idea of embedding evidence within policing as a generational project. As one interviewee stated:

No amount of anything is going to change police culture in the three years that N8 has been operating. It would be unrealistic to expect, even with an investment of £7m or even £27m, a change in police culture. It is going to take a long time. [Interviewee 06]

In its first four years the N8 PRP has funded a range of products, details of which are in an evaluation by the University of York (Page and Lloyd 2018). The current study found that those who had read N8 PRP research reports or attended conferences and courses were generally positive about their value.

A consistent theme in the in-depth interviews was that the initial funding period needed to be about laying the structural foundations through the N8 PRP Steering Group and forming local partnerships through research and training activities. Most interviewees agreed that to ensure sustainability a coherent and workable regional structure needed to be in place to enable co-production and use of evidence by police and academics:

The N8 is an example of genuine co-production between the police and academics, it's far too soon to talk about realising benefits... N8 is probably the best example of a major funding programme to particularly

¹ The sample is unrepresentative of staff in N8 forces, being skewed heavily to senior officers and to force analysts. Nevertheless, it gives an indication of how the N8 partnership is used and assessed. In summarising the survey, we have aimed to keep the level of detail of findings proportionate to the size and reliability of the sample.

facilitate the relationship between academics and the police... I think the police attitude to research has changed dramatically... I think the approach N8 takes and the funding for the small projects and what they've managed to produce has been absolutely excellent. [Interviewee 06]

The Steering Group was welcomed, though interviewees described some teething problems, including a disconnect between the expectations of the police and academics and the inevitable cultural differences between the two occupations. One difficulty mentioned by several interviewees was that the Steering Group was initially chaired by an academic; they saw this as disrupting what was intended to be an even balance of power between the two organisations. This was rectified by appointing joint chairs, a move that symbolised the reality of a partnership of equals.

Interviewees highlighted the difficulties of embedding evidence into the fabric of the police service and the organisational culture of all ranks of police officers and staff. Acceptance of EBP will remain fragile so long as it is promoted and spearheaded by individual evidence enthusiasts. The survey did find generally positive attitudes toward the principles of EBP. Thus 57% said that research evidence had affected their working practices. Almost all senior officers and civilian staff agreed that collaboration between police and academics was vital to enhance greater use of research evidence, and 70% of officers below the rank of chief inspector thought this. However, they were more pessimistic about levels of organisational support for EBP: almost two-thirds of respondents believed there were no organisational emphasis on the use of research in decision-making, and 57% thought there was a general lack of understanding in their organisation about the relevance of research evidence to everyday policing. The overall sense from the survey was that evidence enthusiasts are champing at the bit to move their force onward towards EBP but felt that organisationally there is still a long way to go. This pattern was consistent across ranks.

The benefits of N8 PRP engagement

The in-depth interviews identified the perceived benefits of the N8 PRP, which included the advantages of working in partnership, the small grant projects, being part of the decision making process regarding funding allocation, PhD and career development opportunities, establishing relationships beyond the work of the N8 PRP, being part of innovative research projects and attending forums. Some were very positive indeed, referring to the ways in which collaboration provided practical benefits as well as opportunities for staff development:

The future

The in-depth interviews asked about the future of the N8 PRP. A significant theme to emerge was the need to plan and resource the implementation of research recommendations. A number of interviewees suggested that police and academics need to work better together to implement research recommendations. For example:

I think the police have certain strengths and the academics have certain strengths. The police are great at implementing things, they have the data, they are gung-ho on doing stuff. The academics are good

at analysing data, which isn't a police strength. They are good at evaluating things, which the police can't be bothered to do. I call it a marriage made in heaven because of their complementary skill sets. The police have these problems of crime, disorder, police community relations and so on. They haven't got the time to read all the academic literature. You know, the notion of evidence-based policing implies that the police are going to go delving into research reports. That's never going to happen. They haven't got the time or the interest or anything else. But the academics, that's their job. But it does mean it's a partnership and there is no hierarchical relationship between the two. It should be, in my opinion, a genuine partnership. [Interviewee 14]

I saw a lot of output [from the N8 PRP], but I didn't see a lot of implementation... I didn't see, this is an initiative, the collaboration found this, and it's been implemented across these number of police forces with this level of impact. I never saw that. I saw a lot of good things, I listened to a lot of good discussions, a lot of interesting discussions, but I never saw the impact [Interviewee 05].

In the in-depth interviews, there was unanimity that the N8 PRP should continue to promote, enable, and provide a regional structure for the co-production of police academic knowledge. All agreed that sustaining and supporting the N8 PRP was important for both the region's police forces and academics. However, most said that the continuation of the N8 PRP will require several things to happen: the necessary funding being available: EBP being fully embedded into the organisational fabric of forces; and senior police officers and PCCs being able to see an organisational benefit to being part of the partnership. For example:

I think the sustainability of N8 will hinge on funding... You can have great relationships here, there and everywhere, but academics need funding, and the police at the moment would say they haven't got any. That's a real problem. I mean you can try and make use of free labour, with Master's students and PhDs even, but that's not what the police need. The police need proper experienced researchers working with them. It's not easy to see how that can happen without the funding...The police need to have clear evidence that it's worth their while investing in these relationships. [Interviewee 06]

Evidence based policing needs to become a part of the overall cardiovascular system of policing, don't strip it out. [Interviewee 13]

To combine the knowledge of the police with the intellectual academic firepower that N8 has available to it would be formidable [Interviewee 04]

In conclusion

Interviewees were unequivocal in their support for the continuation of the N8 PRP, all were largely impressed with the distance travelled by the partnership in its first four years. Many interviewees discussed the teething problems the partnership had experienced, as well as the accomplishments. Moving forward interviewees want the partnership to evolve, from one that produces research to one that commits to assisting the police to embed evidence and implement recommendations. There was a general consensus that the police need to start seeing the tangible benefits from their partnerships with academics.