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Exploring evidence-based policing

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Introduction

> The fact that an opinion has been widely held is no evidence whateverthat it is not utterly absurd.
>
> (Bertrand Russell)

In recent years policing has seen a shift away from taken-for-granted ways of doing things. As part of this shift, the utilisation of a more consistent evidence base to support decisions, techniques and interventions has become more prevalent. This course examines the basic elements of evidence-based policing and gives insight into how more evidence-based approaches can inform better policing practice.

After completing this course, you will be able to:

- understand more effective evidence-based approaches to decision making
- considered ways in which evidence-based policing can enhance policing practice
- understand ways that you can make more informed evaluations on the effectiveness of approaches to policing
- reflect on ways in which evidence-based practice in policing can affect communities both positively and negatively.

1 Evidence-based practices

Over time, both organisations and people develop typical ways of doing of things. For organisations, this can often be referred as the culture – 'the way we do things around here' as Deal & Kennedy (1982) put it. This can include both spoken and unspoken rules, as well as the attitudes and behaviours of those individuals that are members of the organisation.

Sometimes, certain practices are continued because that is what members of the public expect or because it is "how it has always been done" even though there might be little evidence to support its continuation. Habit and intuition can play a crucial role in driving these behaviours as can perceptions of good judgement in terms of perpetuating behaviours.

In recent years there has been a growing focus on the use of evidence-based approaches in various fields. Put simply, it is no longer enough merely to point to gut feeling, perception or intuition in order to justify decisions which can have significant long-term implications for individuals or societies. Rather, a structured approach building on reliable evidence is required.

Evidence-based management

Evidence-based management is about making decisions through the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best available evidence from multiple sources by:

1. **Asking:** translating a practical issue or problem into an answerable question.
2. **Acquiring:** systematically searching for and retrieving the evidence.
3. **Appraising:** critically judging the trustworthiness and relevance of the evidence.
4. **Aggregating:** weighing and pulling together the evidence.
5. **Applying:** incorporating the evidence into the decision-making process.
6. **Assessing:** evaluating the outcome of the decision taken

to increase the likelihood of a favourable outcome.

(Barends, Rousseau and Briner, 2018, p. 2)

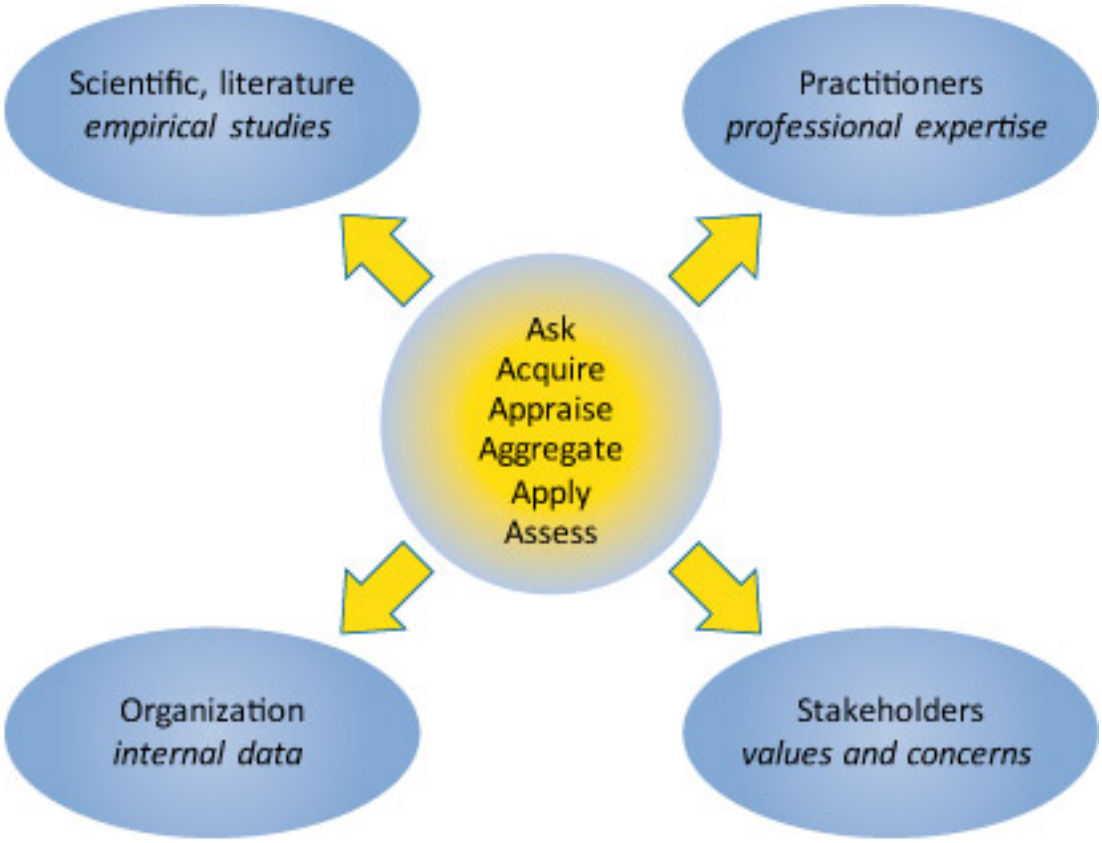

Figure 1 Evidence-base practice process (Barends, Rousseau and Briner, 2018, p. 5)

1.1 Sources of evidence

In fields such as science or medicine where information and data and be more readily quantified this might seem like common sense, but these same approaches have also emerged in a wide range of other fields. This includes areas such as management and education where evidence is often less *quantitative* – that is to say, reliant on numbers and numeric data – but instead more *qualitative* and is based more on opinions, impressions and feedback. Rather than one necessarily being better than the other, it is important to highlight that both play a crucial role in helping us make better decisions.

As part of this, practitioners in all fields have started to make better use of evidence and evidence-based approaches to support their decisions. The logic of evidence-based practice in all professional fields is that using greater quantities, sources and types of evidence in a critical and systematic way will contribute to better decision making processes and improve the quality of outcomes. A real challenge can be that the evidence used is often limited. Key reasons can include:

- A lack of evidence
- A lack of a sufficiently *diverse range* of evidence sources
- It is not *critically appraised* for quality and/or relevance.
- It is not used in a *systematic* way.

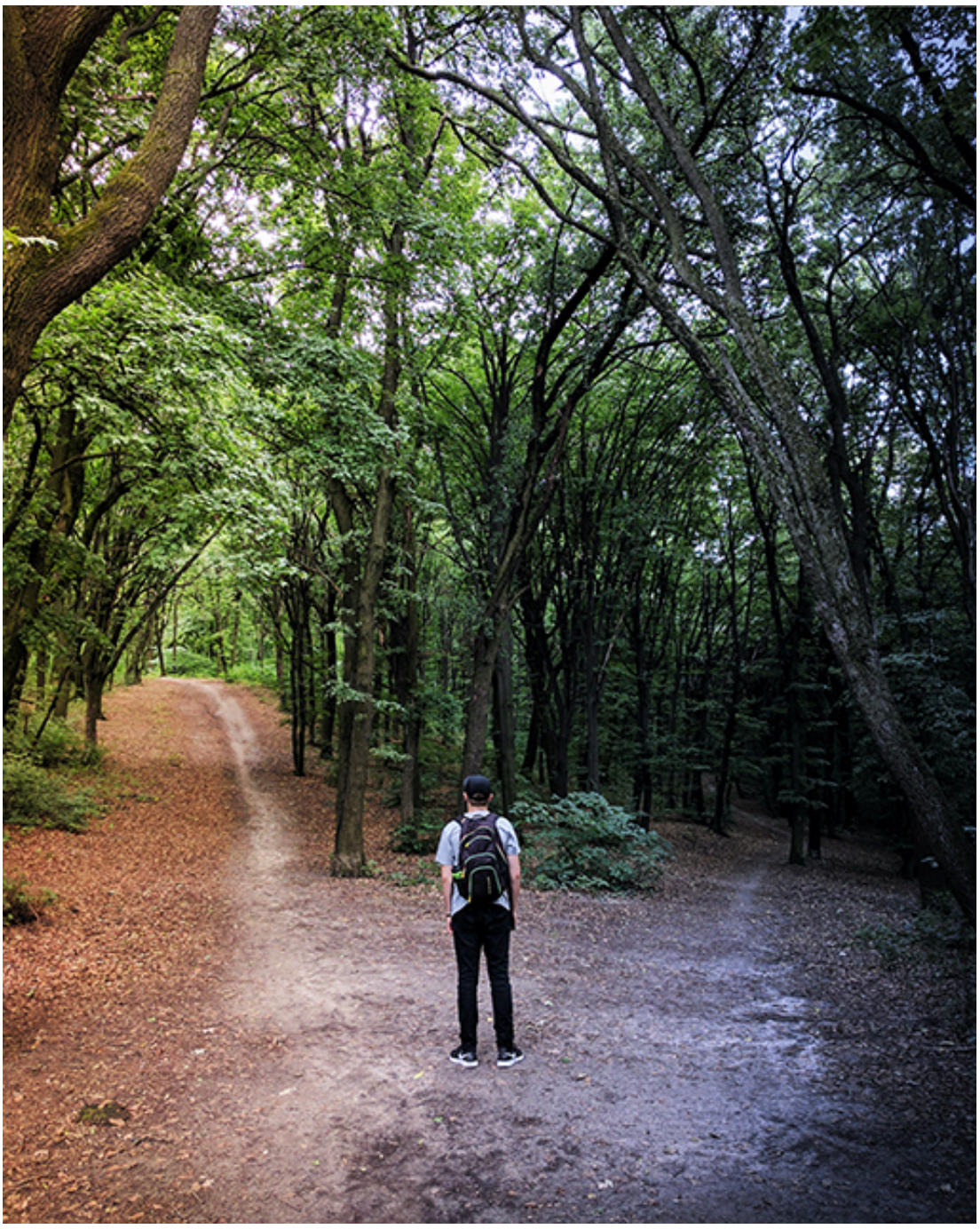

Figure 2

Activity 1 Decision making

1. Think about a decision you made recently, whether at work or outside. What sources of evidence did you draw on in making that decision? Are these among the four sources of 'best available' evidence identified?
2. Did you critically appraise the evidence in the way described above? If you did, how did you go about this? If not, what is your judgement now of the quality of the evidence you used?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

As humans we can all tend to fall into typical patterns of decision making. While sometimes these patterns might involve using evidence in a structured methodical way as outlined, our decision making is often based on prior experience or even gut feel. Although this might lead us to the correct decision, more often than not failing to draw on and critically appraise evidence can take result in errors and mistakes.

2 What is evidence-based policing?

In some ways, the term ‘evidence-based policing’ might seem rather odd. After all, evidence is and always has been a crucial element of investigations since the first policing organisations were established. Evidence-based policing is, however, less about the evidence used to support an investigation and more about the evidence to support the effectiveness of the investigation techniques utilised.

The evidence-based approach to policing was first conceived by the American criminologist, Herman Goldstein, when he developed an approach known as Problem Oriented Policing (POP). The POP model ‘is an approach to tackling crime and disorder that involves the identification of a specific problem, through analysis to understand the problem, the development of a tailored response and an assessment of the effects of the response’ (College of Policing, 2017). In developing this framework, Goldstein sought to use research-based evidence to challenge the three main functions of the model of policing utilised at that time namely:

- preventative patrol
- rapid response
- solving crimes to catch offenders

(Goldstein, 1979)

This approach in turn led to the emergence of evidence-based policing, developed by criminologist Professor Larry Sherman. Sherman argues that EBP is ‘a method of making decisions about “what works” in policing: which practices and strategies accomplish police missions most cost-effectively’. (Sherman, 2013, p. 377)

Defining evidence-based policing?

In an evidence-based policing approach, police officers and staff create, review and use the best available evidence to inform and challenge policies, practices and decisions.

As a way of working, it can be supported by collaboration with academics and other partners.

The ‘best available’ evidence will use appropriate research methods and sources for the question being asked. Research should be carefully conducted, peer reviewed and transparent about its methods, limitations, and how its conclusions were reached. The theoretical basis and context of the research should also be made clear. Where there is little or no formal research, other evidence such as professional consensus and peer review, may be regarded as the ‘best available’, if gathered and documented in a careful and transparent way.

Research can be used to:

- develop a better understanding of an issue – by describing the nature, extent and possible causes of a problem or looking at how a change was implemented; or
- assess the effect of a policing intervention – by testing the impact of a new initiative in a specific context or exploring the possible consequences of a change in policing.

> Evidence-based policing does not provide definitive answers that officers and staff should apply uncritically. Officers and staff will reflect on their practice, consider how the 'best available' evidence applies to their day to day work, and learn from their successes and failures. The approach should mean officers and staff can ask questions, challenge accepted practices and innovate in the public interest.
>
> (College of Policing, 2020)

When considered from this perspective, evidence-based policing may seem complex. Yet as Braga (2009) points out: 'While it is acknowledged that evidence-based policing can serve other useful purposes (for example, improving police training standards, improving police-community relations), the main outcome of interest or "bottom line" is crime prevention.'

3 The stages of evidence-based policing

As is no doubt clear, evidence-based policing involves adopting a structured approach towards any issues or topics that are to be studied. Bryant and Bryant (2019) argue that there are usually five distinct stages in any EBP project:

- State the question
- Gather the existing evidence
- Assess the existing evidence and undertake research
- Implement the findings
- Evaluate the implementation

While each of these stages is of crucial importance, it is the third stage – in which the evidence is assessed – that can be the most challenging.

3.1 Assessing evidence

For evidence-based policing to be successful it is crucial that evidence is fully assessed. This will determine if the study was implemented correctly, it will then examine the pre- and post-response data (both qualitative and quantitative). Following this, the process will determine if the goals or objectives of the study were attained. This will allow for the identification of successful strategies and to ascertain if any new strategies may be needed to augment the original plan.

An important element is that this assessment process is repeated at regular intervals to ensure the continued effectiveness of the study.

Randomised Control Trial

A key element of Sherman's approach to EBP is the use of a Randomised Control Trial (RCT). The Cambridge Centre for Evidence-Based Policing (no date) state that an RCT is, 'A research design intended to estimate the effects of a target program by':

a. Identifying a substantial number of people or other units of analysis,
b. Selecting all units eligible for the target program and the RCT,
c. Recording the identifying details of each eligible unit,
d. Assigning some units (treatment group) to receive the program, while
e. Insuring that no other units receive the target program, then
f. Delivering the assigned treatments as randomized, and
g. Comparing outcomes for the two groups
h. During or after an appropriate follow-up period has elapsed.

An RCT is essentially an experiment that is conducted in a scientific manner in order to reduce bias and is generally used to try to gain knowledge about a 'population'. Bedford and Mazerolle (2014, p. 403) highlight a range of examples of situations where RCTs have positively impacted on policing practice, including 'trials of community policing, alternative approaches to domestic violence, problem-oriented policing, hot-spots policing, repeat-offenders policing, third party policing, crackdowns, and restorative policing'.

3.2 Implementation

While assessing the evidence is key, so too is practical implementation. As Braga (2009) argues:

> Implementation is critical to the development of the evidence-based policing model. It is not enough to evaluate what strategies work best when implemented properly under controlled conditions. Ongoing research is necessary to determine the results particular police agencies are achieving by applying (or not) the recommended practices.

This implies that rather than just being one-off investigation, effective EBP is an ongoing process.

Activity 2 Key aspects and research

Allow approximately 10 minutes

In the following clip Dr Nicky Miller, Director of Knowledge into Practice at the Open University's Centre for Police Research & Learning, discusses some of the key aspects of evidence-based policing and the research supporting these approaches.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1 Dr Nicky Miller

Discussion

In the clip, Dr Miller discusses not just what evidence-based policing is but also some of the key principles which underpin it. These include seeking to have the best available research evidence and combining that with professional expertise and insight. It also includes taking a systematic approach to creating, reviewing and using evidence. By drawing on these principles, those working in policing can more effectively integrate evidence-based approaches into their day-to-day work.

4 Putting evidence-based policing into practice

There is no doubt that EBP offers great opportunities within policing. A number of highly publicized pieces of EBP research have had an impact on policing in various areas and the College of Policing summarises much of the research on the effectiveness of the most common interventions in their Crime Reduction Toolkit.

Figure 3 How effective are body cameras in policing?

In 2015, the College of Policing published a report on the effectiveness of Body Worn Video (BWV) in policing in London. This extract from the report provides a useful insight into the evidence-based approach taken:

> Given growing interest in BWV across England and Wales this trial starting in May 2014 sought to test a consistent approach to the distribution of approximately 500 cameras across Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) in ten London boroughs. The basic premise of introducing BWV was that the presence of a camera and the captured footage would improve CJ [criminal justice] outcomes because the quantity and quality of available evidence would increase, thereby supporting victims and witnesses. In addition, it would introduce a layer of accountability for the police and public, which would impact on the quality and nature of interactions – reducing complaints and the number of stops and searches. London's 'Global City' status, with around 31,000 officers, means this trial will address an evidence gap on the impact of BWV in a larger UK force.
>
> (Grossmith *et al.*, 2015, p.5)

The full College of Policing report outlines in detail the process taken and the conclusions reached.

One useful approach for evaluating interventions such as this has been called EMMIE and this is summarised in the table below:

Table 1 The EMMIE Model

Effect	Impact on crime	Whether the evidence suggests the intervention led to an increase, decrease or had no impact on crime.
Mechanism	How it works	What is it about the intervention that could explain its effect?

Moderators	Where it works	In what circumstances and contexts is the intervention likely to work / not work?
Implementation	How to do it	What conditions should be considered when implementing an intervention locally?
Economic Cost	How much it costs	What direct or indirect costs are associated with the intervention and is there evidence of cost benefits?

Source: College of Policing

Activity 3 Putting EBP into practice

In Video 2, Superintendent Gordon McCalmont of the Police Service of Northern Ireland discusses some of the challenges and opportunities of putting evidence-based policing into practice.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2 Superintendent Gordon McCalmont, Police Service of Northern Ireland

Discussion

As discussed in the clip, putting evidence-based policing approaches into practice brings great opportunity to enhance policing and better serve communities. Yet it also comes with challenges and is not always easy to do correctly. Nonetheless, the benefits far outweigh the challenges and any opportunity to implement evidence-based approaches should be embraced.

5 The challenge and limits of an evidence-based approach

While it might be tempting to conclude that an evidence-based approach is just common sense, this is far from being the case. Human decision making is complex and is shaped by a range of social and psychological phenomena. Key factors impacting on the success of an evidence-based approach include:

- Misconceptions about the idea of evidence-based practice
- Sources of bias
- Professional fads and fashions
- Power, politics and careers.

5.1 Misconceptions about the idea of evidence-based practice

Several common 'myths' and misconceptions have arisen about evidence-based practice which prevent practitioners developing the skills needed to undertake it. Some of the most prevalent are:

- evidence only means quantitative 'scientific' evidence
- practitioners should not use their own professional expertise or 'gut feel' to make decisions
- evidence is about objective truth and can prove things
- the newest breakthrough studies provide the best evidence
- collecting valid and relevant evidence solves the problem
- if you don't have evidence, you can't do anything
- evidence-based practice just means proven techniques or best practices
- experts (e.g. consultants and university professors) know all about the evidence so you just need to ask them.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Moore (2006) also makes the point that if not managed carefully, an excessive focus on evidence-based practice over *experience-based* knowledge gleaned through qualitative studies can be detrimental to gaining real-world insights.

5.2 Sources of bias

Various forms of cognitive bias can impact the way in which people seek and interpret evidence. If biases are not managed carefully, they may ultimately impact on both the decision-making process itself and the quality of decisions made, as well as on the powers utilised in the framing and implementation of policy.

There are six commonly held sources of cognitive bias which hamper evidence-based decision making:

- Confirmation bias – the tendency to search for and interpret information consistent with our existing beliefs.
- Availability heuristic – the tendency to overestimate the likelihood of an event happening based on our most recent memory of it or something similar happening. If we can remember something easily, its importance is heightened.
- Hindsight bias – the tendency to see past events as being more predictable than they were before the event occurred.
- Anchoring effect – the tendency to over-emphasise or over-rely on a single piece of evidence.
- Framing effect – the tendency to draw different conclusions from the same information presented in different ways (e.g. if a food is '85% fat free' or contains '15% fat').
- Meta-cognitive bias – this is the tendency to believe that although others may suffer from bias, we are immune from it.

5.3 Professional fads and fashions

Most professions witness trends in the popularity of particular ideas which come and go over time. These appear simple to understand and implement, and they often promise to deliver a specific set of outcomes using an equally specific package of tools or interventions. It is this apparently straightforward 'cause effect' relationship, combined with their 'cutting edge' newness which appeals to practitioners, particularly those looking for a quick fix and/or career enhancement. Their reassuring simplicity of use also helps contain anxieties about the uncertainties ofprofessional decision making, and vagaries of organisational and wider social processes.

This has also been found in a policing context, where one researcher (Lumsden, 2016) has noted that evidence-based policing has often been seen as a buzzword, perhaps in part because it is not only poorly understood but also poorly applied in practice.

5.4 Power, politics and careers

Career progression can be an important driver of professional behaviours. Hence it is important to understand what kinds of behaviours are valued and rewarded by the organisations in which we work, and in particular by the managers and leaders of those organisations. The most important question from our perspective is: 'Do senior professionals and managers get to their positions by being evidence based in their decision making?'

One of the ways we can begin to recognise the importance of power and organisational politics is to reflect on some of the differences between the standards we aspire to as professionals (often referred to as our 'espoused goals') and what drives our day-to-day work (our 'implicit goals').

Table 2 is an example, based on the work of the Center for Evidence-Based Management.

Table 2 Aspiration and practice in professional behaviour

Espoused goals	Implicit goals
• to do what works • to help our organisation/service fulfil its mission • to identify and solve important problems • to do what matters • to treat everyone equally • to speak honestly and truthfully to colleagues and managers.	• get things done • further my career • avoid trouble • fix immediate problems • meet targets and do what gets measured • favour those who can help advance my personal goals • say what those people want to hear.

(Adapted from www.cebma.org)

Politics can also play out in other ways, most particularly in terms of resource allocation. Kadry, for example, argues that a real challenge in undertaking evidence-based research in policing can be a lack of engagement and cooperation due a lack of time and resources:

> Another consideration is that an EBP approach that seeks to understand the successes and failures of long-term operations and policing initiatives is highly dependent on the cooperation of the police officers carrying out the work. 'Cooperation' here is not used to denote willingness to be a part of an evidence-based policing test, but rather whether police officers have been assigned enough time and training to be able to carry out the duties and deliver the information needed for the integrity of a test to be upheld. In other words, ensuring that any evaluation does not commend or condemn the tactics used in a policing initiative, where it may have been the deployment (or lack thereof) of the tactics that may misrepresent the efficacy of the tactics.
>
> (Kadry, 2019, p.10)

Ultimately, while EBP may be beneficial for some policing problems it is not a universal panacea. By recognising these challenges, we can begin to establish how evidence-based approaches might be applied most effectively for the benefit of communities, police and other stakeholders.

5 Conclusion

Over recent years, key practices related to evidence-based policing have gained greater relevance and importance. This course has explored the background to evidence-based practices in policing and how they reflect an increased desire to support decisions and interventions with clear evidence and data, so enhancing their delivery and overall effectiveness.

By taking a more evidence-based approach to policing, it is intended that police services will be better able to support communities and deliver more effective policing for the benefit of all.

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Images

Course Image: courtesy Police Service of Northern Ireland

Figure 1: adapted: Barends, E., Rousseau, D. and Briner, R. (2018) ‘Evidence-based management: the basic principles’, Fig 1.1, p. 5 in Barends, E. and Rousseau, D. (eds.) Evidence-based management: how to use evidence to make better organizational decisions. London

Figure 2: Vladislav Babienko/https://unsplash.com/photos/KTpSVEcU0XU

Figure 3: JOHN GOMEZ/Getty Images

Audio-visual

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