



## Police Departments' Adoption of Innovative Practices

Stephen D. Mastrofski, George Mason University and  
Lorie Fridell, University of South Florida

Researchers studying innovation have long noted that organizations go through a process as they adopt, implement, and incorporate an innovation into structure and practice (Rogers 2003). An important juncture in this process is when the organization moves from the decision to adopt to the actual implementation of the innovation. A sign of organizational commitment to a given innovation and its implementation is the adoption of formal policy that supports the innovation, establishes rules and procedures regarding the innovation, or allocates resources specifically to support this innovation. Most studies of police innovations focus on the “adoption” decision – as in, “We’re going to do it” – and leave unexamined the stage where the adoption is realized into policy. The National Police Research Platform distinguished between the two when asking about each participating department’s status regarding 10 approaches to policing that are currently regarded as innovative. The results indicate that by 2013, large majorities of departments had adopted nearly all of the innovative practices, and that most of those had implemented formal policies in support of those innovations.

### **Innovation Adoption with and Without Formal Policy**

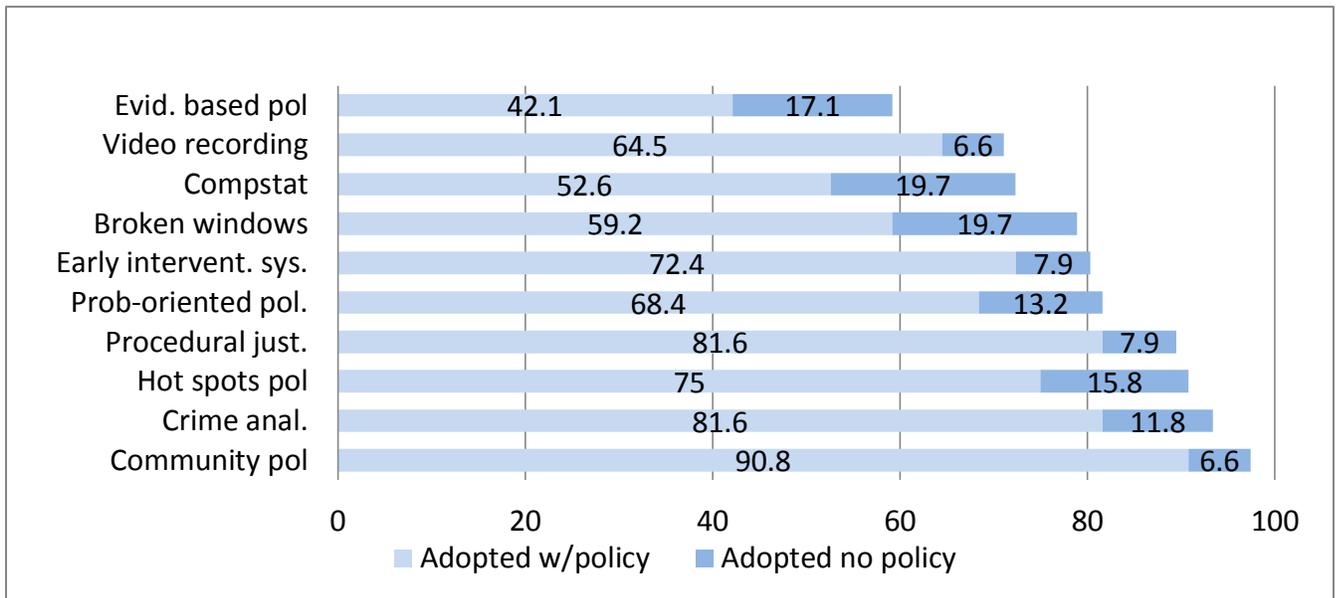
The Platform conducted a survey of its participating agencies in October-December of 2013. Part of that questionnaire asked knowledgeable persons within the organization to indicate whether each of ten innovations had been adopted, whether department policy regarding that innovation had been established, and if so, what year. Seventy-six Platform police agencies completed the questionnaire. Although 25 Platform agencies did not complete the survey, the profile of survey respondents did not differ markedly from the total Platform sample.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 shows the proportion of departments that had adopted each innovation and the proportion that had also established policy for the innovation.

The figure shows that this collection of innovations was popular among responding agencies. Six of the innovations were adopted by 80 percent or more of the sample. Community policing was almost unanimously adopted (97 percent). Also in this most-popular group were crime analysis, hot spots policing, procedural justice, problem-oriented policing, and early intervention (with problem officers). Three innovations were adopted by 70-79 percent of the sample: broken windows, Compstat, and video recording of officers. Only one registered at a lower level: evidence-based policing (59 percent). To the extent that these 10 approaches to policing capture innovativeness in police agencies, the sample reflects a remarkably high portion that has embraced most of these reforms.

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<sup>1</sup>The median number of sworn officers for the entire Platform was 274; the median for the department-characteristics survey was 255. The median percentage of civilian employees for the entire Platform and for the survey was 21 for each. The median percentage of minority race employees was 20 for both the entire Platform group and the survey respondents. The median percentage of female employees was 26 percent for the entire Platform group and 27 percent for the survey respondents. Twenty-one percent of the entire Platform group was a county sheriff; 25 percent of the survey respondents were county sheriff’s departments.

**Figure 1. Percentage of departments adopting innovation with and without formal policy**

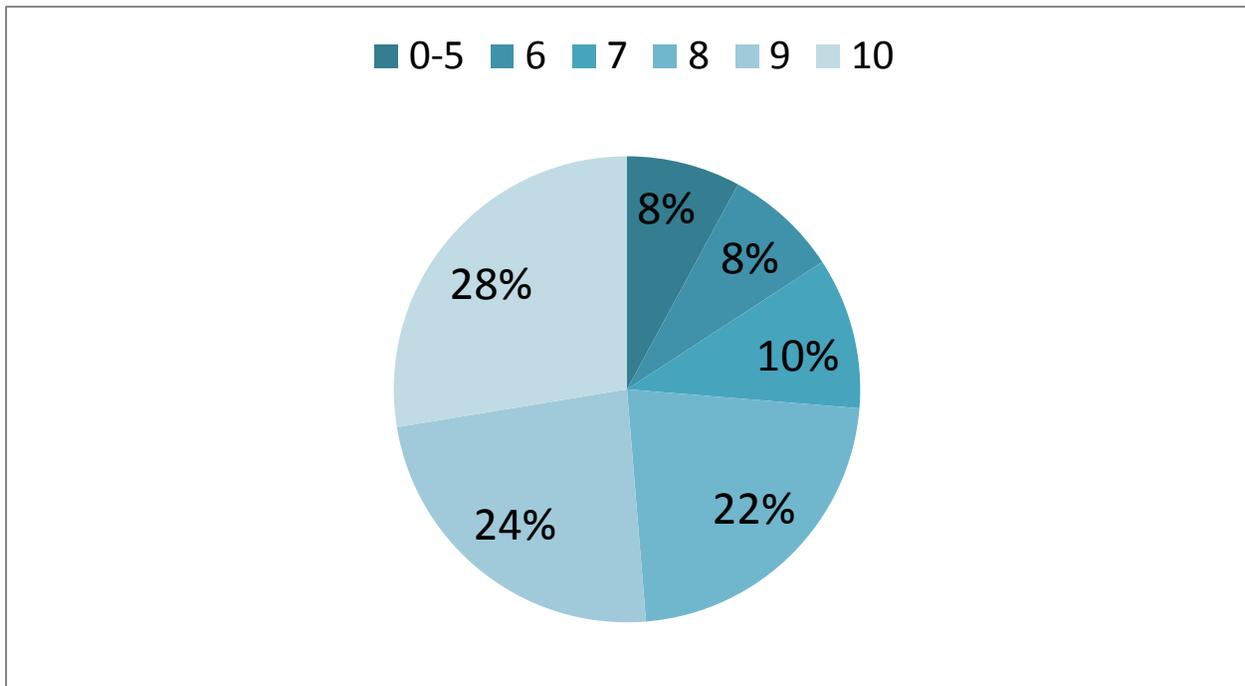


However, when focusing on only those agencies that have followed their adoption decision with the establishment of formal policy, the distribution is less concentrated at the high end. Only three innovations have policies supporting their adoption in 80 percent or more of the sample (community policing, crime analysis, and procedural justice). Two (hot spots and early intervention) fall into the 70-79 percent category. Two fall into the 60-69 percent category (problem-oriented policing and video recording); two fall into the 50-59 percent category (Compstat and broken windows); and one comes in with only 42 percent having established policy in support of the innovation (evidence-based policing). Yet across all types of innovation, a considerable majority of departments that have adopted the innovation also report that it has been formalized in policy, ranging from 71 percent for evidence-based policing to 93 percent for community policing.

These 10 innovations constitute what some have termed “big” or “strategic” (Bayley 2008; King 2000; Moore, Sparrow, & Spelman, 1977). Figure 2 shows how popular they are as a package among the sample departments. The vast majority (nearly 75%) have adopted at least eight of the 10 innovations. Such innovation among American police agencies appears to be quite normal, and not at all exceptional.

The speed with which these innovations diffused among this sample of agencies varied considerably. One way to measure the speed of diffusion is to consider how long it took each innovation to move from a low level of policy adoption (10 percent of agencies in the sample) to a breakpoint (50 percent of agencies in the sample). In terms of innovation research, this time period measures how long it took for the police agencies in the sample to move from the late stages of “early innovators” to the very beginning of the “late majority” phase of the adoption cycle (Rogers 2003). The latter phase represents a breakpoint at which non-adopters no longer constitute a majority of police agencies.

**Figure 2. Number of innovations adopted with or without policy**

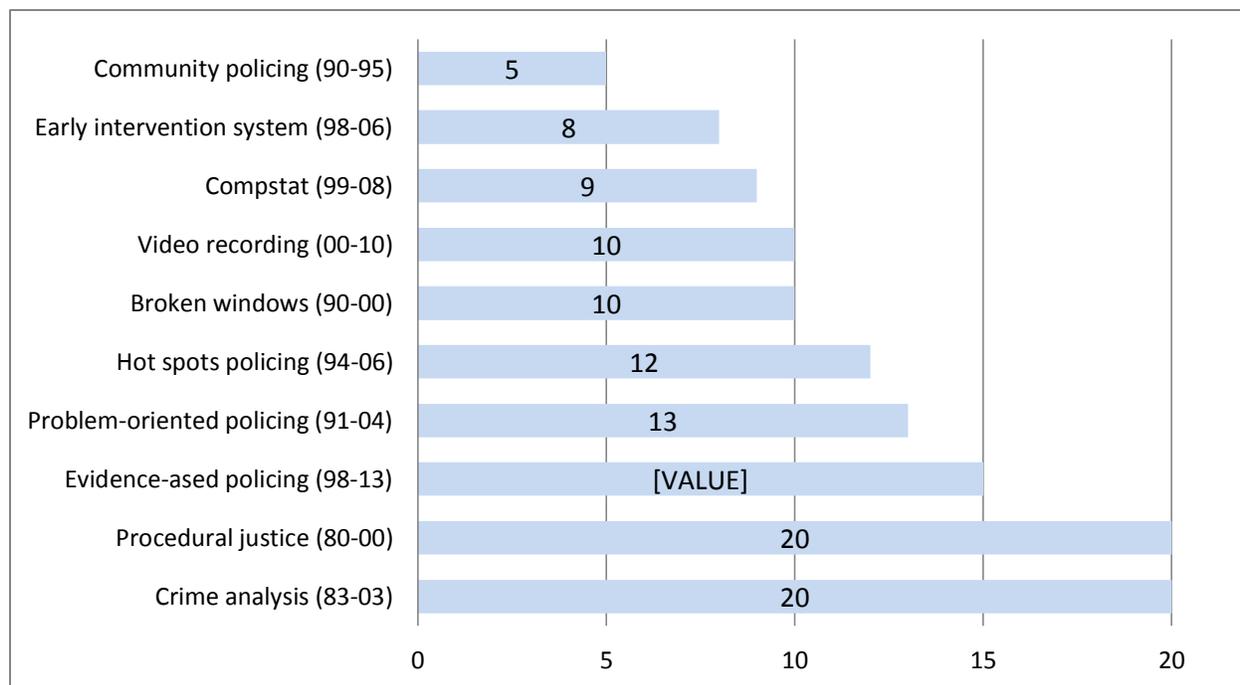


### **Rapidity of the Diffusion of Innovations**

Figure 3 shows how many years each innovation took to move from early innovation to the late-majority breakpoint. Community policing clearly moved the most rapidly, taking only five years. Others taking less than a decade were early intervention systems and Compstat (eight and nine years, respectively). At the other extreme are procedural justice and crime analysis. The remarkably fast rate of adoption by formal policy of community policing is undoubtedly due in large part to an aggressive, well-funded federal Office of Community Oriented Policing (COPS) grants program to encourage this. Notable, however, is the much longer time required by problem-oriented policing to reach the breakpoint. Problem-oriented policing was also supported by the COPS Office, but its demanding procedures may have slowed the establishment of policies for this innovation (Braga and Weisburd 2006; Cordner and Biebel 2005). The relatively rapid trajectory of policy adoption for early intervention may be due to the efforts of vendors marketing software systems. And Compstat undoubtedly benefited from the extensive publicity of New York City's experimentation with this approach. However, Compstat's adoption rate appears to have slowed considerably after an initial rush. As of 2013, only 53 percent of the sample had established Compstat policies, and only an additional 20 percent had adopted Compstat without formal policies (Figure 1). It appears that Compstat's early rapid-diffusion trajectory noted in the early 2000s (Weisburd et al. 2003) has not been sustained. The two slowest innovations (procedural justice and crime analysis) both had early starts compared to the other innovations (both in the early 1980s). The absence or relatively late start of focused campaigns with specific programmatic elements may account for the length of time required to get to the tipping point. The growing recent national attention paid to police abuse of authority in light of highly publicized video recordings of police-citizen

encounters may well rapidly accelerate the adoption of both procedural justice and video-recording (body camera) innovations.

**Figure 3. Number of years to change from 10-50 percent adoption with policy**



### Conclusion

The Platform’s department characteristics survey indicates that adoption of a broad range of “big” reforms has widely diffused throughout medium-to-large police agencies in America. Most of the agencies that have adopted these innovations have also established formal policies to support them. And the pattern of fairly widespread adoption means that there are relatively few police organizations that have been highly selective about which innovations they adopt. The adage “In for a penny, in for a pound” seems applicable here. The speed of the diffusion of the adoption of these innovations has varied quite a bit among the innovations. It seems likely that historical events (or the absence of high visibility of these events) accounts for much of that variation, along with the challenge of implementing some of them. As data on other innovations (including administrative and a broader range of technologies) accumulates, it may be possible to say more about the innovation diffusion process in American policing. Because this sample included a non-representative group of only a handful of smaller police agencies, nothing can be said about how divergent the pattern for that group of agencies is. Future research should also look at the details of *how* and *how much* these policies were implemented. There is a tendency to assume that America’s decentralized policing system fosters great diversity in how and how many innovations are implemented, but there is relatively little hard data to test that claim (Mastrofski and Willis 2010).

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