Inside this issue…

From the Directors
CEBCP Congratulates Its Newest PhDs
When Is Innovation Not Enough? The Importance of Organizational Context in Community Policing
Improving the Practice of Stop and Search in Scotland
Evidence-Based Youth Mentoring Systems: Constructing Models to Address Systemic Issues Communities Face
Training New Scholars to Advance Policing Research and Knowledge Translation
Glasgow’s Community Initiative to Reduce Violence—An Example of International Criminal Justice Policy Transfer Between the US and UK
Insight Policing—Investigating the Conflict Behavior in Criminal Behavior
CEBCP Active Grants
Hot Off the Press: Recent Publications from CEBCP
Insight Policing—Investigating the Conflict Behavior in Criminal Behavior

BY MEGAN PRICE AND LATRIVIETTE YOUNG

Megan Price is a PhD candidate and the director of the Insight Conflict Resolution Program in the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University.

LaTriviette Young is a sergeant in the Loudoun County (Virginia) Sheriff’s Office. She holds a Master of Science in Conflict Analysis and Resolution from George Mason University.

The “evidence” in evidence-based crime policy does not limit itself to evidence from criminal justice. Rather, the criminal justice arena has benefited from research knowledge and practices from a wide variety of fields. This is especially true in the case of policing, given that the police handle all kinds of social issues and concerns. “Insight Policing” is a recent innovation that blends knowledge from the field of conflict analysis and resolution into policing. It is a tactical communication framework that grew out of the recognition and discovery that much of criminal behavior can be attended to and understood not only as behavior that breaks the law, but as behavior that reflects conflict. When officers recognize there is often an added dimension of conflict behavior in lawbreaking, a world of information opens up to them, which evaluation has shown may position them to not only enforce the law in more targeted ways, but also to have better interactions with citizens. In this article, we describe Insight Policing and its promising use as reported by officers in the Memphis, Tennessee; Lowell, Massachusetts; and Loudoun County, Virginia, police departments.

Insight Policing was developed by conflict resolution scholars from George Mason University specializing in the Insight approach to conflict analysis and resolution—an approach that pays attention to what we are doing with our minds as we make decisions that engage and disengage conflict (e.g., Melchin and Picard, 2009; Price, 2013). Insight Policing came out of a pilot program called the Retaliatory Violence Insight Project (RVIP) that responded to a 2011 call from the Bureau of Justice Assistance for conflict resolution experts to help police departments get ahead of retaliatory homicide and community violence—those tit-for-tat, often lethal, extra-judicial resolutions of interpersonal conflict. While crime nationally was declining at the time, retaliatory crime remained a priority issue for police agencies in high-crime communities, and departments were eager to figure out how best to prevent it. Progressive leaders in Memphis and Lowell, both Smart Policing sites, collaborated with RVIP to discern how Insight conflict resolution principles could illuminate and help transform the persistent problem of retaliatory violence.

A Conflict Perspective on Policing Retaliatory Crime

Integrating a conflict perspective into policing retaliatory crime was a novel endeavor and it yielded a novel finding. While typically treated by police departments as distinct issues, RVIP found that the problem of retaliatory crime is systemically linked to the problem of police legitimacy, therefore embodying a two-fold dimension of conflict. Not only are crimes of retaliatory violence the result of community conflict, but they are also rooted in a conflict between the community and the police—one that is characterized by a lack of confidence and legitimacy in police authority. These conflicts are mutually reinforcing. The legitimacy of the authority of the police is in doubt, community members take justice into their own hands and do not cooperate with police officers. When community members do not cooperate, it becomes extremely difficult for police officers to investigate and close cases of retaliatory violence, let alone to predict and prevent the next ones. When violent, retaliatory crime goes unchecked, the rule of law in the community declines and police legitimacy is further undermined. Attitudes emerge like the one expressed by a community member in one of Lowell’s distressed areas: “The police just aren’t there for us. They’d rather see us shoot each other and then send the ambulance.” Research confirms this sentiment. In communities where retaliatory violence is high, community perceptions of police legitimacy tend to be especially low (e.g., Kane, 2005; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003).

An integration of conflict principles into policing retaliatory violence had to take both dimensions of this conflict into account. The hypothesis of RVIP was that before officers could respond adequately to retaliatory crime among community members, they needed to strengthen the trust and cooperation that the community afforded them (i.e., their legitimacy) by responding to the conflicts that emerged between themselves and the community members they encountered in the course of their regular duties.
Insight Policing

RVIP drew on the Insight approach to come up with Insight Policing. The Insight approach suggests conflict behaviors are stress-based behaviors rooted in two key variables of using our minds: an anticipation of threat and a decision to defend against that threat (Price, 2013). As brain scientists show, we do not use our minds very well when under threat. We are overcome by adrenaline and cortisol, which shuts down our critical thinking capacities. We react in maladaptive ways that tend to escalate threat rather than mitigate it, resulting in bad decisions and “defend-attack-defend” interactions (Picard, 2016). However, the Insight approach demonstrates that critical thinking in threat-based situations can be reignited with targeted curiosity aimed at eliciting and understanding the anticipated threat and the decision to defend.

To train officers in Insight Policing, we drew on officers’ already keen ability to be highly attentive to their surroundings and to the visual and environmental cues that suggest the potential for crime. However, instead of focusing on identifying cues that indicate reasonable suspicion of criminal behavior, we focused on heightening officers’ awareness of cues that indicate conflict behavior—those fight, flight and freeze responses to threat that are routinely apparent in enforcement contexts, not only among community members, but aimed toward officers, and originating in the officers themselves.

Once officers are able to identify conflict behavior, they are positioned to understand it. Insight Policing trains officers to ask targeted questions, called Insight questions, that spark a citizen’s critical thinking by eliciting the threat and decision-to-defend that is patterning their conflict behavior.

A few things happen when Insight Policing is employed. The curiosity characteristic of Insight questions, aimed at understanding a person in terms of their own decision-making, takes a person off guard. Contrary to what they are expecting in an enforcement situation, citizens feel heard and attended to. This eases their defensiveness and de-escalates mounting contention. When people become calmer and less stressed, they can think more clearly. This opens space for cooperative dialogue with the officer, who can investigate the threat and defense patterning the conflict behavior he has identified.

Because conflict behavior is often behavior that breaks the law, the information the officer generates by asking Insight questions is critical. It illuminates the context and motivation of a citizen’s actions, positioning the officer to make targeted and precise law enforcement decisions in response—decisions that officers in Lowell and Memphis report have led them to make fewer arrests for crimes against them, like disobeying directives and officer assault. According to one Memphis officer, using Insight Policing skills helps keep things “to a moderate tone.” While the impact of Insight Policing on crime rates and public perceptions of police legitimacy have not yet been quantitatively evaluated, officer reports suggest that the quality of interaction that emerges when using Insight Policing allows officers to fulfill their obligation to the law and to the public with integrity and builds their legitimacy in the moment when it counts most—in the moment of enforcement.

Insight Policing in Action

The key to Insight Policing is curiosity. According to Sergeant Young, curiosity was not the focus of her basic training a decade ago. Rather, the emphasis of basic training was to teach officers to show command presence through strength, whether that strength was in the form of physical force or certainty in knowing what was right and how things should be done. The problem, she found, was that exerting that kind of command presence led to conflict with citizens. They did not easily comply or show willingness to cooperate. What she discovered over time was that engaging with a person worked much better than relying on the power of her authority. When she learned Insight Policing skills through her master’s studies at George Mason University, she found that Insight Policing coincided with her natural propensity and desire to treat people with dignity and respect. She discovered that she could deepen her ability to engage with citizens in the power-sensitive context of law enforcement through the curiosity inherent in Insight Policing and make effective law enforcement decisions.

In one example, when Sergeant Young served as a deputy in the Loudoun County Sheriff’s Office, she responded to a call from a neighborhood grocery store. A man had been caught by the loss-prevention officer for shoplifting. Clearly, stealing from a store is criminal behavior—it is action taken against the law with straightforward policies and procedures that officers implement. These include obtaining the suspect’s information, calculating the cost of the items stolen, issuing a trespass notice if the management requests it, and either arresting or citing the suspect, depending on the suspect’s criminal history. However, Young decided to incorporate an additional approach based on what she had learned about conflict behavior and curiosity from Insight Policing. She noticed that the suspect was anxiously looking at the parking lot on the security monitor and that what he had stolen from the store were rice, milk, and diapers. She got curious. What was he worried about in that parking lot? And what threat was he defending against by stealing from the grocery store? By asking the suspect Insight questions that revealed the threat and defense patterning his behavior, she discovered within 10 minutes that the suspect was a habitual offender, that he could not find a job, and that his wife and child were in the car in the parking lot waiting for him. Young arrested the man for the crime he committed, but through her curiosity, she learned enough to link him up with a job-training center on his release. She referred his wife too, and helped her access a program for reduced cost child-care. The suspect went with Young without a struggle, and he discovered over time was that engaging with a person worked much better than relying on the power of her authority. When she learned Insight Policing skills through her master’s studies at George Mason University, she found that Insight Policing coincided with her natural propensity and desire to treat people with dignity and respect. She discovered that she could deepen her ability to engage with citizens in the power-sensitive context of law enforcement through the curiosity inherent in Insight Policing and make effective law enforcement decisions.

In this case, the man’s criminal behavior was conflict behavior—he was defending against the practical threat that his wife and child
would have no food. Clearly, the decision to commit the crime was misguided. Had he continued to offend in the short term, the long-term consequences for his family would have grown. Through the curiosity-based communication framework of Insight Policing, Young was able to help circumvent those long-term consequences and prevent future crime.

Young is not alone in reaping positive benefits from her knowledge about conflict and curiosity. In our program evaluation surveys from Lowell, Memphis, and Montclair (New Jersey), ninety-two percent of officers trained in Insight Policing agree that it is useful for their work as police officers. Officers have reported that Insight Policing skills enhance their outcomes from traffic stops to warrant pickups to handling the infractions of subordinate officers (see further outcomes in Price and Price, 2015; and Price, 2016).

The conflict over the legitimacy of police authority can make police-citizen encounters difficult and contentious, and put crime prevention out of reach. It contributes to the extraordinary problem of retaliatory violence in high-crime communities as well as to the burgeoning mistrust that has sparked a current wave of police violence and violence against police across America. Most importantly, it calls for new approaches to policing the public. Insight Policing is a new approach that draws specifically on principles of conflict analysis and resolution to help officers make effective law enforcement decisions and have better interactions with the public. Using Insight Policing skills, officers position themselves to de-escalate contentious encounters, make targeted and precise decisions that change the conflict behavior driving criminal behavior, and reduce crime while increasing legitimacy.

References