



Research Article

The Role of Law Enforcement in the Reduction of Substance Use and Other Behavioural Health Risks: Substance Use as a Focus: United States as an Example

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Abstract:

Reducing behavioral health risks requires a comprehensive range of prevention and treatment services delivered by professionals who are 'housed' within various community-based provider silos. Law enforcement constitutes an important silo that has not been closely associated with prevention, and particularly with evidence-based prevention programs and practices. Yet, within communities, there are well-defined prevention roles that law enforcement can play to support and enhance ongoing prevention programming. These roles, as informed by police science, are very much related to the overall role of law enforcement in the communities that officers serve. In this paper, we discuss these roles and guidelines and make recommendations for the training and functioning of law enforcement officers within a prevention framework.

Keywords: Prevention, Law Enforcement, Policing, Prevention Science, Policing Science



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Definitions

Starting with the definitions of 'law enforcement' and 'prevention' and the sciences underlying these fields will help identify overlapping concepts that are important to explore the fields of practice where professionals from these two fields have opportunities to work together for a common goal. There are many definitions of law enforcement. We will use one developed by the Bureau of Justice, which suggests that law enforcement is: "The generic name for the activities of the agencies responsible for maintaining public order and enforcing the law, particularly the activities of prevention, detection, and investigation of crime and the apprehension of criminals."ⁱ Prevention also has many definitions. The one we will use for this paper is informed by epidemiology, which constitutes the methodological foundation for public health. Prevention comprises actions taken to eliminate or reduce disease and disability before they manifest themselves.

Both law enforcement and prevention practices are informed by science. Police science aims to prevent, detect, and investigate crime to apprehend and detain individuals, groups, and organizations suspected of law violation. Police Science is multidisciplinary and includes: criminology, forensic science, psychiatry, psychology, jurisprudence, community policing, criminal justice, correctional administration and penology.ⁱⁱ

As informed by prevention science, prevention addresses determinants of behaviors that protect or threaten the social, emotional, and physical health of individuals, families, and communities by specifying processes by which these determinants operate and determining effective strategies to reduce risk and promote physical, mental, and social health. Prevention science is also multidisciplinary and includes: public health, sociology, psychology and social psychology, health behavior, medicine, biostatistics, and the neurobiological sciences.ⁱⁱⁱ

Both fields have embraced the application of rigorous methodological standards to ensure that the practices they endorse are 'evidence-based'^{iv} to ensure that they are both effective and beneficial. For prevention, and particularly substance use prevention, there has been a movement from using the term 'research-based' to 'evidence-based' in publications by Pentz in 2003 and Rohrbach et al in 2005^{vi}, and with the creation in 2007 of the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (NREPP) by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The concept of 'evidence-based' prevention was reinforced internationally with the publication in 2013 of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's International Standards for Drug Use Prevention. The concept of 'evidence-based policing' was introduced by Lawrence W. Sherman in 1998.^{vii} There is now an organization, the American Society for Evidence-Based Policing, that is dedicated to supporting research and evaluation of strategies designed to prevent illegal behavior and to translate findings of these studies into formats accessible to law enforcement officers.

Police science helps to address such questions as:

- What types of crimes are committed?
- How has the amount of crime in a given area changed over time?
- What do we know about the people committing these crimes?
- Where are the crimes being committed?
- How are the crimes affecting the community? and,
- What is the best strategy for preventing and/or responding to certain crimes in this jurisdiction?

Prevention science provides the knowledge regarding such topics as:

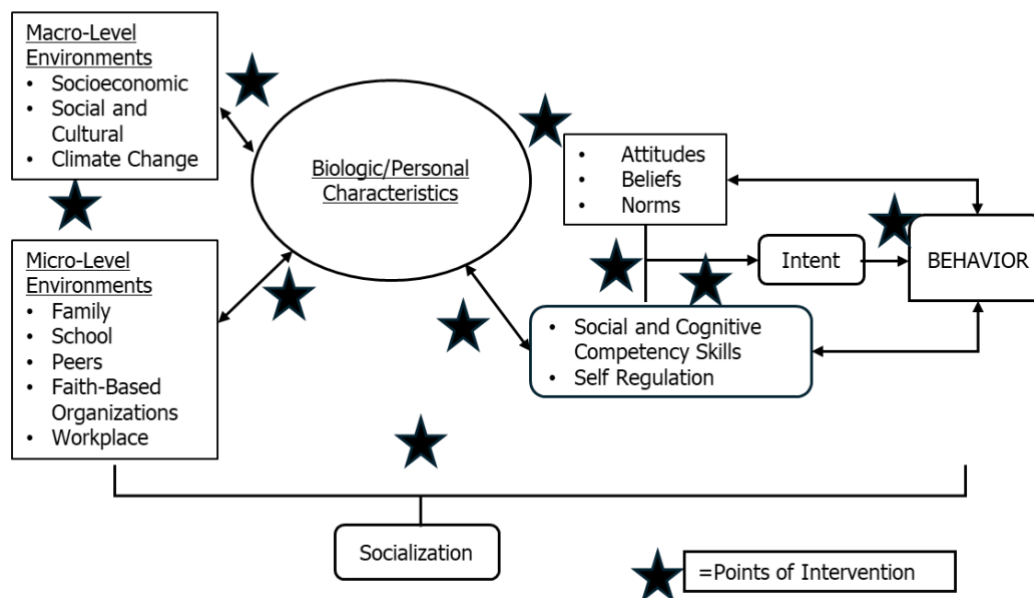
- Who is affected by a given behavior of interest and what are the characteristics of the population affected (e.g., sex, age, race/ethnicity, and geographic location)

as parents and teachers improve their interaction with the youth for whom they are responsible, law enforcement professionals could focus on enforcing evidence-based policies such as reducing the availability and accessibility of psychoactive substances and helping create safe and supportive neighborhoods and communities and reinforce community norms against engagement in risky behaviors. This collaboration is not a new idea. Shepard & Sumner, Van Dijk et al and Krupanski, et al proposed similar concepts related to the intersection of law enforcement and public health.^x

Points of Intersection

Understanding the processes and interactions that increase vulnerability to engage in harmful behaviors suggests points where preventive strategies can intervene to alter negative trajectories and to enhance and reinforce positive trajectories (See Figure 3).^{xi} The major prevention intervention points that affect micro-level environments include evidence-based parenting skills and family management programs. Schools constitute another major focus of prevention efforts, particularly regarding training staff to change their schools' social environments. For example, the Good Behavior Game trains teachers of early elementary grades to introduce children to their roles as students, and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports enhances positive school bonding throughout the school experience. In addition, prevention curriculum such as Life Skills Training and Positive Action help students develop skills needed to make sound decisions that support healthy behaviors.

Figure 3
Intervention
Points



(Fishbein & Sloboda, 2023)

The prevention role of law enforcement officers in schools has received much attention over the last three decades, spurred by the evaluations of programs delivered by D.A.R.E. America.^{xii} These evaluations, as well as growing negative attitudes toward law enforcement across America^{xiii} have increased the challenges related to reaching out and involving law enforcement in prevention efforts in school settings. Furthermore, while prevention professionals take a proactive approach to address behavioral issues, law enforcement professionals have tended to be more reactive.^{xiv} This approach does not lend itself well to the concept of prevention nor, in the case of behavioral interventions such as those mentioned above, to recognizing the importance of engaging students and implementing appropriate instructional strategies to enhance the learning experience (e.g., engaging middle school students in role plays and parents in practicing positive parenting skills).

There are several points at which law enforcement officers could serve to support the work of prevention specialists in schools, the workplace, the community, and the juvenile justice system. In schools and the workplace, law enforcement can serve as a member of a prevention leadership team that develops policies regarding institutions' response to substance use and abuse, regardless of whether use occurs on site or is manifested by behaviors that adversely affect school or work performance. This team could review existing policies relating to infractions due to substance use and an institution's response to an infraction. Research has shown the value of having such a team in place, which should include a variety of staff and other significant stakeholders. This team would ensure that the policies conform with known best practices, that the entire school or work community is aware of them, and that supportive, non-punitive approaches are in place to address infractions and reduce substance use-related behaviors. The presence of evidence-based prevention programming in schools, such as LifeSkills Training^{xv} or Positive Action,^{xvi} or in workplaces, such as Team Awareness,^{xvii} has produced positive outcomes in each setting.

Another key point of intervention for law enforcement is addressing the accessibility and availability of psychoactive substances such as tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis by enforcing regulations regarding sales to minors using operations in which young-appearing adults attempt to purchase these substances and citations are issued to vendors who fail to request an identity card. In addition, fines or risk of business license revocation can be applied if staff of on-premise establishments sell alcohol to inebriated customers, and people can be fined for smoking in restricted areas. Other successful enforcement efforts include roadside sobriety checkpoints. The effects of these enforcement efforts can be enhanced when implemented in conjunction with the use of media to increase the visibility of these activities. A set of evidence-based regulatory policies that are multi-faceted and comprehensive in nature can have a greater impact on substance use and related problems than any one of them in isolation, especially when the policies are enforced with consistency.^{xviii}

Recommendations to Support the Collaboration between Prevention and Law Enforcement Professionals

There are three focal areas by which to initiate a collaboration between prevention and law enforcement professionals:

- Training
- Community Prevention Coalition
- Prevention Partnerships

Training

Prevention science is a relatively new field that is receiving recognition after decades of research that has applied theories of human development and health behavior to understand the determinants and etiology of risk behaviors. Human development theories help to explain normal and dysfunctional development relating to problem behaviors such as substance use.^{xix} Theories of health behavior have examined the key determinants of behavior affecting health, with a particular emphasis on behaviors that effective preventive interventions can modify.^{xx} These theories were developed by conducting studies that observed and tested large numbers of children, adolescents, and adults. In addition, with the improvement of brain imaging, it has been possible to monitor brain development over the lifespan. Through brain imaging, we have learned that the brains of adolescents do not fully mature until they are in their early 20s, which may help to explain their risky decisions regarding behaviors such as substance use.

In addition, cognitive theory has informed education and how humans learn across the lifespan. The

early work of Jean Piaget from the 1920s still influences our understanding of cognitive processes.^{xxi} Piaget's observations from his study of children suggest that they build their knowledge through their observation of the world around them and by manipulating objects in their environment. They learn much on their own through these observations and 'experiments', and their motivations to learn are intrinsic. Cognitive theories related to how children learn are also important to the design and development of evidence-based prevention interventions and policies.

Other educational and cognitive psychologists have contributed substantially to our understanding of how human beings learn and how to apply that knowledge to instruction. Benjamin Bloom,^{xxii} for example, identified and described a hierarchical ordering of cognitive processes. His taxonomy covers three major domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. Learning at the highest level of each domain is dependent on having achieved the prerequisite knowledge and skills at the lower levels so that each domain builds on those beneath it. For example, this means that understanding requires the ability to remember information. And with understanding comes the ability to apply that information in the appropriate situation and then to analyze and assess its effects. Such an assessment then provides the opportunity to apply this information to another situation.

The task of any prevention intervention is to lay a foundation of simple knowledge and skills elements, build upon this foundation with increasingly complex elements over time, and then apply this learning to new situations. Effective learning thus involves a cognitive or mental process that includes not only knowledge acquisition but also comprehension, critical thinking skills, awareness, and growth in attitudes, emotions, and feelings, and the ability to manipulate tools and instruments physically. Furthermore, this process must be reflective of, and tailored to, the individual's stage of development across the life span.

Another important theorist is Jerome Bruner, whose work took place in the 1960s. His learning theory has direct implications for teaching practices. First, instruction must be tailored to the developmental and educational level of the learners. Second, the material must be revisited often using a variety of contexts and strategies to provide the learners with deeper comprehension and longer retention. Third, the material should be presented in a structured sequence that gives the learners the opportunity to acquire and construct knowledge and to transform and transfer or apply new material. Therefore, it is important to encourage learners to use their prior experiences to understand and to be able to translate new materials. In this process, learners need to be encouraged to see the similarities and differences between the new and already acquired knowledge. Bruner also stated that feedback should be in the form of knowledge or information motivated only in part through grades and competition; satisfaction is intrinsic and derives from the learning process itself. The process of toggling between new and old information and building an increasingly complicated knowledge base is called spiraling.^{xxiii}

These theories inform us about how people learn or the process of learning. Also important is an understanding of the determinants or factors that influence learning and why someone is motivated to learn. Motivation is also key to the process of learning whether motivation comes from within, intrinsically, or is motivated by outside extrinsic influences.^{xxiv}

All of these theories are important as they help us understand what types of interventions are appropriate for each developmental period from infancy through middle and old age and for suggesting when and how to intervene to promote positive, healthy development. It is this knowledge that informs the development of those prevention interventions that have been found to have positive long-term outcomes through rigorous research.^{xxv}

Furthermore, the development and enforcement of policies targeting risky behaviors such as substance use also have a theoretical foundation, primarily related to social control.^{xxvi} Social control

is expressed in the enforcement of policies that address and regulate risky behavior by making it clear that the behavior is not normative in a given community and, therefore, not acceptable. Fines and other actions taken in response to infractions of those policies reinforce this principle.

Why is this discussion important? The complexity of the design of theory-based prevention programming requires an understanding of the foundation of the intervention, including both manualized programs and policies, so that it is implemented or enforced as designed. Such an understanding requires training both in knowledge regarding the construction and logic model of the prevention approach AND in the skills to implement and enforce it as designed. All service providers who provide prevention programming need to understand how prevention science is applied to evidence-based interventions to achieve strong positive outcomes and therefore, why fidelity of implementation is crucial. Therefore, if prevention and law enforcement professionals are to join forces in prevention teams, they should be jointly trained in the basics of prevention science and its application to the implementation of evidence-based interventions and policies.

Community Prevention Coalitions

One arena where prevention and law enforcement professionals can collaborate to address substance use is through community prevention coalitions. The involvement of the community in solving public health issues may date back to the Black Plague. Integrating various facets of the community has constituted the foundation of public health for a very long time, particularly with the recognition that changing individual behaviors were insufficient to address the health of the entire community. Many efforts have been made around the world to involve the community in some way to address its health needs.

Recent examples of these efforts in the U.S. are the Stanford Three Community Study conducted by Stanford University from 1979 through 1990^{xxvii} and the Midwestern Prevention Project conducted by the University of Southern California during the 1980s.^{xxviii}

The Stanford Three Community Study used a community-wide education campaign to address cardiovascular disease through changing dietary practices and reducing smoking among the general population. The Midwestern Prevention Project addressed substance use in Kansas City, Missouri, using mass media programming, a school-based educational program, parent education programs, community organizations that included business leaders, and health policy components that are introduced sequentially during a 6-year period. These studies showed how multiple interventions within a defined geographic area could have an impact on health-related behaviors.

Based on this history, in the late 1990s, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention funded a large number of community partnerships, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation supported the Fighting Back Community Coalitions. Two evidence-based community coalition approaches supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse are Communities That Care^{xxix} and PROSPER (PROmoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience).^{xxx} Currently, there are perhaps thousands of community prevention coalitions across the country.^{xxxi} However, not all of these are evidence-based, and their value and effectiveness have been called into question.^{xxxii} Funding for these coalitions comes from a variety of local, state, and federal sources. The coalitions constitute opportunities for prevention and law enforcement professionals to collaborate closely together.^{xxxiii}

Prevention Partnerships

Of major importance is creating partnerships to offer evidence-based prevention programming to

address the needs of the community.^{xxxiv} Regardless of whether they are formalized as a community coalition, these groups need to have access to data as to the size of the problem in the community, whom it affects, and where they can be found. This information not only includes emergency room episodes or deaths in which psychoactive substance use is involved (e.g., drug overdoses, attempted suicides) but also descriptors of substance use treatment admissions, infractions of school and legal policies related to substance use, and arrests related to substance use and analyses of seized substances. Law enforcement has a key role in helping identify areas of concern in the community and in the development of "dashboards" that show at a glance what problems the community is experiencing and how they compare in magnitude and severity to those of similar and neighboring communities.

As mentioned earlier, law enforcement officers and prevention professionals' engagement in the direct implementation of any evidence-based prevention intervention requires an understanding of the foundational structure of the intervention, including the logic model on which the intervention is based. In addition, as evidence-based programs are structured to be delivered to a specific age group, training in age-appropriate instructional strategies is as important as having a full grasp of the content of the program. These caveats pertain to educators who are not trained in prevention science as well as law enforcement officers.

Next Steps

What can bring the prevention and law enforcement communities together in a productive and mutually respectful partnership to pursue the joint goal of preventing substance use and related risky behaviors? What can dissolve the walls of the funding and conceptual silos in which each operates? Given the very different paradigms that frame each profession's approach to prevention, this is likely to be a challenging task. However, as indicated earlier^{xxxv} have noted not only the overlap in community goals but also evidence of the opportunities and success of such collaborations.^{xxxvi} Our suggestions as to how to move forward in a common enterprise include the following steps. We believe that the leadership for an initiative of this nature must come from the top. We suggest that the Office of Drug Control Policy and the United States Department of Justice use their persuasive power to bring together a set of nationally recognized experts from the fields of police science and prevention who have a common interest and focus. The purpose of this should be the development of a white paper that explores and suggests strategies by which prevention strategies and approaches may be braided together across professional orientations. The document should also identify key barriers to collaboration and how these may be overcome or at least attenuated. It should also recommend specific areas in which prevention and law enforcement professionals should be cross-trained if they are to understand each other's guiding principles and operational environments. The white paper should also make specific recommendations regarding existing funding resources that may be tapped to support the development of cross-disciplinary teams, focusing on the articulation of mutual implementation of key prevention strategies of joint interest at the community level. The paper should also suggest novel sources of funding – e.g., from the federal government or interested foundations - that may be required to support this initiative. The next logical step would be an invited conference that was national in scope and that was designed to systematically review the concepts and suggestions of the white paper to a combined audience of prevention and law enforcement officials. Revisions to the paper would then follow.

This initiative could easily falter at the conclusion of this process without further guidance and financial support. We suggest that several pilot sites should be carefully selected – perhaps by means of a competitive grant process – as a laboratory in which to put into practice the recommendations of the white paper. Key to the success of these pilot sites would be their willingness to consult closely on an ongoing basis with experts from both the police and prevention

science fields. The pilot sites, which would serve as incubators for the development and implementation of braided prevention strategies, should then be carefully followed for at least three years and described in individual case studies. Findings from these case studies could then be aggregated into a guidance document that would inform the advancement of this nascent field of practice.

Discussion

Two major issues were not directly addressed in this paper as, in themselves, they would require significant attention. One of these issues is the 'war on drugs' and its implications regarding the distrust of law enforcement within communities. Although pertinent, the 'war on drugs' and the distrust for many communities has led to the implementation of many tough-on-crime laws, especially when substances are involved. Such laws could naturally compromise the applicability and efficacy of the suggested policies. However, with the legalization of marijuana and a renewed focus on decriminalization, the opportunities to enhance the positive role of law enforcement in addressing community issues through prevention, particularly when collaborating with community-based prevention, health, and social service organizations, should help rebuild trust again in law enforcement.

Another issue is the focus on the United States. We purposely specified the United States as an example of how law enforcement can be integrated into a prevention framework, as this is most familiar to us. However, this role is not limited to one country but can be integrated into policing worldwide. In recognition of this concept, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) developed Guidelines for the Role of Law Enforcement Officers in the Classroom developed by a UN-sponsored symposium on this subject held in Vienna. The premise of the Guidelines is: "... to improve the effectiveness of pre-existing and ongoing work of Law Enforcement Officers (LEO) involved in substance use prevention in schools. Its intentions are to incite LEO to re-assess their mode of operation and align their work with what the science of prevention suggests doing in such settings."^{xxxvii} The Guidelines is an effort to provide guidance to law enforcement around the world as to how best to support evidence-based prevention efforts in their schools. This is a part of UNODC's effort to contribute "...to global peace and security, sustainable development and human rights by helping to make the world safer from drugs, crime, corruption and terrorism".^{xxxviii} These guidelines begin to lay the foundation for an international effort to braid together the goals and activities of the law enforcement and prevention fields.

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