Evidence Base
Criminal Justice Research, Policy & Action

ISSN: 3067-9125 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rebj20

Operation Kairos: entropy and the temporality of organised policing

Adrian James

To cite this article: Adrian James (09 Jan 2026): Operation Kairos: entropy and the temporality of organised policing, Evidence Base, DOI: 10.1080/30679125.2025.2607612

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/30679125.2025.2607612

EVIDENCE BASE
https://doi.org/10.1080/30679125.2025.2607612

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Operation Kairos: entropy and the temporality of organised policing

Adrian James

Liverpool Centre for Advanced Policing Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper examines policing's recurring difficulty in sustaining innovation and organisational learning through the conceptual lens of entropy. Drawing on classical and contemporary theories of change, it argues that operational success in policing is best understood as a temporary concentration of organisational energy that must be renewed continually. Using Operation Kairos, a pseudonymous multi-agency initiative in England and Wales, alongside comparative evidence from Canada, United States, Australia, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom, the paper shows how early clarity, alignment, and momentum gradually diffuse as initiatives are absorbed into routine practice. Entropy is reframed not as decay but as a theory of temporality: coherence emerges from provisional alignments of people, resources and purpose, and disperses as those conditions weaken. Organisational amnesia, produced through turnover, workforce strain, and shifting priorities, amplifies this cycle. The paper concludes that resilience in policing depends less on preserving successful arrangements than on designing for their continual renewal.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 December 2025
Accepted 17 December 2025

KEYWORDS
Policing reform; organizational entropy; institutional memory; operational temporality; innovation drift

Introduction – policing's historical amnesia

Policing lives with a familiar paradox. Forces/departments often are quick to learn in the short term but struggle to retain those lessons over time. Each new cohort of officers and leaders rediscovers the same frustrations: stretched resources, over-complex systems, bureaucratic drag, inconsistent leadership and the gradual loss of focus once an initiative gains momentum. For those inside the organisation, the recurrence of this cycle feels inevitable, even if its underlying causes remain obscure. For researchers, it signals a deeper puzzle that conventional accounts of organisational learning, reflective practice and institutional memory only partly explain.

One under-examined contributor to this pattern is workforce instability. Police organisations do not just forget information. They lose the connections and shared understanding that make that information useful. As people move on and organisational priorities shift, the tacit understandings forged during earlier initiatives weaken, leaving new teams to confront familiar problems with little sense of what

CONTACT Adrian James a.d.james@ljmu.ac.uk

has already been tried; each generation ends up tackling the same problems without the benefit of understanding what came before, well enough (Kazeem, 2023; McEvoy, 2020). High rates of churn driven by stress, burnout, limited organisational support, psychological injury, and exposure to traumatic demand (Baker et al., 2023; Davies et al., 2024; Drew et al., 2025; Nonis et al., 2024; Quick & Wolff, 2025; Rossler & Scheer, 2025) further accelerate the loss of tacit knowledge in policing, weakening the connective tissue that enables institutional learning to persist.

Tacit knowledge, once dispersed, rarely re-forms in the same configuration. This pattern links organisational amnesia not only to institutional design but to the lived conditions of police work: stress, fatigue, lack of support, premature departures, and the erosion of the informal networks through which learning typically travels. Organisational learning in policing therefore largely is a continual reinvention of practice shaped more by circumstance and professional disposition than by memory (Campeau, 2015; de Cuffa et al., 2018).

Stark (2024) argues that forgetting also can be protective; allowing organisations to move beyond the constraints of past solutions or to standardise action when reflection might introduce risk. Recent survey research reinforces the idea that this amnesia is both a weakness and a survival mechanism: it enables renewal but limits depth of understanding (Del Pozo et al., 2025). It is well established in the literature that many officers mistrust innovations developed outside their own organisation and remain unclear about their comparative value (see for example: James, 2011; Skogan, 2012; Terpstra, 2020). Under such conditions, new practices attach only weakly to institutional memory and are easily overridden by familiar habits, accelerating the drift back toward established routines.

Operation Kairos (used here as a pseudonym for anonymity) illustrates this dynamic clearly. Conducted by a police force in England and Wales between 2022 and 2023 and evaluated by the author in the autumn of 2024, Kairos was an initiative led by the local police in partnership with the local authority and other partners to reduce youth offending in a large coastal town. It began with focus and drive. A small, tight-knit team under a committed and charismatic operational lead worked with shared intent, producing rapid and visible results. By standard operational measures, Kairos was a clear success.

The paper will show that success depended on an exceptional concentration of resources, attention, and effort that could not be sustained without compromising other demands on the force. As competing priorities reasserted themselves, inevitably, the initiative's privileged position weakened. In entropic terms, the intensity that fuelled Kairos also hastened its diffusion: energy concentrated for exceptional effect had to be redistributed across the wider system, dissolving the coherence that had made the initiative distinctive. Seen in hindsight, this trajectory is neither surprising nor unique. It reflects a broader organisational pattern in which concentrated purpose dissipates over time.

Conceptual and interpretive approach

This paper is not an evaluation of Operation Kairos but a conceptual analysis that uses it as an illustrative case. It shows how the entropic dynamics evident in Kairos reflect an organisational rhythm observable across multiple policing systems. Entropy is used not as a management prescription, but as a way of understanding why policing struggles to sustain success and why decline forms part of the life cycle of collective effort. The comparative material that follows, drawn from Canada, the US, Australia, the Nordic countries and the UK, serves to demonstrate that the forces acting upon Kairos are not idiosyncratic but systemic. The argument therefore proceeds interpretively: Kairos provides a concrete narrative through which to explore temporal processes that shape policing more broadly. Along with the empirical evidence collected in the study, the paper was able to draw upon the findings of an internal review conducted alongside this evaluation, which reinforces the empirical picture and shows that those responsible for Kairos recognised how the conditions sustaining early coherence eroded as the initiative evolved. Note that ethical approval for the study was granted by the Liverpool John Moores Ethics Committee vide 24/LCP/021. Informed consent, in writing, was obtained from each participant. Nobody who participated in the study is identified in this paper.

The trajectory of Operation Kairos

In its early months, Operation Kairos embodied what policing can be at its best. A small, cross-disciplinary team brought together detectives, patrol officers, youth specialists, local authority workers and analysts to address pressing community harm. Leadership was close and personal, communication was direct, and purpose was shared. This tight alignment of people, energy and attention produced rapid intelligence breakthroughs, visible enforcement outcomes and a strong sense of collective achievement.

Initially, Kairos was galvanised by a specific and highly visible problem: moped and motorcycle theft concentrated within a distinct geographic area. That clear focus created a steep organisational gradient, drawing attention, authority and effort into a small operational space and justifying an exceptional concentration of resource. As the initiative gained momentum, its success attracted wider interest. Additional partners became involved, governance arrangements formalised, and expectations emerged that the model might be sustained or expanded beyond its original remit. A Kairos sergeant noted that the project's early success eased the immediate policing problem that had animated It but also altered the nature of the work. As activity shifted toward broader assessment and coordination, officers felt they were no longer able to build on the momentum generated in the early phase.

The project's operational lead said that its decline was a predictable organisational outcome. They said that Kairos' early momentum rested on concentrated individual effort and a tightly defined problem-focus but as the initiative developed, its remit broadened without redesign. It was neither resourced well enough as a standing capability nor embedded within routine governance arrangements. They said that leadership churn further disrupted continuity, leaving sustainability person-dependent rather than institutionalised. Leadership mattered in Kairos, but only insofar as it temporarily concentrated organisational energy; it could not shield the initiative from the wider

dynamics of demand and diffusion. As exceptional energy was withdrawn and competing priorities reasserted themselves, the conditions that had sustained early coherence weakened, rendering the project vulnerable as institutional focus dissipated.

An internal review, undertaken during the life of the initiative, helps to explain this diffusion. It reports that as the original problem-focus weakened, referral of problematic individuals to Kairos became less consistent and engagement between other departments and Kairos grew uneven, reducing the alignment that had sustained early momentum. Leadership rotation within the Local Policing Area disrupted continuity (a Local Authority participant said that the role of strategic lead was assumed by three different Chief Inspectors in a 12-month period) while uncertainty about ownership of the project (the operational lead said that 'senior leaders would dip in and out, but they didn't really understand what it was') and misaligned BCU/Local Authority boundaries dissipated organisational energy further.

The absence of Kairos from routine police operational governance forums, such as daily management meetings and weekly tasking meetings, beyond its initial phase (arguably, an indicator of its declining grip), combined with delays across the wider criminal justice system (particularly in the courts and youth justice systems). These served to introduce additional friction. Together, these pressures accelerated the dispersal of energy that had sustained the early period of exceptional operational focus. Notably, the review did not get a sympathetic hearing from the force executive; the operational lead said that none of its recommendations were implemented.

The operational lead was clear that Kairos' success was inseparable from the exceptional concentration of attention, effort and relational capital that had sustained it. As organisational energy was redistributed across the wider system, its privileged position weakened. Seen in this light, its trajectory is best understood not as failure or decline, but as a familiar organisational rhythm. A burst of focused innovation followed by gradual diffusion as the initiative was absorbed back into the ordinary structures and demands of policing.

Dynamics of energy, order and decay

Viewed in these terms, Kairos followed a familiar organisational pattern: an initial concentration of energy, followed by diffusion and stabilisation. In its early phase, leadership presence, shared belief and a clearly bounded problem-focus created a temporary pocket of high coherence and momentum. Over time, however, that energy dispersed as the initiative was absorbed back into the wider organisational environment. What had been exceptional became routine, and the operational gradient that had sustained intensity gradually flattened. This dispersal was not random. In policing, the pull back toward ordinary practice is shaped by the relentless demands of the present: the continuous flow of unpredictable calls for service that repeatedly redirect attention toward the immediate and the urgent. Classic sociological accounts have long emphasised this defining condition of police organisations, portraying them as oriented less toward the cumulative pursuit of organisational change than toward the management of immediate contingencies (Banton, 1964; Bittner, 1974; Reiner, 2015; Skolnick, 1965). Recent comparative work similarly shows how initiatives that depend on concentrated attention and relational energy

struggle to endure once absorbed into routine organisational life, even where they initially are effective (Del Pozo et al., 2025)). Read in this way, the diffusion of energy observed in Kairos should not be understood as failure, but as a structural return to the conditions under which policing ordinarily operates.

Reform without stability: a comparative view

What happened with Kairos is not unique. Across the globe, policing reforms often begin with energy and clarity, then lose focus and need to be rebuilt later. The problem is not a lack of ideas. It is that systems struggle to keep those ideas alive over time. In many jurisdictions, reforms intended to strengthen operational performance, partnership working, community engagement or preventive practice have tended to follow a recurring trajectory: early momentum and strong rhetorical commitment, followed by drift, partial erosion and eventual reinvention in a later cycle. This suggests that the core challenge lies less in generating new ideas than in retaining and institutionalizing what already has been learned.

This pattern is well established in the history of policing (Banton, 1964; Bittner, 1974; Campeau, 2015; Reiner, 2010; Skolnick, 2011). Each generation confronts what appear to be new problems which are, in practice, familiar ones: relentless demand, bureaucratic complexity, eroding wellbeing and morale and the chronic challenge of managing change. Organisational knowledge from earlier efforts rarely is retained in forms that can guide later reform, and even when it is, new cohorts often privilege rediscovery through experience over inherited solutions perceived as outdated or inapplicable (Argyris & Schön, 1997; Manning, 2008).

Although some examples discussed here differ in their scale and duration from Operation Kairos, they are shaped by the same structural rhythm. Entropy operates at multiple organisational timescales: short-term initiatives concentrate energy briefly before diffusing it back into the wider system, while long-term reforms experience a similar cycle across years rather than weeks. What connects these cases is not their length, scope or institutional visibility, but the underlying dynamic in which focused purpose gradually is absorbed into routine practice. It is this shared pattern, rather than equivalence of form, that makes Kairos emblematic of wider tendencies in contemporary policing.

The concept of organisational amnesia offers a useful lens through which to understand how institutional memory fades when governance structures, priorities or personnel shift. To illuminate these dynamics, this section reviews recent evidence from a range of policing systems: Canada; the United States; Australia; the Nordic countries and the UK; each with distinct histories and institutional architectures yet exhibiting strikingly similar patterns in how reform is initiated, interpreted and absorbed. These examples show that even comparatively well-resourced or organisationally settled jurisdictions experience recurring cycles of innovation and erosion, suggesting that formal commitments to learning often exceed the mechanisms available to sustain it. The analysis begins with developments in Canada, where reforms and oversight practices provide unusually detailed insight into organisational memory, before considering parallel trends elsewhere and concluding with the UK's experience in intelligence-led and neighbourhood policing. These cases demonstrate how the cyclical character of policing reform provides the

essential backdrop for understanding why Operation Kairos unfolded as it did and why its challenges mirror those found across other systems.

Contemporary Canadian experience provides some of the clearest evidence of how policing organizations struggle to convert short-term innovation into durable, institutionally embedded practice. Critical empirical work by Huey, Ricciardelli and their collaborators underscores this pattern. Studies of organisational readiness and capacity-building for evidence-based policing show that Canadian services frequently support innovation rhetorically while lacking the structures needed to sustain it in practice (Huey et al., 2017; Kalyal et al., 2018). Research on knowledge mobilization similarly highlights uneven research literacy, limited mechanisms for translating evidence into operational routines, and the fragility of learning infrastructures (Huey, 2016; Huey & Ricciardelli, 2016). Work examining frontline engagement with knowledge-intensive or analytical tasks further illustrates how cultural resistance, status hierarchies and workload pressures inhibit the uptake of new practices (Huey & Broll, 2013). Taken together, these studies consistently point to a gap between formal innovation and its institutionalization, helping to explain why reform efforts so often dissipate or must later be rediscovered.

Oversight materials reinforce the pattern identified by researchers. Reports from the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission (CRCC, 2017, 2020, 2021)) repeatedly highlight the re-emergence of longstanding issues in areas such as use of force, search practices, and workplace culture, often noting that earlier recommendations either had not been implemented or had lost momentum over time. These oversight findings underscore the fragility of organisational memory within Canadian policing and demonstrate how structural and cultural constraints result in familiar problems resurfacing despite repeated attempts at reform.

Comparable dynamics appear across other policing systems, further suggesting that organisational amnesia is a systemic feature of contemporary policing. In the United States, national reform efforts since 2014 repeatedly have highlighted the recycling of earlier ideas. For example, The US President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) framed new 'pillars' of legitimacy, community engagement, procedural justice, officer wellness and transparency. Yet, these simply paralleled insights from earlier federal commissions dating back to the 1960s. Analyses by scholars such as, Lum et al. (2011), Telep (2017), Weisburd and Majmundar (2018), and Braga et al. (2024) show consistently that the challenge is not the production of knowledge but its organisational absorption. Evidence-based practice in the US exhibits well-documented fragility: programmes shown to be effective in experimental conditions often vanish once early champions leave or operational pressures intensify. CompStat, once seen as transformative, has undergone repeated cycles of reinvention in attempts to address entrenched concerns about metric gaming and short-termism; concerns raised first more than 20 years ago but still central to more recent evaluations (Eterno & Silverman, 2012; Eterno et al., 2021; Weisburd et al., 2006).

Australia provides a parallel set of examples. Evaluations of problem-solving and evidence-based initiatives in Australian jurisdictions highlight difficulties in sustaining analytical and preventive approaches beyond initial implementation periods (Cherney et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2022; Mazerolle et al., 2021). Patterns of pilot-project fatigue, leadership turnover and short-term funding cycles mirror the dynamics seen in Canada and resonate strongly with those observed in Operation Kairos.

Even in the Nordic countries, often perceived as the most stable of corporatist systems with high institutional trust, major police reorganizations have produced mixed outcomes. *Politireformen*, Norway's 2015 major reorganisation of policing services, aimed to strengthen coordination of emergency policing and centralise capacity, yet analysts argue that structural and cultural challenges weakened its promises of improved performance (Christensen et al., 2017). Filstad's (2021) research showed that effective reform in Norway depended on navigating the organisational dynamics through which change is interpreted and enacted. A broader comparative review of Scandinavian policing reforms (Holmberg, 2019) noted that, across Denmark, Norway and Sweden, successive cycles of structural reform, centralisation and professionalisation repeatedly have met difficulties in knowledge transfer, sustaining local legitimacy, and translating formal change into durable organisational capacity. These cases illustrate how, even in well-institutionalised contexts, policing frequently struggles to embed new practices over the long term.

The United Kingdom exhibits similar patterns, shaped by its own institutional history. The National Intelligence Model, introduced in the early 2000s to embed intelligence-led policing, has never fully stabilised as a consistent operational framework across forces (James, 2011, 2016). Neighbourhood policing reflects the same cyclical behaviour; there have been any number of attempts to reinvigorate it. For example, the National Neighbourhood Policing Programme initially demonstrated strong gains in public confidence and problem-solving (Tuffin et al., 2006), but these developments were eroded significantly during a period of austerity in the public services (Longstaff et al., 2015; Unison, 2014), from which policing is yet to recover despite numerous attempts at revitalisation designed to meet public concern about police legitimacy and visibility (Colover & Quinton, 2018; Higgins, 2018). HMICFRS repeatedly has reported this pattern of drift, erosion and subsequent rediscovery in its thematic inspections of police legitimacy and of neighbourhood policing (see for example HMICFRS, 2023).

The cases surveyed in this paper reveal a remarkably consistent pattern: policing systems are adept at generating reform energy but struggle to retain it. Innovations emerge with clarity of purpose and early momentum, yet their animating principles rarely become embedded in routines capable of outlasting the circumstances that produced them. As initiatives scale, energy dissipates; as formality increases, coherence fades; and as operational pressures reassert themselves, earlier challenges reappear dressed in contemporary vocabulary. The experiences of Canada, the United States, Australia, the Nordic countries and the UK demonstrate an entropic structure to police reform; one in which organisational memory proves fragile and renewal episodic rather than cumulative. These patterns help explain why Operation Kairos unfolded as it did: not as an exception or a local anomaly, but as a concentrated instance of a wider systemic rhythm in which progress repeatedly diffuses back into institutional routine. Kairos thus is a particularly clear microcosm of how concentrated energy, once exposed to institutional gravity, disperses back into routine practice.

Entropy and the second law of thermodynamics as conceptual lenses

To explain why these patterns recur across such different contexts, the paper considers the underlying dynamics through which energy, attention, and purpose rise and fade within policing organisations. In physics, entropy describes the tendency of energy

within a system to spread and lose concentration unless renewed from outside. It is the movement from order toward disorder, or more precisely, from usable to unusable energy. Applied metaphorically, entropy provides a language for something officers recognise instinctively: operations, teams and partnerships lose vitality and purpose unless their energy (moral, emotional, organisational) continually is replenished. In human systems, energy refers not to heat or force but to attention, motivation and coordination. These are the intangible resources that allow a group to act effectively with common purpose.

Over time, those resources are diffused through turnover, bureaucracy and competing priorities. Entropy in this context describes that diffusion: the gradual thinning of belief and of focus. Importantly, entropy is not simply about decay. In complex human systems, decline and renewal are two sides of the same process. As one form of order dissolves, it releases potential for another. Entropy therefore becomes a vocabulary for realism: a reminder that organisational coherence always is temporary, that success is time-bound, and that vitality must be recreated rather than preserved.

Although the term is used here metaphorically, the thermodynamic origins of entropy illuminate its organisational relevance. In physical systems, entropy expresses the tendency of energy to disperse across the available space unless work is done to maintain concentration. The Second Law of Thermodynamics does not describe collapse but the steady drift toward equilibrium; a state in which differences of temperature, pressure or potential have evened out and the system's capacity to perform work has diminished. In this sense, entropy is fundamentally a theory of energy management: it explains why pockets of high order or concentrated power require continual input to sustain themselves, and why they naturally revert toward more diffuse states.

This insight translates with surprising clarity to organisational life. Policing operations, like physical systems, rely on gradients (differences in attention, motivation, urgency, and shared purpose) to generate movement. Kairos functioned because energy was concentrated unusually: people were aligned, leadership was catalytic, and organisational attention temporarily was focused on a single purpose. As in thermodynamics, that concentration required continuous work to maintain it. Once external inputs weakened (through resource constraints, competing demands and leadership turnover) the initiative gravitated back toward equilibrium. Diffusion, in this sense, was not a failure of will but a structural response to the dissipation of the energies that had powered the operation.

Thermodynamics sharpens another crucial distinction: systems can be held in high-energy, far-from-equilibrium states but only at a cost. Police forces often attempt to sustain intense operational focus beyond their energetic means, creating what Prigogine (1980) called dissipative structures; temporary formations held together by continuous expenditure of energy. Kairos, at its height, possessed this quality. Its momentum was real but inherently time bound. When the organisational energy behind inputs diminished, its structure relaxed and redistributed itself across the wider system. Thermodynamics therefore offers not just a metaphor but an analytic warning: no policing initiative can remain in a high-energy state indefinitely and attempts to do so generate strains that only hasten the return to organisational equilibrium. This thermodynamic framing provides a natural bridge to older philosophical traditions that also understood order as dynamic rather than static.

Philosophical resonances: from classical order to modern systems

The story of Operation Kairos echoes a long philosophical tradition concerned with the tension between order, flux and decay. For Heraclitus (c500 BC cited in Kahn, 1981), stability existed only through movement; for Aristotle (384–322 BC, 1999), vitality was found not in stasis but in purposeful striving. Both understood coherence as dependent on the continual regeneration of the forces that sustain it. Modern process thinkers deepened this intuition. Bergson (1911) emphasised durée (time as lived flow rather than sequence), arguing that life endures only by continually creating itself. Whitehead (1929) similarly rejected static metaphysics, describing reality as an ongoing process of 'concrescence', where each moment of coherence must be achieved anew. Arendt (1958) saw action and beginning as essential to the human condition: political and institutional life persist not by permanence but by the capacity to initiate, to renew, and to act again. These perspectives converge on a shared insight: continuity is never a given but a practice, dependent on the replenishment of energy and the willingness to recreate purpose.

Thermodynamics provides a scientific analogue to these older philosophical intuitions. Systems must expend energy to resist equilibrium; when that energy falters, structure relaxes and order dissolves. Prigogine's (1980) notion of dissipative structures captures the paradox vividly: the most vital systems operate far from equilibrium, sustained by continuous flows of energy that allow them both to endure and to transform. Organised human systems including policing, exhibit the same rhythm. They maintain coherence only through ongoing work, and when that work diminishes, they drift toward equilibrium, losing the intensity that once defined them. In this context, Kairos becomes not merely an operational story but a microcosm of a wider truth: that organisational coherence is achieved through temporary alignments of purpose, energy and circumstance, and that its dissipation is both natural and necessary for subsequent renewal. The challenge is not to resist this rhythm (according to those analyses, an impossibility) but to steward it, recognising that order in policing must be remade rather than preserved.

Implications for policing and scholarship

The central implication of this analysis is not that policing reforms fail too often, but that routinely they are judged against criteria (stability, permanence and scalability) for which they never were structurally suited. Effectiveness in policing inherently is time-bound, emerging from temporary alignments of people, resources and purpose rather than from arrangements designed to endure unchanged. Entropy provides a useful way of understanding this temporality.

Used here not as a management prescription but as an analytical lens, it helps explain why organisational coherence is difficult to sustain once initiatives are absorbed back into routine practice. In policing, this tendency is intensified by the continual pull of immediate demand. However focused or innovative an initiative may be, organisational energy and attention repeatedly are redirected toward the unpredictable calls for service that define policing's public purpose. As classic sociological accounts long have observed, police organisations are oriented less toward the cumulative pursuit of strategic change

than toward the continuous management of immediate contingencies (Banton, 1964; Bittner, 1974; Reiner, 2015; Skolnick, 1965). This orientation is not merely a constraint on organisational change but also a defining democratic feature of policing: police power is ordinarily activated in response to public demand and, once that demand is addressed, is expected to recede, limiting sustained intrusion into everyday life.

Precisely because policing is organised around this episodic, demand-led use of authority, the dissipation of focused organisational energy is not anomalous but built into its institutional design. From this perspective, the gradual diffusion of energy observed in Kairos is not an aberration but a structural return to ordinary business. Leadership, resources, and belief can temporarily concentrate organisational effort, but they cannot insulate initiatives from wider dynamics of demand, scale and institutional routine. Decline, in this sense, is not evidence of failure but an expression of the conditions under which policing operates normatively. For policing scholarship, this suggests a shift in analytical emphasis. Rather than focusing primarily on whether initiatives are sustained, research should attend to how long coherence can realistically be maintained, under what conditions, and at what cost to the wider policing system. The afterlife of initiatives (how energy dissipates, relationships fray, and attention is reallocated) becomes as analytically important as their launch.

For policing practice, the implications equally are significant. Entropy challenges the assumption, embedded in many reform programmes, that stability can be achieved if only the right structures are put in place. Instead, it encourages a more realistic orientation toward organisational life, in which drift, diffusion and decay are treated as normal patterns rather than as deviations from an ideal model of learning. In this context, resilience lies less in preserving successful arrangements than in designing for their renewal: periodically rebuilding relationships, refreshing purpose and recalibrating attention.

This has significant implications for how learning systems are conceived. Traditional 'lessons learned' approaches focus on storing information for future use, yet much of the knowledge that matters in policing resides in human networks, flows of trust and shared momentum. Systems that preserve data but neglect organisational energy are structurally mismatched to the realities of police practice. Entropy, understood in this way, is not merely a metaphor but a framework for resilience. Police organisations endure not by freezing successful configurations in place, but by recognising the inevitability of change and cultivating the capacity for repeated realignment and renewal.

Conclusion: harnessing entropy

Operation Kairos shows that success in policing is not a permanent state but a phase: a temporary concentration of energy that eventually must disperse. Recognising this is a discipline of realism. Entropy allows us to see decline not as failure but as transition, the moment when the alignment of people, purpose and attention that once produced momentum can no longer be sustained at the same intensity. The dispersal of energy is not an aberration but the normal afterlife of organisational achievement.

Understanding policing in these temporal terms invites a more modest and more generative conception of success. Rather than imagining progress as something that can be stabilised once achieved, entropy reminds us that effectiveness is

always provisional; an artefact of timing, focus and relationships. This does not diminish what operations that go beyond the everyday business of policing, like Kairos, achieve; it clarifies the conditions under which they do their best work. It suggests that humility about duration is a necessary counterpart to ambition about impact.

For policing organisations, the implication is not to resist entropy but to design around it. This means treating renewal as an organisational practice rather than an emergency response. Renewal may involve periodically releasing old structures, refreshing relationships or creating protected spaces for new alignments of purpose to form. It means recognising that learning systems built only for storage, for capturing lessons in documents or procedures, are mismatched to the lived reality of policing, where knowledge resides in people, in trust and in movement. The challenge is to cultivate forms of institutional learning that regenerate energy rather than merely preserve information.

Understood in this way, entropy becomes a framework for resilience: a way of acknowledging that organisations endure not by holding fast to a single configuration, but by passing through successive moments of coherence. What matters is not how long a particular pattern lasts, but how deliberately an organisation prepares for its transformation. Each dissipation carries the possibility of a new beginning; each ending creates the conditions for the next alignment. If policing can learn to anticipate and steward these rhythms, then the inevitability of entropy becomes a condition of its renewal. Entropy is not the enemy of order but the landscape through which every durable form of policing must pass, repeatedly.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

ORCID

Adrian James http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5460-406X

References

Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press.

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. A. (1997). Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective. *Reis*, *77* (77/78), 345–348. https://doi.org/10.2307/40183951

Aristotle. (1999). *Metaphysics*. (W.D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

Baker, L. D., Richardson, E., Fuessel-Herrmann, D., Ponder, W., & Smith, A. (2023). Police burnout and organizational stress: Job and rank associations. *Policing: An International Journal*, *46*(4), 682–693. https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-01-2023-0004

Banton, M. (1964). *The Policeman in the community*. Tavistock.

Bergson, H. (1911). *Creative evolution* (A. Mitchell Trans.). Macmillan.

Bittner, E. (1974). Florence Nightingale in pursuit of Willie Sutton: A theory of the police. In H. Jacob (Ed.), *The potential for reform of criminal justice* (pp. 17–44). Sage.
Braga, A. A., Schnell, C., & Welsh, B. C. (2024). Disorder policing to reduce crime: An updated systematic review and meta-analysis. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *23*(3), 745–775. https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12667
Campeau, H. (2015). 'Police culture' at work: Making sense of police oversight. *British Journal of Criminology*, *55*(4), 669–687. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azu093
Cherney, A., Antrobus, E., Bennett, S., Murphy, B., & Newman, M. (2019). *Evidence-based policing: A survey of attitudes in two Australian police agencies*. Australian Institute of Criminology.
Christensen, T., Lægreid, P., & Rykkja, L. H. (2017). Reforming the Norwegian police between structure and culture: Community police or emergency police. *Public Policy and Administration*, *33*(3), 241–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076717709523
Colover, S., & Quinton, P. (2018). *Neighbourhood policing: Impact and implementation. Summary findings from a rapid evidence assessment*. College of Policing.
CRCC. (2017). *Civilian review and complaints commission for the RCMP (2017)*. Report into workplace harassment in the RCMP. https://www.crcc-ccetp.gc.ca/en/report-workplace-harassment-rcmp
CRCC. (2020). *Civilian review and complaints commission for the RCMP (2020)*. Interim report into RCMP response to anti-shale gas protests in Kent County, New Brunswick. https://www.crcc-ccetp.gc.ca/en/interim-report-rcmp-response-anti-shale-gas-protests-kent-county-new-brunswick
CRCC. (2021). *Civilian review and complaints commission for the RCMP (2021)*. Final report: RCMP's personal searches policies and procedures. https://www.crcc-ccetp.gc.ca/en/final-report-rcmps-personal-searches-policies-and-procedures
Davies, A. J., Stephenson, A., Briggs, B., & Allan, D. (2024). What do we know about key influences on police attrition and retention rates? A literature review 2019–2023. *Policing: An International Journal*, *47*(5), 725–769. https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-11-2023-0149
de Cuffa, D., Kraemer, R., & Steil, A. V. (2018). Use of organizational memory systems in a police organization. *International Journal of Knowledge Management (IJKM)*, *14*(3), 37–47. https://doi.org/10.4018/IJKM.2018070103
Del Pozo, B., Nevill, R. E., Cepeda, J., Adams, I. T., Whiteside, A., & Thompson, E. (2025, June 03). Why innovations in policing don't work or don't translate: An implementation science survey of us police leaders. *Police Practice and Research*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2025.2512806
Drew, J. M., Keech, J. J., & Martin, S. (2025). Will I stay or will I go? Exploring job demand stress, organizational justice, and psychological health in decisions to leave the police agency or profession. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, *50*(5), 848–871. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-025-09833-8
Eterno, J. A., & Silverman, E. B. (2012). *The crime numbers game: Management by manipulation*. CRC Press.
Eterno, J. A., Silverman, E. B., & Berlin, M. M. (2021). Police leadership of tomorrow: Comprehensive CompStat performance management moving from stagnation to innovation. *Police Practice and Research*, *22*(1), 886–902. https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2020.1725273
Filstad, C. (2021). The power and politics of reforming leadership practices. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, *15*(3), 1904–1915. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paab032
Higgins, A. (2018). *Modernising neighbourhood policing guidelines: Big cogs turning*. Police Foundation.
HMICFRS. (2023). *Police performance: Getting a grip*. Home Office.
Holmberg, L. (2019). Continuity and change in Scandinavian police reforms. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, *21*(4), 206–217. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461355719889461
Huey, L. (2016). What One might Expect: A Scoping review of the Canadian policing research literature. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/What-One-Might-Expect%3A-A-Scoping-Review-of-the-Huey/47170ca5df8251c8d3ac8d020cdeedac2a17a111

Huey, L., Blaskovits, B., Bennell, C., Kalyal, H., & Walker, T. (2017). To what extent do Canadian police professionals believe that their agencies are targeting, testing, and tracking? *Police Practice and Research*, *18*(6), 544–555. https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2017.1363968

Huey, L., & Broll, R. (2013). I don't find it sexy at all': Criminal investigators' views of media glamorization of police 'dirty work. *Policing and Society*, *25*(2), 236–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2013.864654

Huey, L., & Ricciardelli, R. (2016). From seeds to orchards: Using evidence-based policing to address Canada's policing research needs. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, *58*(1), 119–131. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj2015.E24

James, A. (2011). *The influence of intelligence-led policing models on investigative policy and practice in mainstream policing 1993–2007: Division, Resistance and investigative orthodoxy* [Doctoral dissertation]. London School of Economics and Political Science.

James, A. (2016). *Understanding police intelligence work*. Policy Press.

Kahn, C. H. (Ed.). (1981). *The art and thought of Heraclitus: A new arrangement and translation of the fragments with literary and philosophical commentary*. Cambridge University Press.

Kalyal, H., Huey, L., Blaskovits, B., & Bennell, C. (2018). 'If it's not worth doing half-assed, then it's not worth doing at all': Police views as to why new strategy implementation fails. *Police Practice and Research*, *21*(2), 117–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/15614263.2018.1526687

Kazeem, G. O. (2023). *Risk prediction and decision making in policing-humans, algorithms and Data: (A study of processes at Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire police)*. Open University.

Lindsay, A., Bradley, T., & Mackenzie, S. (2022). Organisational barriers to institutional change: The case of intelligence in New Zealand policing. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, *61*(4), 407–426. https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12486

Longstaff, A., Willer, J., Chapman, J., Czarnomski, S., & Graham, J. (2015). *Neighbourhood policing: Past, present and future*. Police Foundation.

Lum, C., Koper, C. S., & Telep, C. W. (2011). The evidence-based policing matrix. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, *7*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-010-9108-2

Manning, P. K. (2008). *The technology of policing: Crime mapping, information technology, and the rationality of crime control* (Vol. 4). NYU Press.

Mazerolle, L., Bennett, S., Martin, P., Newman, M., Cowan, D., & Williams, S. (2021). Evidence-based policing in Australia and New Zealand. In E. L. Piza & B. C. Welsh (Eds.), *The globalization of evidence-based policing: Innovations in bridging the research-practice divide* (pp. 136–149). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003027508-12

McEvoy, P. (2020). *The role and contribution of knowledge and knowledge management practices in Policing. The case of an Garda Síochána* [Doctoral Thesis]. Technological University Dublin. https://doi.org/10.21427/DM5W-W913

Nonis, S., Hester, K., McDaniel, K., & Philhours, M. (2024). Turnover intentions of police officers: Influence of burnout, supervisor support, and job satisfaction. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paad086

Prigogine, I. (1980). *From being to becoming: Time and complexity in the physical sciences*. W.H. Freeman.

Quick, K. M., & Wolff, K. T. (2025). Mass exodus? Police officer turnover intention and organizational commitment in New York City. *Policing: An International Journal*, *48*(5), 897–922. https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-06-2024-0097

Reiner, R. (2010). *The politics of the police*. OUP.

Reiner, R. (2015). Revisiting the classics: Three seminal founders of the study of policing: Michael Banton, Jerome Skolnick and Egon Bittner. *Policing and Society*, *25*(3), 308–327. https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2015.1013753

Rossler, M. T., & Scheer, C. (2025). Explaining police officer intentions to leave their career field. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2025.2475182

Skogan, W. G. (2012). Why reforms fail. In M. Marks & D. Sklansky (Eds.), *Police reform from the bottom up* (pp. 144–155). Routledge.

Skolnick, J. (1965). The sociology of Law in America. *Social Problems*, *13*(1), 4–39. https://doi.org/10.2307/799317
Skolnick, J. (2011). *Justice without trial: Law enforcement in democratic society* (4th ed.). Quid pro books.
Stark, A. (2024). Institutional amnesia in government: How much is enough? *Policy Quarterly*, *20*(1), 3–9. https://doi.org/10.26686/pq.v20i1.9046
Telep, C. W. (2017). Police officer receptivity to research and evidence-based policing: Examining variability within and across agencies. *Crime & Delinquency*, *63*(8), 976–999. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128716642253
Terpstra, J. (2020). Police reform as institutional change: Symbols and dilemmas. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, *60*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2019.100359
Tuffin, R., Morris, J., & Poole, A. (2006). *An evaluation of the impact of the National reassurance policing programme - Home Office research study 296*. Home Office.
Unison. (2014). *Trouble in the neighbourhood*. https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2015/08/Trouble-in-the-Neighbourhood-Report.pdf
US President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. (2015). *Final report*. Retrieved November 28, 2025, from https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-J36-PURL-gpo64136/pdf/GOVPUB-J36-PURL-gpo64136.pdf
Weisburd, D., & Majmundar, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Proactive policing: Effects on crime and communities*. National Academies Press.
Weisburd, D., Mastrofski, S. D., Willis, J. J., & Greenspan, R. (2006). Changing everything so that everything can remain the same: CompStat and American policing. *Police Innovation: Contrasting Perspectives*, *2*(3), 284–301. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2003.tb00006.x
Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *Process and reality*. Macmillan.