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## Research in Action

James K. Stewart, Director

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# Policy experiments come of age NCJRS

by Joel H. Garner and Christy A. Visser

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When available information is inadequate, how are these uncertainties to be resolved? The answer will often be: only by some form of experiment that permits a comparison between the results of the proposed innovation and those achieved by the existing method of pursuing a given goal. The controlled, i.e., randomized, experiment is the form that permits the most reliable comparison.<sup>99</sup>

*Experimentation in the Law: Report of the Federal Judicial Center Advisory Committee on Experimentation in the Law, 1981*

Policy experiments are becoming increasingly popular with criminal justice practitioners. In Indianapolis, the district attorney is evaluating the effectiveness of prosecuting spouse assaulters in deterring future violence; in Florida, judges are using an experimental design to test new sentencing guidelines; San Diego is studying the effectiveness of electronic monitors; and Texas is comparing differing levels of parole supervision. These and other jurisdictions have decided to take a serious look at important policies by

using a field experiment to test just how well they work.

### ACQUISITIONS What is an experiment?

An experiment involves studying two or more groups equivalent in all aspects except that one group is given a treatment—arrest or counseling in domestic disturbance cases, for example—and the other groups are not. Experimental procedures ensure that every eligible person or case in the experiment has the same probability of getting one treatment as the other. Any subsequent changes observed in these groups thus can be attributed with a high degree of confidence to the differences in treatments.

At present, the National Institute of Justice is supporting two dozen field



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From development of the design to day-to-day implementation, criminal justice experiments require the close collaboration of operational personnel.

Photo by Anne Levin, NCJRS

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## Policy experiments come of age

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experiments in a variety of criminal justice policy areas: policing, prosecution, victim services, bail guidelines, sentencing guidelines, collection of fines, and probation and parole. Additional experiments are being supported by the State Justice Institute, the National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the MacArthur and other private foundations. Some jurisdictions are operating small-scale experiments using their own local resources and talents.

In addition, two recent reports, one from the leadership of the Federal Judiciary and the other from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), have endorsed the use of experimental designs as an appropriate and effective mechanism for developing more informed public policy.

### Field experiments influence public policy

Why is there so much interest in experiments? One reason is that experimental results are seen as giving relatively unambiguous policy direction. For instance, the Minneapolis Spouse Assault Experiment found that arrest deters spouse assault—a finding that has played a major role in changing misdemeanor spouse assault policies of American police departments.

In that experiment, conducted between 1981 and 1982, the officer arriving at the scene of a domestic violence call determined whether the case was eligible for the experiment. If it was, the suspect was assigned by the experiment to one of three police responses: on-the-spot advice, separation of the couple for at least 8 hours, or immediate arrest. In a 6-month followup, arrested assailants had a 19-percent recidivism rate compared to 33 percent for those separated and 37 percent for those advised.

The findings received considerable publicity and have been used to support adoption of a "pro-arrest" policy in

misdemeanor spouse assault cases. In fact, there is some concern that this single experiment from one jurisdiction has been accepted too readily by too many agencies. The National Academy of Sciences' report on its workshop on field experiments emphasizes that the "purpose of experiments is to inform policy, not to make policy."

The report also stressed the value of repeating similar experiments in different jurisdictions prior to uncritical

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**"We are at an early stage in making ours a modern profession with stature. We will make mistakes, but we can and must learn from them. For those who are willing to adhere to scientific methods in conducting criminal justice experiments, the road ahead is going to be difficult, but the potential rewards for our society and for us individually and for our profession are great."**

*National Institute of Justice Director James K. Stewart, National Academy of Sciences Workshop on Randomized Field Experiments in Criminal Justice*

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adoption of a treatment that has been found successful in one. To this end, NIJ is currently supporting replications of the Minneapolis experiment in six different locations—Colorado Springs; Omaha; Milwaukee; Atlanta; Dade County, Florida; and Charlotte, North Carolina (see page 4 for details of the Charlotte replication). The results of these experiments will help us understand the effectiveness of alternative police responses in dealing with misdemeanor spouse assault cases in cities and police departments with widely varying characteristics.

Even findings contrary to those expected can influence policy. For instance, experiments revealed that certain treatment programs for juvenile offenders not only did not reduce criminal behavior but, in some instances, led to increased criminality. The strength of these findings contributed to the decreased popularity of rehabilitation programs.

More often than not, experiments, like other forms of research, find that one policy is no different than its alternative. The 1972–1973 Kansas City Patrol Experiment tested the effectiveness of preventive patrol on crime rates, community attitudes, and public satisfaction with police services. The experiment compared three levels of routine preventive patrol: reactive, traditional, and proactive. In the reactive condition, officers responded only to calls. In the traditional (control) condition, they carried out the

normal level of routine preventive patrols. In the proactive condition, additional officers were assigned so that the level of preventive patrols could be increased. The experiment found no differences in the outcomes of the three patrol levels.

Still, this study is probably the best-known research in American policing, and its findings about the relative ineffectiveness of saturation patrol have influenced patrol practices in police departments throughout the country.

### Choosing the right policy question

Policy experiments are not simply policy innovations, although in some instances they are that, too. Experiments frequently test a range of traditional policies and do not necessarily involve new or innovative practices. Indeed, policymakers' uncertainty about



Photo by Ann Gardner, NCJRS

The National Institute of Justice is funding policy experiments in numerous jurisdictions around the country. Joel Garner and Christy Visher are among the Institute staff who provide startup technical assistance and are available for help throughout the course of the projects.

the effectiveness of current practices is a vital motivating force for any field experiment. Determining which policies are important enough to warrant substantial research attention is just the first of many issues that policymakers must address. Tried and true policies that are well accepted are not likely to be good candidates for an experiment. A new approach that is controversial or an old one that is openly questioned might be worth pursuing. Picking an interesting question may be the most important part of an experimental design. Theory and past research might help inform that choice, but policymakers must also consider the needs and attitudes of the community.

### Field experiments are rigorous

Experimental designs are traditionally considered the most rigorous form of research; all other research designs are judged by how well they approximate an experiment. The descriptive

information provided by other forms of research can certainly help policymakers understand and improve policy, but policymakers need more than descriptions. They need to know how well one policy option works compared to another. Experiments provide answers to such questions. While most research designs have a limited capability to identify the effects of particular policies, experiments can isolate the unique contribution of each policy variable.

The core of an experimental design is testing a policy that a criminal justice agency can manipulate. Age, for instance, is an important determinant of criminality and a vital consideration in setting criminal justice policy. Juveniles are treated differently from adults, but age cannot easily be manipulated by the criminal justice system. On the other hand, an agency can waive serious juvenile offenders to adult court. This potentially controversial policy option could be tested with an experimental design. The strength of experimental designs and the focus on *policy* variables make experiments particularly attractive to State and local decision-makers.

### Policy experiments require collaboration

As we have noted, experiments are collaborative efforts between operational agencies and researchers that are designed to generate knowledge—not just any knowledge or knowledge of interest only to academics but knowledge about the relative effectiveness of public policy options. Experimental assignment of treatments to cases is what makes experimental designs different from other research designs. Thus, experiments require that policymakers give up some of their traditional discretion for the range of cases under investigation.

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**“You start experimenting and people begin to think that what they are doing is exciting and interesting. They begin to take a different view of themselves. They begin to think expansively, creatively, originally, and there is a tremendous amount of intellectual energy lying dormant in police agencies that needs to be inspired.”**

*Minneapolis Police Chief Anthony Bouza, National Academy of Sciences Workshop*

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## Charlotte, North Carolina: A case study in researcher-practitioner collaboration

While no major research project is really typical, the collaboration between operational agencies and researchers in Charlotte illustrates issues other jurisdictions are likely to face in a field experiment.

Charlotte, North Carolina, is one of six jurisdictions currently replicating the Minneapolis Spouse Assault Experiment (see p. 2) to study the effectiveness of alternative police responses to misdemeanor spouse assault cases. They will study 900 such cases encountered by the 400 patrol officers of the Charlotte Police Department. Major Joe Kelley, Commander of Charlotte's South Patrol Bureau, and Professor David Hirschel of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) are directing the project.

Chief Killman, a graduate of the UNCC criminal justice program, initiated the collaborative effort. The Chief had been approached by an out-of-town research firm about the replication but chose to work with local researchers he knew and trusted.

### Developing the design

In lengthy discussions, the police department and the university worked out the design's basic structure. They agreed to focus on spouse assault cases where both parties were present and to study four alternative police responses: stationhouse arrest, citation arrest, advice to the couple, and separation of the couple for a period of time. They also developed the criteria patrol officers would use to determine whether a situation was eligible for the experiment. For instance, the case could not be a felony, both parties had to be present and be adults, and no warrants could be outstanding against either party.

The department and the university researchers decided to use the entire patrol force instead of just a small number of volunteer officers. This meant that training would involve more than 400 officers in the patrol division and the departmental command staff.

### Facing new problems

Unexpected problems often arise in field experiments. In Charlotte, all participants (including NIJ) underestimated the cost and complexity of the numerous modifications needed as the project progressed. For example, changing existing police forms to describe the eligible cases and the delivered treatments turned out to be a major effort. "I was shocked at the amount of time we all spent on nonresearch issues," commented University of North Carolina researcher Ira Hutchison. "We had to politic like hell to get one little form approved."

Early in the project's field phase, one aspect of the design was changed. Two treatments—advice and separation—were combined into one. And as late as this July the design was further modified: In three patrol beats, domestic disturbance calls are assigned to specially trained officers whenever possible. Both modifications have shortened the field time required for the project.

### Close collaboration pays off

At every step, the collaboration drew on the combined strengths of university people expert in research methodology and police officers knowledgeable about policing. Charlotte police officials, for example, used their detailed knowledge of computer-aided dispatching to redesign the very heart of the research plan—the experimental assignment procedures. When Charlotte officers

determine that a call is eligible for the experiment, a computer program uses the seconds tick of the dispatching time to select and assign the police response, which officers then implement.

The strong ties between researchers and operational personnel were crucial to other aspects of the project. Individual patrol officers had to change the way they traditionally handled misdemeanor spouse assault cases—a change unlikely to have come about if researchers had been working alone. Chief Sam Killman's support and Major Joe Kelley's direction were critical in obtaining the officers' commitment. Retired police captain Gail Sloan, who managed day-to-day project operations and became its main troubleshooter, was another key player.

### Involving the community

The experiment's collaborative efforts extend beyond the police department and the university to victims' rights and women's advocacy groups in Charlotte. The project recruited the former director of the Charlotte Victim Assistance Project, Valerie Schmieder, to manage the victim interviews. Chief Killman made sure community groups knew of the project's progress.

The Charlotte experiment is now more than halfway to its goal of 900 cases. Experiments are not easy to implement. Credit for the success of the Charlotte project must be shared by many participants in the department, the university, and the community. They have already learned much and look forward to having the best information available on what they can do together to reduce spouse assault in Charlotte.

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When an experimental design is applied to field operations, policymakers work with researchers to develop the details of the experimental assignment procedure and the types of cases that will and will not be eligible for the experiment. *For all practical purposes, local policymakers, not researchers, design the final form of any sound field experiment.* This does not happen all at once or even over a short period of time. Policy experiments typically involve months to design and implement. For instance, the Kansas City Patrol Experiment was started, then stopped, then started up again because Police Chief Clarence Kelley realized that his police department was not implementing the proper design.

Experiments require that policymakers—either chief executives or midlevel managers—involve themselves in doing research. In some experiments, policymakers have



Photo courtesy of Charlotte Police Department, Charlotte, North Carolina

Charlotte, N.C., Police Chief Sam Killman initiated his jurisdiction's replication of the spouse assault experiment. "We made a conscious effort to strengthen the link between the university and the department. We are especially grateful that we were able to do so by addressing an issue, like spouse assault, that is of vital importance to so many people in Charlotte."

**"Experimentation is not the way of the true believer. You have to be a skeptic, or at least an agnostic (on a particular issue). Nor is experimentation for the pessimist. If a person believes that life cannot be improved or that practices cannot be improved, then there is no point to experimentation."**

*Professor Peter Rossi, University of Massachusetts, National Academy of Sciences Workshop*

initiated the collaboration with researchers. The Charlotte, North Carolina, Police Department, for instance, approached the University of North Carolina at Charlotte about joining with them to replicate the Minneapolis Spouse Assault Experiment (see page 4 for more on the Charlotte replication). More typically, researchers initiate the contact, or the collaboration is the result of long-standing personal relationships between researchers and local practitioners. In all cases, successful field experiments involve policymakers in the design, implementation, and interpretation of the research findings.

### Experiments in progress

In addition to experiments testing alternative police responses to spouse assault, NIJ-sponsored research in Indianapolis is examining prosecution policies for handling these cases. The experiment, conducted by Marion County (Indiana) District Attorney Stephen Goldsmith and David Ford of Indiana University at Indianapolis, is assessing the deterrent effect of three different approaches to handling misdemeanor wife assault cases: allowing victims to drop charges, diverting offenders to rehabilitative treatment programs before prosecution, and giving alternative sentences for those found guilty (rehabilitative treatment as a condition of probation, fines, or jail).

Another Indianapolis experiment is testing the use of electronic monitoring of probationers and parolees. The research, begun in 1986, assigns convicted nonviolent felons sentenced to probation to a home detention (house arrest) program either with or without the simultaneous use of an electronic monitoring device.

A replication of a pretrial drug use surveillance experiment first conducted in Washington, D.C., is under way in Phoenix, Arizona. Michael Gottfredson, of the University of Arizona, in cooperation with Terri Jackson, director of the Maricopa County Pretrial Services Agency, is evaluating whether periodic pretrial drug testing is effective in reducing pretrial arrest and failure to appear. Arrestees released on their own recognizance who tested positive for drugs at arrest are either assigned to the pretrial urine testing program or to regular pretrial supervision.

In Houston and Dallas, the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles and Joan Petersilia, a Rand Corporation researcher, are assessing the effectiveness of intensive parole supervision, which involves more frequent contact between parolee and parole officer, mandatory employment, and lower officer caseloads versus regular parole. High-risk male and female parolees in the study are assigned to one of the two programs according to experimental procedures.

In addition, NIJ is currently supporting experiments that are comparing imprisonment against alternative types of

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## Policy experiments come of age

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**“Both practitioners and researchers must recognize that experimentation is not just a study; it is not just a program evaluation; it is a major process of organizational change. No matter how temporary that change may be, it is still going to be intrusive and major.”**

*Professor Lawrence W. Sherman, University of Maryland and President, Crime Control Institute, National Academy of Sciences Workshop*

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community supervision of offenders, testing jail or no-jail policies for drunk drivers, examining police drug enforcement strategies, and assessing the use of saturation patrol in locations with large numbers of prior calls to the police.

### **The future of field experiments**

At the National Institute of Justice, field experiments are a priority. While support continues for other research methods and approaches, the National Institute of Justice *Research Program Plan Fiscal Year 1989* emphasizes the preference for field experiments. The National Institute, however, cannot

implement field experiments; only State and local agencies working in collaboration with researchers can do that. More important, NIJ relies on policymakers and practitioners to identify important issues and policies that need testing, as well as jurisdictions willing to be the site for such experimentation. The future of field experimentation will be determined by the interest expressed by State and local criminal justice officials and by the contributions of ongoing and future experiments in helping them make policy.

The state of the art in criminal justice experiments is advancing as close

collaboration between criminal justice agencies and criminal justice researchers brings a deeper understanding of the relationship between theory and reality, policy and practice. Randomization, once a new idea to the criminal justice community, is now more readily understood and accepted as useful and sometimes a necessity for reliable results. Criminal justice experiments have not yet reached the routine precision of laboratory experiments, but they increasingly inspire the confidence of practitioners and policymakers.

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