Translating Research into Policy

Presentation by

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Thank you, Jan [Chaiken, panel chair]. On behalf of NIJ Director Jeremy Travis, I'd like first to thank JRSA and BJS for inviting the National Institute of Justice to be part of this panel. Jeremy asked me to convey his regret at not being able to participate, and he wanted me especially to express to JRSA and President Przybylski [Roger Przybylski, President of JRSA and a panelist] his appreciation for JRSA's contribution to making the relationship between our two organizations such a productive one. On my own behalf, I am honored to speak in Jeremy's place and to share the dais with you, Roger, and my colleagues from the Office of Justice Programs [Shay Bilchik and Larry Meachum].

I see translating research into policy not as a goal with precisely defined parameters (like preparing NIJ's annual report to Congress, for example), but rather as a work at all times in progress. It is an imperative that drives other central goals at NIJ, and is an effort always in a state of becoming. It reminds me of the enigma of the runner in the stadium that we learn about in our college classes in formal logic. The runner never reaches the other side because he or she always has half the distance to go. There's always more distance left to travel--more to accomplish.

I.   The NIJ Record

Having said that, I would like to defy that academic logic and note, very briefly, some of NIJ's significant accomplishments in translating research into policy and practice, as a

way of conveying the important message that policy-relevant research has been an integral part of the Institute's mission since its founding.

Let me first mention the area of policing, where NIJ achieved a number of successes fairly early in our history. Building on the work of the Police Foundation, which challenged the efficacy of "preventive" or random patrol, NIJ sponsored research that questioned another universally held assumption--that the faster the police answer a call for service, the higher the probability of an on-scene arrest. We found the biggest delay in response occurred between the moment the offense is committed and the moment the citizen makes the call. The conclusion was that rapid response was critical largely for crimes in progress or when someone is injured. Other, less critical, calls could be deferred. These findings led the Police Executive Research Forum to develop a model response system for classifying calls by level of urgency. NIJ then tested and evaluated these models, and since that time they have been adopted by most major police departments.

Most of you are familiar with NIJ-sponsored research on spousal assault, which revealed, at least initially, that arrest cut in half the risk of repeat violence. That changed police practice to favor arrest. I say "initially" because replications of the research revealed a significantly more complex pattern--so often the case in research that takes seriously the scientific charge to replicate important studies. I'll return to this in a moment.

In prosecution, we investigated why defendants who had criminal "careers"--past convictions--were not being handled in a way commensurate with their public safety risk. Our findings became the impetus for development of "career criminal prosecution" programs, which focused on these repeat offenders and included vertical prosecution. These programs in turn laid the foundation for specialized prosecution units in such areas as gangs and child abuse.

Just two more examples I'll cite are in science and technology. NIJ sponsored the development of an investigative tool that has become a standard in forensics--the *Sourcebook of Forensic Serology, Immunology, and Biochemistry*. And--more visible to the general public--our development of lightweight, flexible, effective body armor is credited with saving the lives of more than 1,500 police officers as of 1993.[1]

More recently, the findings of research on the efficacy of drug treatment for offenders were cited at the very highest level of policy making. I'm referring to President Clinton's proposal last September to expand prison-based drug treatment, including the Residential Substance Abuse Treatment for State Prisoners Program, to be administered by OJP's Corrections Program Office. We at NIJ were particularly gratified that the President explicitly based his decision on empirical research. NIJ has sponsored or disseminated the work of researchers Douglas Lipton, James Inciardi, and Sandra Tunis on treating offenders.[2]

II. How the traditional research paradigm limits the utility of research for policy and program development

This kind of high-level, high-profile recognition of the utility of research for policy making is not something we can expect to see regularly. But when this acknowledgment does come, it is a welcome validation of NIJ's mission and the dedication of the researchers whose work we sponsor. More commonly, we face, in the workaday world of the research community, many obstacles to fulfilling the policy premise of researchers, many of which stem from the way research is traditionally conducted.

We've been asked to look at some of the limitations on the "supply" or "producer" side of research, but I think we also need to note there are limitations on the other side as well--the "demand" or "consumer" side. In developing my thoughts on limitations on both sides, I borrow from Al Blumstein and others (all of whom, I assure you, are names we associate with the *strengths*, not the limitations, of the traditional research paradigm).

*   Research takes time. NIJ has every confidence that our multi-year, collaborative Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, directed by Felton Earls of Harvard's School of Public Health, will produce new insights into the determinants of pro-social, anti-social, and criminal behavior. Yet even with an innovative design that

will enable the researchers to telescope many years of the subjects' lifetimes into a study covering only 8 years, this project is a very long-term undertaking.

My point is that the slow pace of research and some of the other often noted "limitations" of research are inherent in the process of knowledge-building, and as such are not something we need be defensive about.

On the other hand, because we are dealing with issues of grave concern that often demand an immediate response from public officials whether or not we have all the knowledge we need, we must be able to respond in the short-term. NIJ is taking steps to meet this need, as I'll discuss.

*   The second "limitation" is that research findings are often inconclusive. When they are, they permit various interpretations--they raise what Al Blumstein called the "half-full-half-empty" question. Joan Mullen has called this limitation "one of the necessary evils of research in progress that drive policy makers to despair."[3] What's worse, as we all know, is that when you compare findings from various studies on the directly contradictory!

NIJ-sponsored research on police responses to spousal assault shows how elusive are definitive answers. The replications of NIJ's initial study produced different findings

about the effect of arrest on subsequent behavior--namely, that the effect varied with the type of person arrested.

This particular "limitation"--the potential for ambiguous or conflicting findings--is an ever-present caution against putting findings into practice too soon, and encourages us not to ignore the need in science to replicate studies and re-validate their findings under different circumstances in order to assess their generalizability. Equally important is the responsibility of researchers to insert this cautionary note when introducing research findings into policy discussions and debate.[4]

*   As to the next limitation, a mea culpa is sometimes in order for the research community because of flaws in our research designs. However, it is important to note that we often do not deserve a mea *maxima* culpa, because many research design flaws are extremely difficult to overcome. For example, it is sometimes unacceptable to set up the control groups that empirically based study requires, because Federal regulations and canons of research ethics place certain constraints on studies using human subjects. On the other hand, advances in measurement techniques enabled us to develop high-quality alternatives to controlled experiments. Within these constraints, assessing the strength of the study design for the policy community is the responsibility of the principal investigator *and* the organization monitoring the project.

*   The foregoing does not exhaust the limitations of much traditional research for

policy making. Others include: insufficient emphasis on policy implications of the

findings or the absence of an explicit orientation to social problem-solving; a tendency

to use language that addresses other researchers rather than communicates with policy

makers; "tunnel vision," or inability to place one's project in the "big-picture" context;

and pressure to get the findings published in the scholarly literature, delaying their

timely receipt by policy makers.

I want to discuss, very briefly, the limitations on the "consumer" or "demand" side,

because they too create obstacles to translating research into policy and practice. I

think that by addressing some of the limitations on our supply side we may be able to

overcome or at least mitigate some of the limitations on the other side.

But not always. The consumers of research may find themselves constrained at times

to make policy decisions that are unsupported by research. This is often necessitated

by factors or values not addressed by the empirical research. It is what NIJ Director

Travis meant when he said that policy makers' immediate response to the public's

concern about crime is a rational choice in public policy terms (though it may seem

otherwise from the researchers' perspective). Our research in spousal assault also is

indicative of how other important values interpose. As Jeremy has noted, the question

of whether the police *should make an arrest can* be answered only by reference to the

values society sees at stake. As a society we see spousal assault as an act of violence

grave enough to warrant invocation of the criminal sanction—this value takes precedence over the research finding that arrest "works," or has instrumental value to deter, only in *some* instances.[5]

*   Al Blumstein and Joan Petersilia have noted the lack in the criminal justice profession of a tradition of empirical research comparable to that in the medical profession. From the start of medical school and throughout their careers, physicians are trained to keep up with the research literature in their field, and many contribute regularly to that literature. By contrast, the legal profession, the dominant profession in criminal justice, has a wholly different, case-based approach to building knowledge. This helps explain why research findings are not as whole-heartedly embraced in many criminal justice practitioner and legal policy maker circles.[6]

But there are limitations we may be able to address. One is skepticism about the usefulness of research. Some skepticism is due to the limitations of research I noted earlier--its slow, methodical pace, for example. But some is also due to an often pervasive sense among policy makers that in the criminal justice system "everybody already knows the answers" on an intuitive level. And some practitioners feel--not wholly without justification--that for some problems they have the best answers--from what Al Blumstein and Joan Petersilia have called "craft knowledge" based on experience.[7]

III.   How research and evaluation are changing to meet the needs of decision makers

We can't overcome all the limitations of the research paradigm, but we can limit the limitations, or limit a *limited number* of the limitations. Overall, the way NIJ is doing this is by assuming not only the role of knowledge builder--our traditional role--but also the role of knowledge broker--between the research and policy maker/practitioner communities.

We are doing this in somewhat different ways from those we've used in the past. The principle that has always guided NIJ's work is that policy *and* practice are the starting point of research. This principle continues to apply today. Our new "Breaking the Cycle" pilot project and the accompanying evaluation is an example. The "cycle" is that of drugs and crime, and the project will test the hypothesis that a systemwide policy of needs assessment, sanctions, and services for all arrestees coming into the criminal justice system can make measurable change. What determined the selection of this hypothesis was its utility for policy makers.

That hasn't changed, of course. What is different is our emphasis on beginning the policy-researcher linkage well before research projects like Breaking the Cycle are under way, before awards are made, even before competitive solicitations are released. It starts early in our planning process. Before we even begin to think about what types of research to sponsor, we engage the practitioner community and the research

community in that process. Each and every major solicitation for research we release is developed using input based on direct dialog between both groups. That is also true of our other initiatives--in restorative justice and police integrity, to name just two.

What we've been doing very recently is to attempt to bring research and practice together--not to blur the lines between them, but to produce a synergy between them. We are doing this by encouraging the two to interact, to be partners--thereby breaking down the producer-consumer dichotomy. I'd like to touch on a few areas in which we are taking this approach.

*   Thanks in great part to the partnerships between NIJ as a science agency and the Crime Act offices of OJP and the Department of Justice, we have been able to build our research portfolio in several key areas, one of them policing. A significant part of this research effort in policing is fostering what we term "**locally initiated research.**" These projects are carried out by a team--police department staff on the one hand, and researchers on the other, with the researchers often from an academic or research institution located in the same jurisdiction as the department. The partnership collaborates on a problem that the department identifies and to which the researchers and practitioners apply their expertise.

The goal is to solve the problem and to help police departments become better problem solvers by expanding the tools they have at their disposal. We consciously designed

this effort with the goal in mind of helping practitioners understand the practical value of research. We hope they will begin to see research as a resource they can tap from local sources, without having to thread their way through the maze of the Federal bureaucracy. We also hope to promote continuing dialog at the local level between researchers and practitioners and so make the link of research to practice more direct and immediate. Beginning in 1996, we extended these partnerships to the field of corrections.

*   Our **"problem-solving"** projects respond to the need, expressed by Mark Moore among others, that because research is for the long run and we need answers in the short run, we should link research to decision-making. In other words, practitioners' experience (their "craft knowledge") provides part of the answer, and interacts directly with the knowledge conveyed to the public by researchers. In these problem-solving projects, practitioners are active partners in devising what might work on a problem, rather than passive recipients of knowledge imparted by researchers.

One of these projects is under way in the Boston Police Department, where researcher David Kennedy is working with the Department staff to tackle youth violence in which firearms are involved. Together they are gathering data, while *at the same time* working to come up with intervention strategies to help solve the problem. They are working hand-in-hand to analyze the supply of and demand for guns and devising sometimes

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unorthodox methods to convince young people that gun ownership is counterproductive.[8]

In these projects I think what is notable is not just policy and practice as the foundation of the research agenda, but also our proactive efforts to get researchers and practitioners "on the same bus." If practitioners and researchers work with each other from the "get go," they may be able to ease the time constraints of the traditional research paradigm. In addition, once practitioners can experience--not just as observers but as participants--why research takes time, why it is often inconclusive, and why the research design often becomes a minefield, their expectations of research might be more realistic. That, in turn, might mitigate some of the skepticism on the "consumer" side.

*   We are also working on the dissemination "end"--streamlining ways to get research findings into the hands of people who can use it. One example is NIJ's **research-in-action partnerships**, which we inaugurated in fiscal '95. The partnership is made up of two or more professional or membership organizations, which come up with new ways to disseminate research findings of interest to their members. The rationale behind research-in-action is that the organizations themselves are best equipped to know their members' needs and the best ways to reach them, and they can put research findings into contexts most useful for their members.

IV.   What further steps need to be taken

To answer the question, "what further steps need to be taken to improve the utility of research to policy makers?" I will limit myself to one issue--transnational crime. I selected it because I see it as an area in which we need to do more to provide research that has high utility for practitioners, including studies that furnish data on the scope and nature of the problem.[9] It is a relatively neglected field, as one researcher recently noted in faulting American academic criminology for limiting its view by assuming what he called "a localistic orientation to crime, as nineteenth century social theorists assumed the paradigm of the nation-state."[10] This researcher, William McDonald of Georgetown University and a visiting fellow at NIJ, has called for greater attention to a new "global criminology"--the study of crime and justice problems related to the compression of the globe.[11]

Criminal justice practitioners are consumed by urgent problems at home, but they--if not yet researchers--increasingly recognize that crime committed halfway around the globe yesterday can mean crime committed at home today.[12]

The most familiar example is drug trafficking, but newer, no less pernicious forms have emerged and are expanding their reach. Furthermore, when we talk about transnational crime today, we are often referring to highly organized criminal enterprises.

The causes of the increase in transnational crime help explain the forms it takes. Ironically, the liberalization in economics and politics that we in the West espouse is promoting its growth. Liberalization, plus globalization, means increased mobility of goods and people as borders open. Recent political dislocations have made some states unwitting or unwilling hosts of transnational crime by leaving them weak, with law enforcement underfunded and legislative remedies inadequate to deal with crime.[13]

In addition, new avenues are open for financial crime because advanced communication systems make it possible to move capital around the global financial system rapidly and easily. Where banking regulations are lax, money laundering can thrive. In finance, transnational crime extends to counterfeiting and credit card fraud.[14]

I learned from Gerhard Mueller that the United Nations has categorized organized transnational crime by prevalence. They came up with 18 types, with money laundering--closely tied to drug trafficking--topping the list.[15] Terrorism comes in second. In third place is—perhaps surprisingly—theft of art and cultural objects. Next is theft of intellectual property, which includes illegally copying software. I might add that the U. N. placed computer crime in a separate category altogether.

The dollar losses alone from these crimes are staggering--bootlegged software losses amount to $7.5 billion annually in this country. Smuggling of people, with its associated crimes of indentured servitude and the sale of visas and passports--is also a multi-

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billion dollar business in the U.S.[16] Yet relatively little research is addressing these issues.

I'd like to note two studies now under way at NIJ that illustrate the kind of research I think can help practitioners deal with this growing threat. Both take the two-fold approach of gathering data on the extent and nature of the problem and of assessing solutions.

*   One study centers on Soviet emigré crime organizations, which have been widely reported in the media as operating here in the U.S. Extortion, forgery, counterfeiting, confidence schemes, and insurance and medical fraud are some crimes attributed to them. One of our researchers [James Finckenauer of Rutgers] is trying to find out the actual extent of their operations, examining their scope, their nature, and their structure.

He is also examining possible solutions being developed jointly by three States--New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey--which have joined forces to combat the problem, through forging links with investigators in the former Soviet Union.[17]

*   The other study [by visiting fellow Bill McDonald] deals with one of the unintended consequences of illegal immigration--crime committed by people who enter the U.S. illegally. It is difficult to determine the extent of crime committed by illegal

aliens, but this is no longer just a problem for traditional border States such as California and Texas. Iowa is an example of jurisdictions dealing with how to pursue cases in which illegal aliens charged with a crime have fled the country, and in this study we will be examining an approach pioneered by California that may be useful to other jurisdictions.[18]

Conclusion

As we contemplate the growing scope of the research we need to undertake as crime is globalized, and remind ourselves of the continued limitations of research as a problem-solving strategy, I think we can all take encouragement from findings in the field of "knowledge utilization." Joan Petersilia has called our attention to these findings as they apply to criminal justice research.

Experts studying how knowledge is absorbed and put to use confirm how difficult it is to measure these effects, including the effects of research on public policy. They assure us, however, that the effects are there, although they are often indirect in the social and behavioral sciences, and more nuanced than is the case with the hard sciences. They tell us if criminal justice research does not change policy in easily measurable ways, it nonetheless challenges old ways of thinking; it leads policy makers to rethink their problems, even to reconceptualize how they identify problems; and to consider new alternatives. Criminal justice research can and does therefore promote thinking in

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wholly new and perhaps more useful categories.[19] That is no small accomplishment,

and it is one of which we can be justifiably proud.

Notes

1. *Twenty Five Years of Criminal Justice Research: The National Institute of Justice*, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, December 1994; National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, *Annual Report, FY 1975*, U. S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, 1975.

2. "Clinton to Link Prison Funds, Drug Programs," press release, Reuters News Media, September 11, 1996. Examples of NIJ-sponsored or -disseminated research in the efficacy of in-custody drug treatment are Douglas S. Lipton's *The Effectiveness of Treatment for Drug Abusers under Criminal Justice Supervision* (Research Report, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, November 1995); Sandra Tunis et al.'s *Evaluation of Drug Treatment in Local Corrections* (Research Report, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, May 1996); and James A. Inciardi's *A Corrections-Based Continuum of Effective Drug Abuse Treatment* (Research Preview, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, June 1996).

3. Mullen, Joan, untitled presentation made at NIJ's 25th anniversary commemoration, Washington, D.C., December 12, 1994, in *Conference Proceedings: Twenty Five Years of Criminal Justice Research–the National Institute of Justice*, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice [1995].

4. From a discussion in McDonald, William F., and Sergei E. Paromchik, "Transparency and the Police: External Research, Policing and Democracy," unpublished paper, U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1996.

5. Travis, Jeremy, "Violence Against Women: Reflections on NIJ's Research Agenda," *National Institute of Justice Journal* (230), February 1996: 21-25.

6. Blumstein, Alfred, and Joan Petersilia, "Investing in Criminal Justice Research," *Crime*, eds. James Q. Wilson and Joan Petersilia, San Francisco: ICS Press, 1995.

7. Ibid.

8. *Juvenile Gun Violence and Gun Markets in Boston: Summary of a Research Presentation by David Kennedy, Ph.D.*, Research Preview, Washington, D. C.: U. S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, forthcoming.

9. The need for research in transnational crime is discussed in McDonald, William F., "The Globalization of Criminology: The New Frontier Is the Frontier," *Transnational Organized Crime* (vol. 1, no. 1), Spring 1995:1-22.:

10. Transnational crime has been defined as crime that violates the laws of more than one country or is committed in one country and has an impact on another (Mueller, Gerhard O. W.,

"Transnational Criminal Activities and Organized Crime," unpublished paper, September 1996). A more detailed definition is in McDonald, "Globalization of Criminology."

11.   McDonald, William, "Globalization, Crime, and Justice: The New Challenges," in McDonald, William, ed., *Crime and Law Enforcement in the Global Village*, Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishers, forthcoming.

12.   See, for example, Albrecht, S., "Criminal Aliens: What Every Officer Should Know," *Law and Order*, V (40, 6), June 1992:79-81; and Hoffman, T. W., "Yugoslavian-Albanian Organized Crime: An Overview and Profile," *Law and Order*, V (40, 7) July 1992:93-96. The impact of transnational crime in the U.S. is discussed in McDonald, "Globalization of Criminology."

13.   United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (Fifth Session, Vienna, 21-31 May 1996), *Review of Priority Themes: Implementation of the Naples Political Declaration and Global Action Plan against Organized Transnational Crime.*

14.   Ibid.

15.   Mueller, "Transnational Criminal Activities." The 18 transnational crimes listed by the U. N. are money laundering, terrorist activities, theft of art and cultural objects, theft of intellectual property, illicit trafficking in arms, aircraft hijacking, sea piracy, land hijacking, insurance fraud, computer crime, environmental crime, trafficking in persons, trade in human body parts, illicit drug trafficking, fraudulent bankruptcy, infiltration of legal business, corruption and bribery of public officials, and other offenses.

16.   Ibid., and McDonald, William F., "Illegal Immigration: Crime, Ramifications and Control (The American Experience)," unpublished paper [1996]; "Chinese Charged with Smuggling: 2-Year Probe Leads to Capture of Freighter Crowded with Aliens," *Washington Post*, October 9, 1996.

17.   "Soviet Emigré Organized Criminal Networks in the United States," proposal submitted to NIJ by James O. Finckenauer (NIJ grant #93-IJ-CX-0019); and communication from James O. Finckenauer.

18.   Information provided by William McDonald.

19.   Petersilia, Joan, *The Influence of Criminal Justice Research*, Santa Monica: California: RAND Corporation, June 1987.