

Framing the National Agenda: A Research and Policy Perspective

By Jeremy Travis

Editor's note: The following was excerpted from a speech delivered by Jeremy Travis, director of the National Institute of Justice, to the National Corrections Conference in April 1997.

An issue of overarching importance to the nation is how to leverage the resources, both old and new, of the corrections and treatment professions to move our country's thinking and practice forward.

You have been given the assignment of developing and expanding our nation's efforts to reduce drug abuse and to enhance public safety by intervening in the lives of offenders in your custody. By the time they have reached your institutions and organizations, these offenders have proven resistant to most efforts to redirect them toward law-abiding, safe and healthy behavior. This is particularly true for offenders with a history of drug abuse.

Yet, there is a sense of optimism that our country is moving toward a drug control policy that recognizes the enormous contributions that the criminal justice system — particularly the corrections field working with treatment providers — can make in reducing drug abuse and enhancing public safety.

One could imagine any number of ways to spend taxpayers' dollars to reduce drug use in this country. One could invest in interdiction efforts to keep drugs from coming into this country in the first place. At the other end of the spectrum, one could invest in educational programs to prevent young people from using drugs. Between these polar extremes are many other worthy contenders for the tax dollar — public education campaigns, police crackdowns, communication systems to alert law enforcement to the movement of drug shipments, research to develop ways to block the effects of illegal substances and treatment for youthful drug users.

New Investments

For the last four years, the National Drug Control Strategy of the Clinton Administration has recommended increased investments in reducing drug use among hard-core users; the central strategy has been using the criminal justice system as the point of intervention.

The people under your supervision consume a staggering volume of illegal drugs, and any reduction in their drug use represents a significant reduction in the nation's aggregate demand for illegal drugs. According to one estimate, about 60 percent of the cocaine and heroin consumed by the entire nation over a year is consumed by individuals arrested in that year. Without considering any other factors, such as the

impact upon levels of crime committed by hard-core drug users, a policy that focuses on individuals under criminal justice supervision has the potential for significantly reducing our national demand for drugs, which, in turn, will impact upon the forces that supply that demand.

We now know that we can effectively reduce drug use in the offender population with the important corollary result that we can reduce the number of new crimes they commit. In short, there is an emerging policy consensus, based on solid research, that an investment of scarce taxpayer dollars in the work that you do is a high-yield investment — with dividends in reduced demand for drugs and less crime.

Research published by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) supports the proposition that there is a strong nexus between drug abuse and the criminal justice population. According to our Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program, between half and three-quarters of arrestees test positive for drugs. The incidence of drug abuse in our population is remarkably high and remarkably constant. So when we arrest someone for violating the law, we are most likely bringing into our custody someone who has a drug problem.

And the absolute numbers are as staggering as the percentages. According to one estimate, the number of drug-using arrestees who are in need of treatment exceeds two million a year. To further complicate the picture, we also know that drug users who come into the criminal justice system are likely to use more than one drug.

And we are starting to understand, through research funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, that the drug users coming through the criminal justice system are highly dependent upon illegal substances. Casual use is not the phenomenon we encounter in the criminal justice context. Nor is this a population that has frequently sought treatment in the past. Only a quarter of drug users in prison were previously in treatment and, according to a study of New York City addicts, 70 percent have neither been in treatment nor intend to seek treatment.

The final piece of this complex puzzle is provided by research showing that the process of arrest, detention, adjudication and imprisonment — which sometimes serves as a de facto detoxification and abstinence program — has only a short-term effect on drug use. Between 60 and 75 percent of untreated parolees who have histories of heroin and/or cocaine use are reported to return to those drugs within three months after release.

So the picture painted by these research findings is of a criminal justice system heavily populated by frequent drug users, often with complex drug problems involving more

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than one illegal substance, who have not been amenable to treatment in the past and show few signs of stopping drug use even after long periods of incarceration.

Treatment Works

Treatment works and, more specifically, treatment under criminal justice coercion works with this most difficult of client groups. Not to imply that it always works, but treatment does result in overall reductions in crime and drug use within the criminal justice population.

Several solid research studies have been published to support these twin conclusions. The initial results of one study are encouraging and confirm similar findings in other studies. The researchers found that both long-term residential and outpatient drug-free programs led to significant decreases in illegal activity. Drug use after treatment also decreased in both types of programs.

Another body of research demonstrates that treatment interventions not only work, they also are cost-effective. Another study concluded that for every dollar invested in drug treatment, taxpayers saved \$7. These savings are attributable to decreased use of drugs and alcohol and the resulting reduction in costs related to crime and health care.

But the findings with the greatest policy significance come from the correctional context. Researchers now have examined the results of highly rigorous evaluations of a number of prison-based therapeutic communities around the country. All of them are showing that they have a positive impact and have been shown to reduce drug use and criminal behavior after the offender is released from prison.

These studies contain another important finding: when we combine prison-based therapeutic community-style treatment with post-release supervision, the reductions in drug use and criminal behavior are even greater.

I hope that you begin to sense the power of these research findings when they are put together to support a comprehensive policy initiative leveraging the potential of the criminal justice system. First, a significant portion of our national drug consumption is attributable to individuals arrested and placed under the custody of the criminal justice system. Second, more than half of those arrested are drug users and therefore candidates for some sort of intervention. Third, interventions under criminal justice coercion and control have the effect of significantly reducing drug use and criminal behavior. Put together, these are the building blocks of an emerging policy initiative.

National Initiatives

We should not rush to the conclusion that new policy directions have been established overnight, or that new programs are in place on a broad scale that reflect this emphasis on the criminal justice system as a point for intervention.

But we do have a better understanding of the drug problem. There are now two major research efforts under way

that will provide local policy-makers with powerful knowledge about the drug problems facing their communities. Taken together, they will accentuate the truth that America does not have "a" drug problem, it has a wide variety of drug problems — drug problems that change over time, that reflect associated changes in crime patterns or gang migration, that affect men differently from women, adults differently from young people, poor differently from well-off, ethnic, racial and immigrant communities differently from each other.

We need to develop measures other than those national surveys that tell us drug use is up or down a few percentage points. We need local drug use profiles that are sensitive to local phenomena in order to develop local policy. It is very good news for all of us that, by the time the century turns in three years, we will have at our disposal up-to-date, reliable, localized research findings that will help local policy-makers determine enforcement, intervention, treatment and prevention strategies that are tailored to local drug problems. We are seeing an exciting spirit of innovation in the criminal justice system, particularly in the willingness of criminal justice practitioners to use their authority to leverage behavioral changes in drug-abusing defendants. Most prominent are the drug courts — now well over 100 around the country.

Equally important are the innovative programs of probation and parole departments mixing treatment with ongoing supervision, including graduated sanctions.

There are three important experiments under way that take the lessons learned from drug courts and apply them to the entire criminal justice system. Working closely with the administrative offices of the United States courts, the Department of Justice has completed development of universal drug testing and intervention programs in 23 of the 74 federal districts.

The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment also is funding a number of five-year demonstration projects that are seeking to provide treatment services on a systemwide basis to underserved populations such as female and juvenile offenders.

Finally, NIJ, with funding from the Office of National Drug Control Policy, is implementing a research demonstration project in Birmingham, Ala. Under this project, everyone arrested in Birmingham will be tested for drug use, and every component of the criminal justice system will work together with a common goal: to reduce the level of drug use in the population that moves from arrest to final disposition.

Treatment Options

Of particular importance is the emerging consensus that our prisons represent an important point of intervention in the cycle of drug use within the offender population. The Federal Bureau of Prisons has embarked on perhaps the most ambitious treatment initiative in a prison setting. At the state level, new resources are being made available for treatment — over the decade of the 80s, the percentage of inmates receiving some sort of treatment tripled.

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The linkage between sentencing policy and drug policy represents an important new frontier for states that are struggling with the twin concerns of growing prison budgets and intractable drug problems. But the important point should not be lost: in-prison treatment is effective at reducing drug use and crime.

As much as prison treatment is effective, when combined with treatment under post-release supervision, it is significantly much more effective. These research findings provide the basis for the Presidential Initiative, now enacted into law by Congress, that requires each state to develop, by March 1998, a plan for testing and treatment of inmates before and after release. These research findings provide the rationale for the decision by Congress to add \$25 million to the Byrne formula funds that can be made available — but only if you ensure that your state spends the money this way, for these purposes.

Yet, it is an understatement to say that the gulf between research findings, statutory language and the reality of operating programs is wide and intimidating. Suffice it to say that we desperately need your guidance and ideas on how to translate these research findings and this statutory directive into sound correctional policy and practice. I find it ironic that, at a time when so many states are eliminating or restricting parole, we have such strong research findings that supervision can be effective at reducing recidivism. In the not-too-distant past, when researchers and practitioners alike were caught up with the notion that “nothing worked,” the temptation to eliminate parole was somewhat more understandable. Yet we now know the value of that system of phased and supervised reintegration. We now know that the public is safer if inmates are released back into their communities with a support system that increases the likelihood that they will remain crime- and drug-free. So, as you are working together to devise ways to meet the requirements of the statute, we are counting on you to tap your creativity and your powers of advocacy to devise new approaches that can yield best results.

Our role at NIJ is to create overlapping circles — to find the power of knowledge that can influence policy. We are building the foundation of knowledge upon which the next generation of innovation can be built. Yet much more remains to be done. We have a number of initiatives that seek to link correctional agencies with researchers. I want to encourage you to seek out representatives of NIJ or write to me if you are interested in participating in these efforts. 

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