



'Internationalizing' Criminal Justice Research

by Philip Bulman

Editor's Note: NIJ recently added two experts to its International Center and moved it into the Director's Office to raise the Center's profile and ensure that it takes full advantage of technology and social sciences advances internationally. Because this issue of the *NIJ Journal* features two articles on international issues, we asked staff writer Philip Bulman to look at ways in which NIJ's International Center is "internationalizing" the Institute's research portfolios.

When the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) set out to develop updated standards for portable X-ray equipment used by bomb squads, British scientists and engineers did most of the work.

"Explosives have no nationality," said Chris Tillery, associate deputy director for science and technology at NIJ. "Most countries have the same concerns."

Because NIJ has close contact with the British Home Office Scientific Development Branch, officials on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean knew that American and British law enforcement agencies were independently working on similar projects. This contact

made it possible for the American effort to leverage the considerable experience and expertise developed by the British over decades. The collaboration is a good example of how international efforts can ultimately help U.S. state and local law enforcement agencies.

NIJ's work is increasingly international in scope. The Institute supports partnerships and projects with other nations, collecting and sharing knowledge with researchers and working together to develop new information — all to benefit U.S. state and local agencies. These partnerships can also save one country from unintentionally reinventing the wheel that another country has already developed.

Technology development has been a fruitful field for international law enforcement collaborations, but many other efforts are under way as well. Criminal enterprises work across borders in such pursuits as drug and human trafficking. Cindy Smith, chief of NIJ's International Center, said that in cases for which the roots of crime may be overseas, American law enforcement organizations can gain important insights from research that is not U.S.-myopic.

For many years, NIJ's International Center has funded research partnerships in countries where events were influencing crime in the U.S. These partnerships include research in El Salvador on the MS-13 gang, a Burmese project focused on drug smuggling and a study of Chinese smugglers who helped people enter the U.S. illegally.¹ NIJ is now expanding its International Center to ensure that all of its research portfolios consider what the U.S. criminal justice research community can learn from and share with other countries.

Using International Knowledge to Solve Local Crime

Much of the Institute's international work helps U.S. state and local law enforcement agencies leverage the criminal justice solutions that already have been discovered elsewhere. Regular contact with other countries can be critical when addressing such issues as the illegal drug trade, terrorism and human trafficking.

Forensics is another area where international contacts are fruitful. Mike Sheppo, chief of NIJ's Investigative and Forensic Sciences Division, noted NIJ's relationship with Australia's National Institute of Forensic Science. A formal memorandum of understanding between the two countries has given researchers who are doing similar work an effective way to share their findings, particularly in the areas of processing damaged DNA and using robotics in crime laboratories. The project has been so successful, Sheppo added, that it is expected to lead to other international collaborations, especially among crime laboratories.

For many years, NIJ's International Center has funded research partnerships in countries where events were influencing crime in the U.S.

Another benefit of international collaboration is learning about innovative programs that are emerging overseas. For example, the U.S., which currently has the world's highest incarceration rate, may benefit from other countries' experiences in attempting to reduce both crime and incarceration rates. Smith offered another example of a British program that reported improved relationships between crime victims and law enforcement after a police officer was assigned to follow every case through to conclusion.

Sharing Information

Best practices research flows in both directions. For example, NIJ helped pioneer the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program in the U.S. This voluntary drug-testing program in American jails identified important regional variations in drug abuse: Some areas were found to have high rates of methamphetamine abuse, whereas cocaine or heroin abuse was more prevalent in other regions.

The ADAM program helped state and local authorities focus on the widely abused drugs in their regions, said Christine Crossland, senior social science analyst in NIJ's Violence and Victimization Research Division. The program proved to be so successful, she noted, that it attracted attention overseas, which, in turn, resulted in NIJ's technical assistance in setting up similar programs in Australia and the U.K.

Many police departments in the U.S. now grapple with the threat of terrorism in addition to dealing with conventional crimes, such as drug sales and burglaries. This, as so many state and local law enforcement agencies know, puts a strain on resources. In one project, NIJ brought

experts from cities in the U.S. and Israel together to share best practices on how cities can respond to terrorism threats. This collaboration, which culminated in a series of papers discussing Israeli and American perspectives, will result in a book to be published later this year.

Partnering With Chinese Researchers

In the international arena, federal agencies often work together to offer expertise to a foreign country. In one such project, NIJ teamed up with the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Bureau of Prisons to work with professionals in the People's Republic of China. The project includes the University of Maryland and several Chinese universities that are working to develop and set up an academic criminal justice curriculum.

Many experts who have worked with partners in China have remarked on that government's commitment to achieve genuine reform in its vast justice system. NIJ senior science advisor Edwin Zedlewski said that officials and researchers in China seem open to U.S. criminal justice expertise and eager to learn from others by applying in China the best of what other systems have to offer. This is an important opportunity for change, he added, because even modest improvements in China's vast justice system will likely have significant public safety outcomes for millions of Chinese.

Although many of NIJ's international efforts involve collaborations with a single country, the Institute also engages in broad efforts, notably with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Headquartered in Vienna, Austria, this office focuses on research and

technical assistance that assists member countries in meeting the challenges of transnational crime, such as terrorism, corruption and drug trafficking. Zedlewski noted that NIJ, which is one of 17 research institutes of the U.N., provides criminology and criminal justice expertise as part of the U.S. State Department's delegation to the annual U.N. Crime Commission meeting. Also, as a member of the U.N. Programme Network Institutes, which operates under the U.N.'s Crime Prevention Program, NIJ offers input on U.N. resolutions and related documents and provides delegates and experts for various U.N. conferences.

The Institute also takes part in the International Research Directors Consortium, which includes criminal justice research organizations from Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

NIJ's "internationalization" of its research portfolios takes various forms, depending on the type and purpose of the project. For example, NIJ Director David Hagy said that researchers planning international projects may want to apply for a grant in a specific topic area. A topic such as prison radicalization might fit into a corrections area, whereas a comparative domestic violence victimization project would be suitable for a domestic violence solicitation.

The bottom line, however, is that NIJ's internationalization of its research portfolios will be so "invisible" in the field that a bomb squad technician rushing off to an emergency in the American heartland probably will not know that British scientists helped develop the standards for a piece of equipment he uses. But he may be able to do his job better as a result of this international sharing of knowledge.

NCJ 222902

About the Author

Philip Bulman is a writer and editor at the National Institute of Justice. He has more than 25 years of experience as a journalist and writer specializing in science policy, scientific research and technology development.

Note

1. *Characteristics of Chinese Human Smugglers*, available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/204989.pdf>.