

Building an Innovation Agenda for Corrections

By Joseph Russo and Doris Wells

Authors' Note: Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

Building a road map for innovation in corrections is an ambitious, but crucial, task. This was the focus of a new joint study by the RAND Corporation and the University of Denver called “Fostering Innovation in Community and Institutional Corrections: Identifying High-Priority Technology and Other Needs for the U.S. Corrections Sector,” which was funded through the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center system. The report discusses and prioritizes innovations to address the many problems now facing the corrections sector (e.g., transition of inmates from prison to communities, handling contraband, mental illness issues, language translation among inmates and staff and risk assessment problems).¹

The Corrections Innovation Process

Identifying innovations in corrections requires a thorough understanding of the current state of affairs. To accomplish this, researchers for the study conducted a literature review on the challenges facing corrections, available technologies and previous needs

assessment activities, and, more importantly, researchers received input from a corrections advisory panel, a group of 25 seasoned corrections professionals from across the country. Advisory panelists were carefully selected to provide representation from various components of the corrections enterprise (e.g., prisons, jails, parole, probation and pretrial), levels of government, geographic locations, different-size agencies and positions held within his or her organization to provide a deep and broad knowledge base. Involvement with national associations and working groups was also a consideration in order to provide perspectives beyond a panelist’s particular agency.

Researchers conducted highly structured exercises with the panelists to elicit information about the greatest problems facing the field and specific needs to address them. Unlike previous efforts by NIJ that focused solely on technology issues, this project examined problems from a wider perspective. One exercise focused on identifying problems. Panelists were divided into two subgroups — one focusing on institutional corrections and the other on community corrections — and asked to identify problems that may prevent an agency from accomplishing its mission. For example, the researchers asked questions such as, “During a typical day, what are the most pressing issues, difficulties or inefficiencies?” and “What other concerns arise in a

crisis or emergency situation?” Using a different approach, the researchers then asked the panelists to identify problems related directly to the high-level objectives of corrections agencies. For each problem, the subgroup was asked to identify the associated need required to address the issue.

Prioritizing the Needs

The advisory panel prioritized more than 200 needs based on a few selected measures. First, the needs were scored based on how they contributed to one or more correctional objectives, ranging from facilitating change in offender behavior to conserving public resources. Needs that contributed to more important objectives were ranked higher. Next, panelists ranked each need across two dimensions: the probability that the need, if implemented, would successfully address the problem and the probability that the need would be broadly adopted by agencies. The measures were scored and the needs ranked in tiers. Twenty-nine “top-tier” needs resulted from the institutional corrections group, and 19 were obtained from the community corrections group. Some of the top-tier needs included the following:

Risk assessment needs. Risk assessment was a major theme for community corrections, and several problems and associated needs were identified. It is notable that risk assessment has been

a focus of research for many years, but it still remains problematic. The panelists noted the lack of effective validation techniques for risk and needs assessment tools, and expressed that agencies need more guidance regarding appropriate usage. The panelists further expressed concern that many instruments are misused, outdated or have never been validated. Panelists also called for the development of dynamic risk assessment models capable of incorporating almost real-time indicators to continuously update scores.

Contraband-related needs. One major theme for the institutional corrections group was the age-old problem of contraband. Problems noted included the various ways contraband enters a facility (e.g., visitors, inmates, staff, fence lines and logistics) and the inability to monitor a sufficient percentage of inmates' illegal cell phone conversations. Associated needs included more usage of video visitation; cost-effective and unmanned aerial vehicles for perimeter monitoring; automated tools to track contact between inmates and staff; training staff to address resistance to monitoring and searching of employees; and automated tools to transcribe inmate telephone calls.

Mental health needs. Panelists were encouraged to think broadly in developing the needs associated with each problem. One such problem was related to mental health issues — sometimes culminating in suicide — suffered by staff working in high-pressure institutional environments. The panel examined the issue from many different perspectives and articulated an array of needs. For example, a fairly high-tech need involved the development of automated biometric tools to continuously monitor stress levels of officers, particularly those

in high-stress positions. Such tools could allow administrators to quickly identify officers who would benefit from rotation out of that assignment and/or leave time for decompression and recovery. A decidedly low-tech approach called for better access to resources for officers returning to correctional duty following military service, where post-traumatic stress disorder or related issues were identified.

Common needs. The groups shared some high-priority needs (e.g., addressing language differences between staff and those under supervision). Community corrections called for developing accurate speech-to-speech translators so officers could communicate with their clients in real time. Institutional corrections identified a need for tools to translate and transcribe inmate telephone calls in foreign languages to enable rapid keyword analysis and pattern recognition. In addition, both groups acknowledged deficiencies in their ability to effectively manage offenders with mental illness. The associated needs for both groups focused on improved and increased staff training.

Some of the problems identified independently by the two groups were interrelated. For example, the institutional corrections group noted that state-prison population reduction strategies (e.g., California's realignment efforts) have created jail space management challenges. One associated need was the development of new alternatives to incarceration in order to manage certain offenders in the community. Not coincidentally, one of the problems identified by the community corrections group was the release of more dangerous, higher-risk offenders into the community as a result of prison/jail overcrowding. The associated need was the dedication of more targeted resources to community-based agencies.

Conclusion

The corrections sector is charged with a difficult mission of achieving multiple — sometimes conflicting — objectives simultaneously, and innovations can play a vital role in enhancing mission performance and public safety in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Thus, the entities involved in corrections innovation can benefit from the information in this report. The issues raised by the panel can assist the broader sector in thinking about the problems and, ideally, encourage the sharing of innovations developed as a result.

The needs identified are the result of the deliberations of a single advisory panel at a single point in time. Nevertheless, these needs represent a useful measure of the requirements of the field. The innovation agenda offered is intended to be an initial step in the process of capturing the input of the corrections community and making those needs and priorities known to decision-makers across the spectrum.

ENDNOTE

¹ Jackson, B.A., J. Russo, J.S. Hollywood, D. Woods, R. Silbergliitt, G.B. Drake, J.S. Shaffer, M. Zaydman and B.G. Chow. 2015. *Fostering innovation in community and institutional corrections: Identifying high-priority technology and other needs for the U.S. corrections sector*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR820.



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