How research is translated to policy and practice in the criminal justice system

By Yunsoo Park

Author's Note: Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

A recent NIJ-funded study of Florida's correctional systems has shed new light on the question of how research is translated into policy and practice in the criminal justice system. Researchers found that the most common ways to effectively translate research to policy and practice included making the information easier to understand, more credible and more applicable to local circumstances; instead of presenting information in the academic research format that tends to be more complex and difficult to understand. The findings also indicated that the most successful way to translate research involved regular interactions between researchers and practitioners — specifically, that academics could do more to communicate and collaborate with policymakers and practitioners.

This study was carried out by scholars at Florida State University (FSU).[1] The goal of the study was to describe the use of research and other factors in developing state-level juvenile and adult correctional policy and practice in the state of Florida and answer targeted questions, such as:

– What sources of information do Florida's correctional policymakers use to make their decisions and how much influence do these factors have?
– What are the primary strategies used to inform policy with research evidence and what methods would help policymakers use evidence-based information in their decision-making process?
– What is the underlying process for research translation in shaping how policymakers assess and respond to problems?

To achieve their goal, the researchers used data from several sources, including:

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- Relevant literature on research and public policy in criminal justice.
- Relevant legislative and state agency documents.
- Interviews and web surveys with established academic researchers and key decision makers from state agencies and legislative practitioners and policymakers.
- Observations of archived, pre-recorded legislative public hearings and committee meetings.

Prior literature was examined to identify themes (e.g., barriers, facilitators) for developing the interview and survey instruments that were to be used. An advisory panel of criminology research experts at FSU was then consulted about the project's research design and methods. A total of eight academic researchers, eight practitioners and four policymakers were interviewed in person to explore "why" and "how" themes (e.g., "why" barriers may get in the way of knowledge translation and "how" certain strategies may help to translate research to policy and practice). Upon completing the interviews, online follow-up surveys were sent to the participants to compare and validate findings from past research about processes underlying research translation. In order to investigate process models of translational criminology, participants were also asked about researcher/practitioner partnerships during the interviews and follow-up surveys. In addition to the data from interviews and surveys, this study also examined four policy cases to

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Barriers to research translation and other influential factors

During the interviews, participants consistently mentioned six types of barriers or challenges to the research, knowledge and translation process. These barriers/challenges were (in descending order from the most to least frequently mentioned):
- Difficulty in interpreting and using research.
- Lack of support from leadership in using research.
- Differences in training between policymakers/practitioners versus researchers.
- Relationship issues (i.e., distrust, lack of access or lack of engagement between or within agencies or between academics

and policymakers/practitioners).
- Budget and fiscal restrictions (e.g., limited research funds).
- Tendency for criminal justice policymaking to be event driven, which may not be compatible with the generally longer research process.

In addition to these barriers in using research, four influential factors other than research that interviewees mentioned as having a significant impact on correctional policy and practice included (in descending order from the most to least frequently mentioned): political ideology, special interest groups (e.g., advocacy), public opinion and the media.

The surveys also highlighted how much influence certain factors have on correctional policy and practice, such as fiscal constraints of correctional organizations, ranked as having the strongest influence, followed by political ideology and growing cost of incarceration. Notably, academic research, public opinion and social media were the three factors identified as having the weakest influence on correctional policy and practice. Lastly, respondents reported that they believed research has more of an influence on juvenile policies (50 percent endorsed) compared to adult policies (28 percent endorsed).

Kinds of evidence and research used by practitioners

Review of the policy case summaries showed that there was little evidence on the use of academic research in official legislative documents and public testimony. However, the interviews with

participants did indicate evidence of research use, suggesting that official public documents may not be the sole or best resource to turn to when exploring research translation for a given policy.

Interviewee responses identified six main ways that policymakers and practitioners acquired evidence to inform their decision making, which included (in descending order from the most to least frequently mentioned): (1) government-sponsored or conducted research, (2) peer networking (e.g., other state practitioners), (3) intermediary policy and research organizations, (4) policy taskforces and councils, (5) peer-reviewed research and (6) expert testimony.

Survey results also showed that researcher/practitioner partnerships were the most effective mechanism of knowledge translation and academic journals and social media were the least effective.

The interaction model: Most successful for research translation

The study's researchers found that the process model most often linked to successful research knowledge translation in corrections was the interaction model, which involves relationships, partnerships and bi-directional communication between researchers and practitioners. An example of this model is researcher/practitioner partnerships (RPPs). Participants of the study stated that long-term relationships and RPPs were among the most effective ways to translate research knowledge into correctional policy and practice.

How researchers and practitioners can improve research translation

Six main effective facilitators

Interview results pointed to six main facilitators that make it easier to increase and improve the use of research to inform policy/practice, which included (in descending order from the most to least frequently mentioned):
– Relationships (e.g., trust, reciprocity).
– Involvement in the evidence-based movement (e.g., focus on using data to figure out best practices).
– Leadership's support of research use in decision making.
– Research that makes concrete recommendations or is easy to understand (e.g., randomized control trials).
– Scarcity of budget, which pushes policymakers/practitioners to focus on evidence-based methods.
– Cross-training (e.g., researchers, engaging in policy research).

Five effective strategies

The interviews also pointed out five strategies to help improve the use of research, including:
– Increased investment in research.
– Support for research/practitioner partnerships.
– Ongoing task forces comprised of a range of individuals (e.g., researchers, criminal justice agency members and community agency members).
– Academics reaching out to practitioners (e.g., via practitioner-focused conferences).
– Cross-training researchers and practitioners.

Concluding remarks

This study sheds light on how research is translated to correctional policy and practice, as well as methods to improve this process, with three important take-away points. First, the study found that government research, peer networking and policy/research organizations were the most frequently used sources for the research translation process, rather than academic publications and expert testimony. This is most likely because the aforementioned types of evidence are easier to understand, seen as more credible and can more easily be applied to local settings. Second, the study found that successful research translation is most likely to occur when researchers and practitioners build meaningful relationships and regularly interact and communicate to establish trust, credibility and reciprocity. Lastly, the study had important policy implications, especially for academics, specifically that academic researchers should be proactive in reaching out and working with policymakers and practitioners, as well as becoming involved in correctional policy and practice (e.g., through graduate courses that train students in conducting policy research).

ENDNOTES:

This article is based on the final report, "Translational Criminology — Research and Public Policy: Final Summary Report": https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/250597.pdf.

[1]George B. Pesta, Javier Ramos, J.W. Andrew Ranson, Alexa Singer, Thomas G. Blomberg.

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