Document Title: Criminal Justice System State Administrative Agencies: Research Capacity and Experience with Research Collaborations, Findings from the Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships Study (RPPS)

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM STATE ADMINISTRATIVE AGENCIES: RESEARCH CAPACITY AND EXPERIENCE WITH RESEARCH COLLABORATIONS

Findings From The Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships Study (RPPS)

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Fact Sheet

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FROM THE RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIPS STUDY (RPPS)

Why Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships Matter

Research has the greatest potential to impact change in practice and policy when (1) it is conducted in collaboration with practitioners rather than conducted by an academic researcher alone, and (2) its findings are clearly communicated to the people who influence policy and practice in a useful, easy-to-read format (Block, Engel, Naureckas, & Riordan, 1999; Mouradian, Mechanic, & Williams, 2001). Until now, little was known about how State Administrative Agencies (SAAs) in the criminal justice (CJ) system promote or facilitate partnerships between academic researchers and CJ practitioners or how previous successful collaborations can inform future ones. We conducted a study to learn (a) how the infrastructure of SAAs allows them to conduct research and support or promote researcher-practitioner collaborations and (b) how these SAAs are impacting the CJ community through research findings.

STUDY OVERVIEW

Goal: To improve understanding of successful researcher-practitioner collaborations[1] between those working within and outside of the CJ system so that the knowledge learned can be used to promote the creation of new partnerships and enhance existing ones.

Design: There were two components to this study.

1. Individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with practitioners and researchers who self-identified as having at least one past or current "successful" research partnership (though many also had past unsuccessful partnerships). The purpose was to learn from them what they thought made their partnerships

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[1] "Collaborations" and "partnerships" will be used interchangeably.

successful. Practitioners, as defined by the National Institute of Justice for the purpose of this study, were CJ system employees (including administrators of CJ state administrative agencies, SAAs) and those who provide services to CJ system clients. Researchers were those who conducted research but were not CJ system employees.

Participants were 55 women and 17 men of various racial/ethnic groups. They were employed in a range of settings located in urban, suburban, and rural settings in North America, including family violence and sexual assault programs, private practice, and SAAs such as departments of corrections, local county courts, independent research institutes, and colleges/universities. They had 4 to 40 years of experience (average of 12 years).

- 49 people (38 women and 11 men) participated in individual interviews (8 of which were with SAA staff) face to face or via telephone.
- 23 people (17 women and 6 men) participated in 5 focus groups convened at professional or academic conferences.

Data analysis. The audio/video recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. With the aid of a qualitative analysis software package the transcribed files were coded with identification tags corresponding to the RPPS research questions related to the following categories determined a priori: highlights of the collaboration, lowlights of the collaborations, reasons the collaboration was needed, benefits of the collaboration, characteristics desired in a collaborator, characteristics desired in an organization, characteristics of a successful collaboration, facilitators of a successful collaboration, barriers/challenges to a successful collaboration, balancing the needs of researchers and practitioners, products and results of the collaboration, usefulness of resulting products, sustainability of partnerships, advice for researchers, and advice for practitioners. The research team reviewed the coded responses to identify salient patterns of themes.

2. A Web-based survey of CJ-system SAAs aimed to (a) determine each state's infrastructure and general experiences regarding research in the CJ system and (b) document lessons learned from past or current successful collaborations with a researcher outside of the CJ system.

Participants were those whose responsibility it was either to oversee the conduct of research in the SAA or to conduct research on behalf of the state. Seventy-five participants from 49 states completed the survey, with several states having multiple respondents from different SAA research departments (i.e., department of corrections, office of the courts, etc.). Of respondents, 41% were administrators or directors of the agency, 35% were supervisors or managers, 21% were front-line or support staff, and 3% were university-employed Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) directors[2].

Data analysis. Data were analyzed to present simple descriptive statistics such as an average or the percentage of participants who endorsed a response.

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[2] SACs are funded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics to contribute to effective state policies through statistical services, evaluation, and policy analysis. SAC contracts may be awarded to SAAs or researchers at academic institutions.

FINDINGS

State Administrative Agencies have educated, experienced staff to analyze data and conduct research.

- Most SAAs employed one to seven staff (average of five) whose responsibility it was to conduct research; some SAAs employed as many as thirty staff for this purpose.
- 83% of respondents reported that there were people on their staff with master's degrees, 52% reported staff with doctoral degrees, and 50% reported staff with bachelor's degrees.
- Respondents were employed in their agency/department for an average of eleven years—with an average of eight years in their current role.

State Administrative Agencies place great value on using research evidence to inform their mission.

- 70% of respondents reported that their agency/department places great (versus some or no) value on utilizing findings from research to inform the agency/department's mission.
- Collecting data, disseminating findings, and translating research to programs or policies are the most central missions of SAAs regarding the conduct of research, endorsed by 97%, 88%, and 88%, respectively.

Collaborations between State Administrative Agencies and researchers outside of the CJ system are common.

- 89% of respondents reported that their agency/department had collaborated with a researcher outside of the CJ system.
- Of those that had ever collaborated, 91% stated the collaborations met the expectations of the SAA.
- Of those SAAs that had collaborated in the past five years, they had done so with an average of nine researchers employed outside of the CJ system on an average of eight projects.
- For those SAAs that had not collaborated, reasons were that no opportunity had arisen, resources were not available to collaborate (such as funding and staff), the agency/department had never been approached to collaborate, and collaborating would not benefit the agency/department.

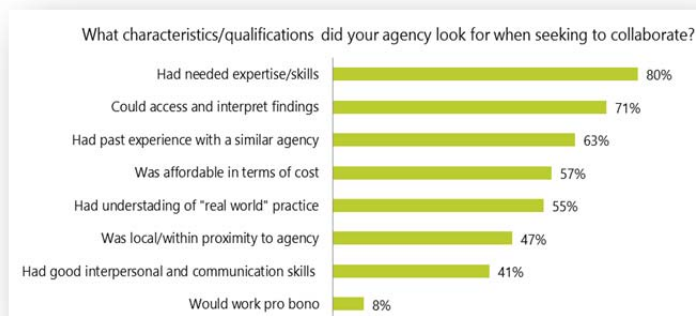### State Administrative Agencies determined there was a need to collaborate largely as the result of analyses of criminal justice data.

- 70% reported that the need to collaborate was determined by analyzing their state's own CJ data.
- 54% reported that the ideas for collaboration were generated by CJ system administrators or personnel.
- 33% reported that collaborations existed as a requirement of grant funding.

State Administrative Agencies sought research collaborators who had experience or working knowledge of the CJ system to ensure that findings would be useful.

- 80% sought a researcher with the needed expertise and skills.
- 71% sought a researcher who could access and interpret research findings/results so they would be useful for practice.
- 63% sought a researcher with past experience with or working knowledge of the system.
- 55% sought a researcher who had an understanding of how individuals and institutions interact "in the real world."

What characteristics/qualifications did your agency look for when seeking to collaborate?

Had needed expertise/skills	80%
Could access and interpret findings	71%
Had past experience with a similar agency	63%
Was affordable in terms of cost	57%
Had understading of "real world" practice	55%
Was local/within proximity to agency	47%
Had good interpersonal and communication skills	41%
Would work pro bono	8%

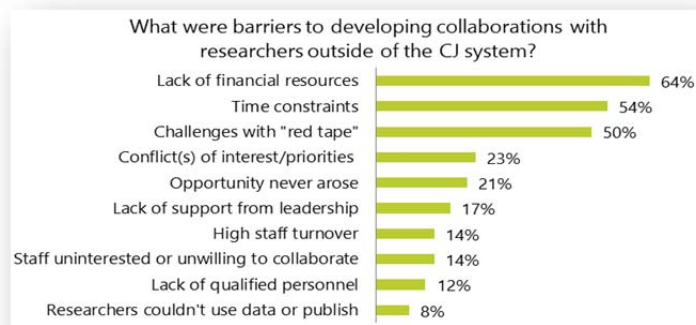## Available funding was the most helpful facilitator in developing a research collaboration.

Factors identified as "most helpful" to developing a collaboration with a researcher outside of the CJ system were:

- Available funding (73%)
- Available researcher (55%)
- Allocated time for agency/department staff collaboration (53%)
- Institutional culture supportive of agency/department collaborations (49%)

Available funding, time, and "red tape" were the greatest barriers to developing a research collaboration.

The most frequently reported barriers to developing a research collaboration were:

- Financial resources (64%)
- Time constraints (54%)
- "Red tape" (50%)

What were barriers to developing collaborations with researchers outside of the CJ system?

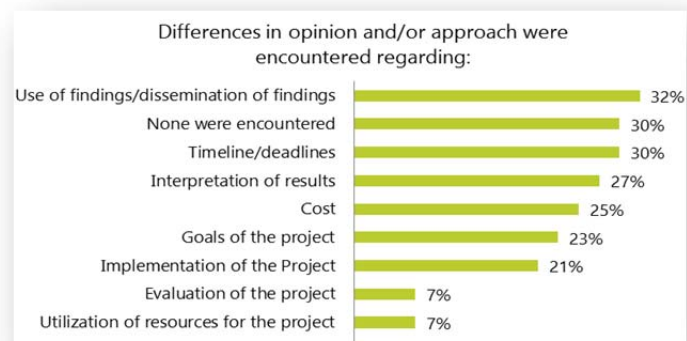|	
Lack of financial resources	64%
Time constraints	54%
Challenges with "red tape"	50%
Conflict(s) of interest/priorities	23%
Opportunity never arose	21%
Lack of support from leadership	17%
High staff turnover	14%
Staff uninterested or unwilling to collaborate	14%
Lack of qualified personnel	12%
Researchers couldn't use data or publish	8%

Differences in opinion/approach with researchers were encountered by over 70% of practitioner respondents.

The most frequently encountered differences regarded:

- Use or dissemination of findings (32%)
- Timelines/deadlines (30%)
- Interpretation of findings (27%)

Among practitioners who reported experiencing obstacles in a research collaboration, only 4% reported that the obstacles were not overcome.

Differences in opinion and/or approach were encountered regarding:

Use of findings/dissemination of findings	32%
None were encountered	30%
Timeline/deadlines	30%
Interpretation of results	27%
Cost	25%
Goals of the project	23%
Implementation of the Project	21%
Evaluation of the project	7%
Utilization of resources for the project	7%

Though most State Administrative Agencies place great value on using research evidence to inform their mission, collaborations do not produce many meaningful, practical products.

The most frequently reported product of collaborations was a written report (96%), which tends to be lengthy and, therefore, read and used by only a few select people.

- 72% reported presentations to agency personnel, legislative bodies, and/or community organizations.
- 48% reported presentations at professional or academic conferences.
- Less than one-third of products had direct implications for practice and policy.
    - 30% reported improved practical procedures.
    - 30% noted improved administrative procedures.
    - 24% reported improved or new services.
    - 22% noted changes in public policy.

IMPLICATIONS

Often, practices, services, and policies are informed by objective information—that is, research findings. Nearly 75% of respondents reported that their agencies highly value research evidence to inform their work. This means that, in many states, practices and policies are no longer being developed and revised based solely on personal experiences and opinions. However, that more than 25% of respondents' agencies place some or no value on research evidence raises great concern. Simply encouraging evidence-based practice and policy alone is not enough to motivate all SAAs to use research evidence to inform their work.

SAAs should review their procurement and other policies to determine if they discourage researcher-practitioner collaborations, and if so, to what extent. Difficulties may exist in applying for and obtaining funds; obtaining approval for research projects; collecting, accessing, and analyzing data; and completing projects within appropriate timelines. Adjusting policies can reduce limitations and encourage collaborations with researchers outside of the CJ system. SAAs might offer incentives to universities to have their faculty partner with practitioners, perhaps eliminating some "logistical snags" to collaborating identified by CJ practitioners. For example, some SAAs place limits on administrative overhead rates, which, in certain situations, discourage university-based researchers from establishing formal research partnerships. Modifying these rates could contribute to a greater number of established collaborations. For example, SAAs could agree to pay the rates that universities typically charge, or universities could modify their rates to accommodate these collaborations. Also, given that funding is critical to developing collaborations, grantors might allocate funds for the simple purpose of developing a formal partnership between a researcher(s) and practitioner(s).

People in university-dense areas might be confident that a nearby researcher will be available to collaborate. However, there may not be a researcher with an interest in or the appropriate expertise for the practitioner's project, or a researcher close in proximity to the practitioner who is able to collaborate. To begin the process of finding a collaborator:
- Ask trusted colleagues at different organizations.
- Search university websites for a researcher with expertise that matches your organization's goals.
- Subscribe to listserves that focus on issues related to your organization's mission and the population served.
- Search web-based professional networking websites.
- Attend meetings of area task forces, workshops, and coalitions targeted to the clients you serve and/or the mission of your organization (the ease of which will depend on your geographic location).

Graduate programs in criminology, criminal justice, psychology, and related fields can give their students a professional advantage by inviting practitioners from the CJ system to co-teach or guest lecture in courses about strategies for collaborating. This experience will better prepare researchers-in-training to be considered as collaborators and for more productive future collaborations.

Regarding the research agenda of SAAs, staff with various perspectives of the agency and its clients—from higher-level administrators to front-line staff—should contribute to the research agenda so that findings have the greatest potential to impact practice and policy.

Differences of opinion and approach are common among research collaborators. Many challenges can be avoided by developing a formal written agreement (e.g., memorandum of understanding) at the outset of the project that can help to:
- Set clear expectations and boundaries.
- Establish a clear understanding of the problem.

- Identify the needs of each partner and his or her respective role.
- Develop realistic expectations about accomplishments.
- Ensure that the budget is reasonable and funds are available.
- Identify potential products and discuss strategies for their dissemination.

Because written final reports and other products are usually read by very few—least of all by those who can help in translating findings to have "real world" impact—it is essential that findings are interpreted, written up, and disseminated in ways that can impact the CJ system. When developing a plan for dissemination, consider obtaining input and approval from upper-level administrators, exploring nontraditional methods of dissemination (i.e., email distributions, social media, and media campaigns) and using nontechnical language that clearly illustrates why and how the findings can affect policy and practice.

Conclusion

The large percentage of respondents that stated (a) their SAA places great value on utilizing findings from research to inform the agency/department's mission and (b) that collaborations met the expectations of the SAA suggest that practitioners within the CJ system will continue to seek collaborators to work on projects. The experiences of SAA practitioners who have already collaborated with researchers outside of the CJ system can help to inform those who are interested in collaborating for the first time or those who wish to strengthen existing collaborations with a researcher. By heeding their advice, practitioners in SAAs and the researchers they partner with can identify and utilize known facilitators, and avoid barriers to collaborate successfully, and ultimately improve advocacy and support for victims and contribute to the reduction of crime and recidivism.

References
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