Findings from the Researcher Practitioner Partnerships Study (RPPS)

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY AND PRACTICE:
THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN ADVANCING CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

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SUMMARY

There is growing awareness that evidence-based practice and policy are critical to reducing crime. The findings reported here from the Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships Study (RPPS) demonstrate promise for the development of future research collaborations[1]. We discuss the implications of the resulting evidence to inform practice and policy in the criminal justice (CJ) system. For example, (a) CJ system state administrative agencies (SAAs) reported that they highly value using research to inform their agency/department's mission, and (b) the majority of SAAs that had collaborated with a researcher not employed within the CJ system said the collaboration met their expectations. These and other findings from the RPPS are encouraging. However, there also are discouraging findings, such as those that highlight challenges to conducting research, collaborating to develop and complete a project, and using research evidence as a basis for policy and practice. For example, SAAs reported significant barriers to developing research collaborations, such as limited financial resources, time constraints, and "red tape."

To improve our understanding of what leads to successful researcher-practitioner collaborations between those working within and outside of the CJ system, we conducted the RPPS, which had two parts. For Part One, SAAs in all 50 states were contacted to provide information about the agency's infrastructure regarding research and researcher-practitioner collaborations; respondents were people responsible for overseeing research in the SAA or for conducting research themselves 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., departments of corrections, offices 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]. For Part Two, academic researchers and CJ system practitioners in the United States and Canada participated in interviews and focus groups about successful collaborations. Participants were 55 women and 17 men of various racial and ethnic groups. They were employed in a range of settings located in urban, suburban, and rural settings, 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).

Results from this study suggest that changes in policy can promote more effective research collaborations, which, in turn, can provide a stronger evidence base for CJ practice and policy.

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[1] "Collaborations" and "partnerships" are used interchangeably.

[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.

INTRODUCTION

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. Knowing this information is critical to producing evidence in the future that has strong potential for improving the CJ system and its impact.

Overall, SAAs value developing evidence-based policy and practice and often use collaborations with researchers from outside the CJ system to accomplish this goal. The majority of RPPS participants reported that (1) their SAA highly values using research evidence to inform their agency/department's mission (reported by 70% of respondents) and (2) the majority of SAAs who had collaborated with a researcher outside of the CJ system said the collaboration met their expectations (reported by 91% of those who had collaborated). However, a number of factors provide challenges to successful collaborations. Overcoming these challenges will require changes to policy.

The following recommendations are based on specific examples of how RPPS participants collaborated successfully, overcame obstacles to collaborate successfully, or are suggestions for overcoming obstacles based on their experiences. These recommendations aim to minimize barriers

to and facilitate research collaborations between CJ system practitioners and researchers.

Funding

Research funding is a central concern for CJ practitioners. "Inadequate internal funding" was identified as a substantial challenge to collaborating with an academic researcher outside the CJ system. Significantly, RPPS participants who had not collaborated indicated that inadequate funding was the primary reason collaboration had not occurred. Among practitioners who had collaborated with academic researchers, more than half had sought a collaborator who was "affordable in terms of cost." Moreover, 75% of participants ranked "availability of funding" as the most helpful factor to facilitating future collaborations.

Therefore, to address cost-related barriers to research collaboration, recommendations include to:

1) Revise policies that preclude SAA staff from applying for funding from external sources (e.g., federal grant-making institutions);

2) Create a process (or streamline existing processes) to allow SAAs to accept funds from external sources (e.g., universities); and

3) Provide funding mechanisms within SAAs to support research collaborations.

Given that funding is essential to an SAA's ability to collaborate, it could be useful to provide incentives for state-funded institutions of higher education to collaborate with SAAs on research projects. Faculty of colleges and universities within the state could be strong resources for collaborations with CJ system practitioners and may be in a position to more easily collaborate with SAAs' staff/practitioners than researchers from private institutions where incentivizing such

collaborations may be more difficult (but not impossible). These types of collaborations could promote the development and utilization of evidence-based practice and policy unique to a state's CJ system.

Bureaucracy

RPPS participants reported that the "red tape" of working in an SAA limited agencies' abilities to apply for external funding in support of collaborations. Although funding could help to facilitate collaboration, only 24% of participants were able to obtain external funding support. Participants frequently attributed this inability to obtain funding to policies that restricted SAAs' ability to apply for external funding themselves. For example, one SAA research administrator reported that state policies had prohibited her from seeking and identifying a researcher collaborator in time to respond to a federal solicitation for research grant applications. The state's procurement process requires that a request for applications be issued in order to award a contract for a researcher's services. This requirement that the request "go out for bid" is unreasonable against a grant application deadline, which is often only 8 weeks from the time the grant is announced—when in some states, the procurement process itself can take 6 weeks or more. Other "red tape" issues were identified that impede or prohibit collaborating. For example, some states put a limit on payment of indirect costs.

To facilitate successful research collaborations, state governments should review procurement and other policies to determine the extent to which they impede or prohibit collaborations.

"Red tape" issues that didn't prohibit collaboration but did slow the process included obtaining approval for research projects and accessing and analyzing data. For example, SAA participants indicated that there were frequently time delays in obtaining approvals from both university internal review boards and SAA internal research review committees. Furthermore, logistical barriers such as compliance with security policies and confidentiality of data also interfered with the collaborative process. These barriers should be reviewed and related procedures revised to better facilitate collaborations.

"We welcome the opportunity to participate in collaborative research but often run into logistical snags between public and private-sector administrative differences in how data can be accessed, released, etc."
—Government-System SAA Practitioner

To facilitate collaboration, policy makers should:

1) Streamline the process of approval for research projects, which could include appointing a person or committee to oversee research in SAAs; and

2) Reduce logistical barriers related to accessing, analyzing, and releasing data.

Agenda

Time constraints, limited staff availability, cost, and strained resources often result in a research agenda set by one or a small number of individuals—namely, agency and department administrators. Opening the development of the research agenda to a wider array of SAA and university systems can result in more meaningful research projects and, therefore, products with stronger real-world application. For example, one state "has a Research Workgroup that includes data, operations and research staff from all criminal justice agencies in the state. Participation

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is open to other criminal justice researchers from local colleges and universities, the legislature, and the non-profit community." This type of forum allows for increased communication among SAA and university members and strengthens the quality of the research conducted and the resulting findings.

To facilitate successful research collaborations, policy makers should work to include multiple agency and department staff members in setting the research agenda by:

1) **Appointing a person to oversee research development within the state system, which includes a responsibility to foster researcher-practitioner collaborations; and**

2) **Requiring quarterly meetings across departments within the CJ system (e.g., probation, court support services, office of policy management) to increase communication, discuss "red tape" issues, and suggest topics for the research agenda.**

CONCLUSION

Policy makers have many ways to facilitate the development of evidence-based criminal justice practice and policy within their state systems. Researchers and practitioners have highlighted several strategies that may promote the development of collaborative projects. Recommendations are directly from RPPS participants or were derived from the experiences they reported. These recommendations are based on the assumption that many states have already modified one or more of their policies to facilitate a collaborative research process. We suggest that states review their policies to support internal and external funding applications, reduce the bureaucratic "red tape" that slows down the collaborative process, and encourage communication across and within agencies and colleges/universities to set the criminal justice research agenda.

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