

Developing a Rapid Response Capacity at OJP

Submitted by the SAB Committee on Data Collection and Statistics

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Issue

On occasion, a crime or criminal justice issue receives extensive public attention and generates significant public debate, but lacks pertinent evidence on all sides. A recent example is debate over the apparent rise in homicide and other violent crimes in US cities during 2015. Another is the continuing controversy regarding police use of force against members of minority groups. Such issues merit attention from the Department of Justice and, in some cases, a public response. The response may simply be to point out the need for reliable information and data to inform appropriate policy initiatives. But silence on the part of relevant federal agencies often contributes to the evidence vacuum and to efforts by journalists and advocacy groups to fill it with one-off compilations of statistical data of uncertain reliability.¹ Continuing official silence can lead to the use of questionable evidence to support policy prescriptions.

The DOJ is not always silent in the midst of significant public concern about rising crime, police misconduct, or other crime and justice issues. The White House and members of Congress frequently request information from OJP agencies on specific issues, usually for internal use. This happened, for example, when the Police Executive Research Forum publicly warned of a significant crime rise in 2006.² More recently, the NIJ Director commissioned and publicly disseminated a research report on crime changes in 2015.³ These responses, while valuable, tend to be ad hoc, sporadic, or for official eyes only. We recommend that OJP establish a permanent program to address crime and justice issues subject to considerable public attention and debate for which pertinent evidence is either unavailable or of uncertain reliability.

Recommendation

OJP should establish a “rapid response” working group of representatives of its constituent agencies to monitor crime and criminal justice issues of public concern and, when deemed necessary, respond with relevant statistical data and related information and perspective. In many instances, such responses would indicate that meaningful and informative data are lacking. In cases where the media or advocacy groups have sought

¹ With exemplary candor, Darrel Stephens, executive director of the Major Cities Chiefs’ Association, characterized his group’s collection of 2015 crime data as follows: “It was one of those quick-and-dirty surveys. It had no scientific validity at all. It was to get a quick picture of what was taking place across the country. A real survey guy probably wouldn’t give it much credence” (quoted in <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/scare-headlines-exaggerated-the-u-s-crime-wave/>).

² Police Executive Research Forum. 2006. A Gathering Storm—Violent Crime in America. [http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Critical_Issues_Series/a%20gathering%20storm %20-%20violent%20crime%20in%20america%202006.pdf](http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Critical_Issues_Series/a%20gathering%20storm%20-%20violent%20crime%20in%20america%202006.pdf).

³ <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249895.pdf>.

to fill the evidence void with data of questionable reliability, the OJP response should advise consumers of the limitations of these efforts and of the criteria for and characteristics of credible evidence. The rapid response working group should be proactive in identifying crime and justice issues for analysis and possible response. It would not simply respond to information requests from policymakers, although that, too, is an appropriate role for the team. We emphasize that the working group should restrict its focus to the *science* of crime and justice issues -- the evidence and analysis needed to support claims -- and should refrain from substantive policy endorsements or criticisms.

The rapid response working group should consist of the science advisors, senior policy advisors, or deputy directors of the constituent OJP agencies. The working group should also include a representative of the OJP Office of Communication. The working group should meet every one or two months and report directly to the Assistant Attorney General for OJP. We recognize that any public statement regarding crime and justice issues made by the Department of Justice must be authorized and approved by the Attorney General.

We do not anticipate that the activities of the working group would require significant staff time and resources, beyond whatever staff support is needed to plan meetings and formulate responses for the Assistant AG's review. Because those responses would not require gathering new data, staff support would be needed, at most, to compile existing data for public dissemination. Nonetheless, we recommend that the working group discuss staffing needs at its initial meetings.

A related issue of developing a "sentinel" capacity at OJP, which would issue regular data-based reports on crime and justice issues, was discussed at the last SAB meeting. Our committee believes that such a capacity, while potentially quite important, would exceed currently available resources and might be better situated in another DOJ agency. We recommend only that, in its initial meetings, the rapid response working group discuss the desirability and feasibility of developing a sentinel capacity at OJP or elsewhere in DOJ.

The creation of a rapid response capacity at OJP would underscore the commitment of the Department of Justice to evidence-based criminal justice policy and practice and bring this commitment to bear on crime and justice issues of substantial and immediate public concern.