

Office of Justice Programs
Science Advisory Board Meeting
June 21, 2012 Meeting Summary
August 1, 2012

Welcome and Opening Remarks

The Office of Justice Programs (OJP) Science Advisory Board (SAB) convened its fourth meeting on June 21, 2012, at the OJP office, 810 7th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. The Board provides advice in the area of science and statistics for the purpose of enhancing the impact and performance of OJP programs and activities in criminal and juvenile justice.

The primary purpose of this meeting was for the six subcommittees of the SAB to continue to update the full Board and OJP on their meetings and activities over the past six months. Dr. Blumstein called the meeting of the Science Advisory Board (SAB) to order at 8:30 am. He began by acknowledging the interesting discussions and good interactions that took place during the meetings the previous day between the various SAB subcommittees and the OJP components.

Dr. Blumstein then introduced Mary Lou Leary, who noted her delight in addressing the group for the first time in her new role as Acting Assistant Attorney General (AAAG). AAAG Leary also extended greetings to the SAB from Laurie Robinson, the previous OJP Assistant Attorney General. She also acknowledged Al Blumstein for his leadership, and thanked each Board and subcommittee member for participating, as well as for the work they do on behalf of the SAB as an adjunct to their regular jobs.

AAG Leary talked about the importance of the SAB's advice, insights, and guidance to the Office of Justice Programs. Additionally, having an active SAB sends a powerful message to the field and to the Department overall. In addition to calling the group's attention to the recently-released Office of Management and Budget memorandum on the use of evidence and evaluation in the 2014 budget, AAG Leary noted that the Department's draft policy on scientific integrity is open for comment on the DOJ web site, and encouraged the SAB to provide comments, especially supporting the independence and the integrity of the research and statistics reports from both the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS).

AAG Leary also noted that more than 200 programs are now profiled on CrimeSolutions.gov, and asked the SAB for some guidance regarding building, sustaining, and institutionalizing this resource for the field. She also briefly discussed the companion piece—the Diagnostic Center—which is designed to provide intensive technical assistance to the field. The Evidence Translation and Integration Subcommittee's report has some valuable recommendations regarding CrimeSolutions.gov and the diagnostic center.

The next introduction was of Acting Associate Attorney General Tony West. ASG West first thanked AAAG Leary and the SAB members and noted the importance of their work to DOJ and to criminal justice around the country. He spoke of the importance of science and research being at the heart of policy making, not only in law enforcement and corrections, but in prosecution as well.

ASG West's remarks were followed by a discussion about how the Department can have a long-term commitment to science and the role of the SAB in making that happen. It was noted by Tony West that the emphasis on evidence first started under the leadership of then Attorney General Janet Reno who made a robust commitment to understanding what works in such areas as prosecution, reentry, and reducing recidivism. This commitment has developed further over time under this Administration and will continue to grow during the President's next term. It was acknowledged that limited resources and funding facing the Department now can provide a barrier to gathering needed evidence. While this may be true, ASG West advised the SAB to be ready to seize the opportunity when it becomes available.

OMB Memo on the Use of Evidence and Evaluation in the 2014 Budget

Dr. Phelan Wyrick, Senior Adviser to the OJP Assistant Attorney General, addressed the guidance in the May 18, 2012 (a copy of the memorandum is attached here as Attachment 1). Basically, OMB is asking federal agencies to demonstrate the use of evidence throughout their Fiscal Year 2014 budget submissions. The memorandum provides actual examples from federal agencies on how this can be done.

Dr. Wyrick addressed how OJP's focus is in alignment with the OMB memorandum – improving the quality of generating evidence, improving the integration of evidence, and improving the translation of evidence. There was some discussion regarding the use of low-cost administrative data, and the challenge of ensuring the quality of administrative data. Discussion also focused on the Washington State legislative studies that examine how evidence-based approaches can lead to cost savings. Also mentioned was the importance of leaving space for innovation.

During the discussion following this presentation, the Chair expressed concern that there might be a burden placed on BJS and NIJ from other DOJ components trying to respond to the OMB memorandum. There was further discussion on how this would affect the various formula grant programs, as well as whether the OMB guidance was addressing evidence gathering and evaluation of particular OJP grants or whether the focus was on OJP's effectiveness and impact on the field overall. Also discussed were the differences between assessments and evaluations and the very high costs associated with a robust evaluation of a program's effectiveness.

Subcommittee Reports

Quality and Protection of Science Subcommittee

Alan Leshner, reporting on behalf of Rob Sampson, Chair, Quality and Protection of Science Subcommittee, explained that the subcommittee organized its report into three categories— independence, objectivity, and quality. (Copy of the report attached as Attachment 2)

With regard to independence in science, Dr. Leshner noted that the SAB must do all it can to prevent political interference and pressure from usurping the opportunities for OJP to make use of science. Independence exists only when all senior scientific staff are selected based on high standards of scientific accomplishments and integrity, and when they feel secure and free to act without undue political interference. Under this area, Dr. Leshner discussed the importance of nominations for directors, especially the science agency directors of BJS and NIJ, being solicited from a broad range of major stakeholders and scientific sources, and these agencies' directors—as well as all the OJP directors-- should have mechanisms to protect them from politics, such as having fixed terms.

To ensure objectivity at all levels of the agency, there should be a scientific agenda based on a broad base, but the responsibility should rest with OJP to make decisions on the basis of scientific merit. Scientific merit alone should determine the allocation of the research grants. Key issues to be addressed under this topic include: How much should the agencies control the scientific agenda vs. the policy people setting that agenda? What happens once the project grant is made...how closely is it monitored? Give them money and let them get the job done?

Quality refers to the science products of the agency, including statistical reports from BJS, project evaluations, and basic research reports. Here, the subcommittee advocated strongly that for peer review panels, each reviewer's verbatim review should be sent to the applicant and not just a summary of the peer panel's comments as is the current practice of NIJ. There was also a recommendation that NIJ's new standing review committee process be evaluated after the first year,

Discussion following the report focused on what Joycelyn Pollack referred to as 12 items in the report that should be considered not only by this subcommittee, but by the SAB as a whole. One was "measuring and monitoring research quality." She noted that the agency lacked the resources to review itself and asked whether it would be appropriate to allocate funding for researchers to evaluate BJA or NIJ, or all of OJP, or is the model of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) evaluation sufficient. Dr. Pollack's concerns go to whether NIJ needs to look in a measured way at the impact on the field of the research it supports and the outcomes.

There was additional discussion on the issue of fixed terms for the OJP component directors with some disagreement among SAB members. There was also discussion on greater use of online outlets to communicate research findings, and encouragement for OJJDP to be archiving all of its research data. Privacy issues and costs associated with retroactive archiving of data were noted.

At the conclusion of the discussion on quality and protection of science, Chair Blumstein tasked this subcommittee with responsibility for drafting a response to the DOJ's request for comments on its Holdren memo response. He asked that the subcommittee prepare a draft and send it to the full SAB for review and approval. Dr. Leshner expressed his concern about the 12 issues that

Dr. Pollack raised, noting that these issues require further input from others on the SAB before they could go forward with a draft memorandum. Dr. Blumstein indicated that the SAB would work on this before its January 2013 meeting.

Evidence Translation and Integration Subcommittee

Tony Fabelo, Chair, Evidence Translation and Integration Subcommittee, first acknowledged the growth of CrimeSolutions.gov, and how visits to the site are increasing—thanks, in part, he feels to better marketing. He then briefly reviewed each of the 15 recommendations in his subcommittee’s report. (Copy of the report attached as Attachment 3.) Phelan Wyrick followed the subcommittee presentation with OJP’s response to the recommendations from the subcommittee. (Copy of responses attached as Attachment 4.)

The focus of the larger discussion among the SAB members that followed centered primarily on two recommendations involving: (1) evaluator independence and whether high-rated programs that appear on the CrimeSolutions.gov website should note when the same person is involved in developing, implementing, and evaluating the program; and, (2) consistency or not across all OJP and OJP-sponsored “what works” websites that engage in evidence translation, including CrimeSolutions.gov. There was also lengthy discussion on how to generate “evidence-based principles” that underlie many of the effective programs.

Bureau of Justice Assistance Subcommittee

Edward Mulvey, Chair, BJA Subcommittee, noted that the subcommittee’s recommendations focus on future directions they would like to see for BJA, and is divided into four potential areas where the SAB and BJA can collaborate: (1) the development of program models and accompanying solicitations, (2) technical assistance, (3) joint projects with NIJ, and, (4) joint training and projects with academic institutions. (Copy of the report attached as Attachment 5.)

BJA is interested in advancing the science by not only collecting data from individual grantee sites, but also being able to collect and analyze common data elements across multiple sites. In many cases, this involves collaboration with NIJ. BJA is also interested in other ways to generate knowledge from its programs, and is extensively involved in promoting researcher partnerships between state/local grantees and academic institutions.

Denise O’Donnell (Director, BJA) added that BJA is trying to integrate research into its programs by encouraging partnerships. Further, BJA is working with practitioners on how to use data to develop a program that can be evaluated. She is interested in working with the SAB to improve data collection by grantees and improve collaborations with NIJ. Much discussion followed regarding building BJA’s capacity to build knowledge and evaluate program effectiveness, and how BJA’s activities in this area can align with NIJ. The SACSI model of evaluation was noted as a model for collaboration.

The SAB expressed interest in learning more about the different types of research, resources for research, and the best distribution of research across the OJP components.

Bureau of Justice Statistics Subcommittee

Richard Rosenfeld, Chair, BJS Subcommittee, noted that the BJS report proposes no specific recommendations for changes in BJS functions or programs. Rather, the subcommittee feels that BJS is performing its statistical mission effectively and efficiently, especially in consideration of the agency's budgetary and resources constraints. The subcommittee remains concerned, however, regarding the critical need to provide the resources needed for BJS to maintain its quality and essential scientific functions in an uncertain fiscal climate and through transitions in leadership. The critical question remains how can BJS maintain and improve the nation's criminal justice statistical infrastructure. (Copy of report attached as Attachment 6.)

Discussion followed regarding the National Crime Victimization Survey and the subcommittee's interest in the release of subnational estimates of criminal victimization and related data. Also mentioned was a new infrastructure that BJS is building with state data that will allow the agency to produce more recidivism studies at more frequent intervals.

The discussion next moved to the timely release of BJS reports. Some SAB members questioned the validity of a newly-released report compiled from data that dates back to 2005. There were suggestions regarding generating an intermediate report using data from the 10 biggest states, and then completing the study for all states. Another suggestion was for BJS to provide a regular schedule of future reports as "coming attractions" on the BJS website as a way to help the visibility of the agency. The discussion moved to concern regarding the timeliness of the Uniform Crime Reports, and how BJS, in coordination with the FBI, is working on several positive initiatives to improve accessibility and analytic utility of UCR crime and arrest data.

Acknowledging the importance of keeping the BJS long-term activities ongoing through various Administrations, there was a lengthy discussion about the need for the SAB to draft a report to help ensure that BJS and the other OJP components are able to maintain scientific integrity. The report should also emphasize the need for the SAB to be renewed. There was also a suggestion about drafting a letter to the Attorney General along these same lines as part of the report.

National Institute of Justice Subcommittee

Richard Rosenfeld spoke on behalf of the NIJ Subcommittee. This subcommittee reported that it was continuing to work on a draft report to define the unique role of NIJ in research for OJP and for the Department more generally, particularly including programs like COPS. (Copy of report attached here as Attachment 7.) So far, the subcommittee has been reviewing various models for NIJ's relationship with the other OJP bureaus. These potential models have been reviewed by and discussed with NIJ leadership.

John Laub (Director, NIJ) advised how NIJ is interested in ensuring that the programs are doing high-quality research and avoiding duplication in the agency. NIJ's goal is to establish itself as the leader in research. He also discussed the newly-created Research Partnership office in NIJ, NIJ's study on standing peer review panels, a new visiting fellows program, as well as a number of new initiatives and collaborations with BJA.

There was a wide-ranging discussion on different types of research, such as evaluation research vs. generalizable knowledge, and how NIJ fits a role in OJP vis a vis various kinds of research. The idea of a research coordinating council within OJP was mentioned as a potential mechanism to avoid duplication across the components.

Finally, the idea was raised about the role of NIJ in developing careers for future scientists.

Office on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Subcommittee

Mark Lipsey, Chair, OJJDP Subcommittee, presented the OJJDP Subcommittee report. (Copy of report attached here as Attachment 8.) Much of the discussion focused on efforts for a proposed OJJDP reorganization that would bring more visibility to research. The subcommittee discussed various scenarios of how research should fit in the OJJDP agency—whether there should be a separate research division—as there has been previously—or whether research functions and associated personnel should be dispersed across the units as they are currently.

The subcommittee interviewed former administrators for their feedback on how to organize research to be most effective. The former administrators strongly favored a consolidated research-office approach; however, the subcommittee has not come to consensus on that. The subcommittee summarized the themes from those discussions

Other Issues

Chair Blumstein asked the membership to make a quick statement about what they saw as an important next step for the SAB. The majority of concerns centered on sustainability and a potential change in the Administration and how that would affect the SAB and the infusing of science in OJP.

In her closing remarks, AAG Mary Lou Leary emphasized her support for the SAB, and praised its accomplishments. She noted that many of the recommendations in the subcommittee report on CrimeSolutions.gov have already been implemented, which gives the Board credibility. She highlighted John Laub's hiring of a career DOJ employee who is a scientist as Deputy Director of NIJ demonstrates the importance of science to the agency. Finally, she noted the collaboration among OJP agencies, including NIJ's work with the other OJP bureaus and the work of BJS that takes into account the other OJP agencies' data requirements.

In closing, Chairman Blumstein again tasked the Quality and Protection of Science Subcommittee with drafting a response to the DOJ response to the Holdren memo posted on the DOJ website. There was also an agreement that the SAB prepare a report on its work so far.

The next meeting of the SAB and subcommittees will be in January 2013, on a Thursday and Friday, the exact dates to be determined. Chairman Blumstein adjourned the meeting at 4:00 p.m.