

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LOCAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE EVALUATION CAPABILITY

By: Tom Long
Evaluation Unit Supervisor

Office of Criminal Justice Planning
1245 East Adams Street
Jacksonville, Florida

53941

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LOCAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE EVALUATION CAPABILITY

I. Introduction

This discussion of a model Metropolitan Criminal Justice Evaluation Process is based on the experiences of the Office of Criminal Justice Planning's Evaluation Unit, in Jacksonville, Florida. This unit was a Model Evaluation Program (MEP) participant during the 75-76 fiscal year. The Jacksonville Unit also functioned at a reduced level for approximately two years prior to MEP participation.

The various issues involved in the development of an effective evaluation process will be discussed generally. The process proposed is believed to be generalizable to most local (city, county, regional) Criminal Justice Planning Units.

The Model Evaluation Process will be discussed in terms of the structure of such a unit, the focus that this unit will take, and the process that will be followed.

II. Structure

The placement of evaluation responsibility at the local level has a number of advantages which should be noted. Decisions concerning evaluation priorities usually require an analysis of local problems and programs. Local program evaluators should have a good general knowledge of the evaluation needs within their jurisdictions. Effective evaluation usually requires a positive working relationship between the evaluator and program administrators. Effective communication is necessary to assure that evaluation information is relevant and that results are properly communicated to policy-makers. The locally based evaluation unit will be in the best position to develop positive relationships and effective communication with the users of evaluation data. The local approach to Criminal Justice evaluation may also prove less expensive than other approaches. Such a focus will often simplify the study methodology and avoid costly data processing and statistical analysis.

State and National evaluations will require coordination from each respective level. The local evaluation capability may become involved in data collection/analysis, if the state/national level has developed standardized research designs.

A local evaluation capability may either have a permanent evaluation capability or may contract with private vendors. The permanent approach appears to provide greater flexibility at less cost than the contractual approach. A permanent capability will avoid having to enter into competitive bidding and obtaining time-consuming bureaucratic approval each time a new study is initiated. A permanent capability, if institutionalized under the local governmental structure insures the continuity of evaluation data over time.

While the diverse nature of the Criminal Justice System may prove troublesome, this can be remedied by staffing this capability with generalists with sound research skills. If needed, specialized information may be obtained through literature reviews, technical assistance, and from specialized organizations (American Bar Association, National Sheriff's Association, etc.).

III. Scope of Evaluation

If the evaluation capability has adequate resources and has achieved credibility within the system, then a broad flexible target area should be developed. The Jacksonville project considered their target area to be the entire Criminal Justice System. Evaluation needs were assessed shortly before the completion of an evaluation. This enabled the Evaluation Unit to select areas to evaluate on a timely fashion and thus better meet the changing information needs of the decision-makers. A rigid, scheduled approach, would eliminate such flexibility and decrease the likelihood that evaluation results would be relevant to systems decision-makers.

A small evaluation unit may be limited to focusing solely on project-level evaluations due to limited resources. They may also have to focus on only those projects in a particular area of the system (police, courts, corrections, etc.).

This was true of the Jacksonville Unit prior to MEP funding. At that time the unit had a two-person capability and focused solely on adult corrections' projects. With increased funding the unit was able to undertake program and sub-system level evaluations in various areas within the system.

Another major question facing evaluation managers concerns whether to focus on impact or process level evaluations. Impact evaluation seeks to determine if the project has brought about a change in the system and/or a reduction in crime. Process evaluation focuses on the internal operation of a project to determine if that project is functioning efficiently. Several factors should be considered before deciding on a particular focus:

1. Time Constraints - Impact evaluations will usually be more complicated and time-consuming than process evaluations.
2. User Needs - The users of evaluations data may desire either impact or process data.
3. Availability of Data - Impact data may not be available.
4. Competence of Staff - Evaluation personnel may not have the expertise to objectively determine a project's impact.
5. Resources - Manpower and/or funding may limit the focus.

A comprehensive evaluation approach which included both impact and process data should be the goal of the evaluation capability. This is most likely to meet the various information needs of the policy-makers.

When impact data is not available, a process evaluation should be considered. Such evaluations are quite similar to a "management audit" and can provide the users of the evaluation with relevant data. A process level evaluation may also study the adequacy of impact data and, if necessary, suggest improved data collection to assure the availability of impact data in the future.

IV. Process

The following process typifies the one used by Jacksonville Evaluation Unit. This process is described generally and would apply to any of the different levels

of evaluations described earlier.

1. Pre-Evaluation Planning

In-house evaluation data never seems adequate. Evaluators are continually trying to get projects/programs to implement better data collection systems. One way to improve the adequacy of in-house evaluation data is to build in an adequate evaluation component during the planning stages of a project. This was done with all LEAA grant applications in Jacksonville. The Evaluation Unit reviews all applications and makes recommendations to assure that each new project has an adequate evaluation component. The obvious gap lies in the unit's inability to review non-LEAA projects. Units with a broader perspective may find the adequacy of data in non-LEAA projects/programs a major obstacle to effective in-depth evaluations.

Another important pre-evaluation activity deals with the determination of which projects/programs to evaluate. While such decisions can be made by evaluation staff, policy-makers may be better suited to determining evaluation priorities. Until recently, the Jacksonville unit obtained informal input from system policy-makers to determine project/areas to evaluate in the future. This input will soon be formalized by having a newly created Coordinating Council determine evaluation priorities. Such an approach will insure that evaluations are geared to the actual information needs of the system's policy-makers rather than the needs as perceived by the Evaluation Unit.

A flexible approach to the selection of future evaluations appears to hold the greatest likelihood that evaluations will be relevant. Determining the area/project to evaluate, shortly before such an evaluation actually begins, enables the evaluation unit to provide decision-makers with timely evaluative data. In general, the development of long-range evaluation priority lists are not recommended. What is important to evaluate presently

may be of secondary importance six months or one year later.

After a decision is made concerning a project/program to evaluate, the next step in the process requires the development of effective communication between the evaluation unit and project administrator. Preliminary discussions should: explain the purpose(s) of the evaluation and the expected approach to be used; determine the information needs of the project administrator; and achieve a consensus on how evaluation results will be disseminated.

2. Research Design

The evaluation designs developed by the Jacksonville Unit were non-experimental in nature. The less sophisticated approach was utilized for a number of reasons:

1. The Evaluation Unit did not have the resources to implement sophisticated evaluation designs.
2. The information needs of the system did not warrant rigorous research designs.
3. Expectations of the Evaluation Unit in terms of quantity of evaluations made such long-term studies unfeasible.
4. Projects/programs had not developed necessary data base to facilitate rigorous research.
5. Information needs of system decision-makers could be met through soft research approaches.

Aside from these practical considerations, some preliminary research indicated that, in a study of six evaluations which had an impact on the system, the greatest impact came from the crudest design.¹ It could be that the less rigorous design produces the type of information that is most useful to the decision-makers. As Adams notes:

"The non-experimental study appears more suited to executive decision-making styles and tempos, and its versatility gives it the lead in a variety of problem-solving situations. Before the experiment can be brought to bear, the important decisions have often been made and the center of interest is now new problems in new areas."

"Non-experimental studies are usually quick of execution and generally inexpensive as compared with experiments. Also, they pose less of a threat or burden to operating staff, and they facilitate communication with practitioners since the concepts, techniques and manner of reporting are closer to common experience."

One should not assume that non-experimental research designs do not have their drawbacks:

"Some aspects of non-experimental studies are disadvantageous. Their value is determined to a large extent by the experience, judgement and objectivity of the researcher; improperly used, they may create more confusion than enlightenment. Their procedures lack standardization, their reliability is uncertain, and their interpretation is sometimes difficult. Many of these characteristics are more troublesome to researchers than to administrators. The latter are constantly faced with unreliable and uncertain data in their decision-making processes and they are more accustomed to acting on such information, though often with questionable effect." 2

3. Data Collection

A scarcity of data is a problem faced by most evaluators. Sufficient attention to the development of an adequate evaluation component in the planning stages of a project should assure that minimum data is available.

If such data does not appear adequate the evaluator may:

1. Seek alternative sources of data. Subjective data from interviews and observations may prove to be an adequate substitute for more reliable quantitative data.
2. The evaluation design may be altered. Inadequate data may result in a modification of the original evaluation objectives. The results may become less specific than originally intended. One or more of the initial objectives may prove unattainable.
3. The evaluation may be terminated. If the lack of data is so great that few evaluation objectives can be met, then the evaluation may have to be terminated. Rarely should this prove necessary. Through use of alternative data sources and a flexible evaluation approach most evaluation should prove feasible.

An important part of each evaluation should be a critical assessment of the project's/program's in-house evaluation capability. Gaps in the data should be communicated to project administrators and the evaluator should provide any technical assistance that may be needed to upgrade their data base.

4. Data Analysis

Few local evaluation units will have access to or funds for electronic data processing services. This did not prove to be a problem in Jacksonville. Most data was easily processed on a manual basis. This was because survey data rarely reached a size that necessitated electronic processing. Elaborate statistical analyses were also not needed in the studies undertaken in Jacksonville. Therefore, electronic data processing should not prove to be a major limiting factor in the development of an effective local evaluation process.

5. Post-Study Implementation Strategy

The evaluator's role in the implementation stage of this evaluation process is complex. If the evaluator aggressively pursues the implementation of evaluation recommendations, he is likely to be criticized for overstepping his bounds. If he chooses not to become involved at this stage, he runs the risk that the evaluation will not be given adequate attention. Thus, the evaluator needs to assume a role that encourages serious consideration of evaluation's results without assuming the characteristics of a policy-making role.

Appropriate roles which an evaluator may assume during this phase include: a resource person, a consultant and/or an educator. These roles are not mutually exclusive. There are many similarities and a certain amount of overlap between them. The evaluator may also assume more than one role during this implementation stage of the evaluation process.

6. Evaluation Follow-Up

A policy of the Jacksonville Evaluation Unit has been to conduct a cursory follow-up study approximately six months after the completion of an evaluation. This follow-up generally focuses on the degree to which evaluation recommen-

dations have been implemented. Such follow-up studies are beneficial to the project/program administrators since they provide objective information concerning the changes that the project/program has made since the evaluation was completed. The follow-up is also of great value to the evaluation manager. It provides information on the degree of impact that the evaluation may have had on a project. It also highlights weaknesses in the evaluation process or inappropriate recommendations that may have been made. The follow-up also serves to focus additional attention on a previously completed evaluation. This may be particularly important if the evaluation report was not adequately studied or discussed when completed.

There are at least two negative aspects of conducting follow-up evaluations. First, they are time consuming. The time it takes to conduct the follow-up may divert evaluation personnel from conducting new evaluations. However, this difficulty may be minimized by conducting short-term, cursory follow-ups. Since evaluation personnel will already be familiar with the particular program, it will be easier to document implementation or non-implementation of evaluation recommendations. Input from agency staff interviews may also be used to determine project/program change. Such a cursory follow-up is usually completed by the Jacksonville unit within a two week period.

The second negative aspect arises as a result of the potential bias that the evaluator may have when following-up on his own evaluation recommendations. It may be difficult for the evaluator to determine that a particular recommendation was not appropriate. However, a professional evaluator should be able to maintain a level of objectivity which would enable a critical analysis of the evaluation process as well as the degree to which the evaluated program has implemented recommendations.

-FOOTNOTES-

1. Adams, Stuart, Evaluative Research in Corrections - A Practical Guide, U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administrator, National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice, March, 1975 p. 15
2. Ibid; p. 53
3. Weidman, Donald R., et al, Intensive Evaluation for Criminal Justice Planning Agencies, U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, National Institute of Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice July, 1975 p. 20-21



END