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The Value of Corrections Research: Learning What Works

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OUR NATION'S approach to corrections policy remains in disarray. We are unsure of what works and what ought to be done; priorities appear confused and resources misallocated. A justifiable perception exists that Federal, state, and local governments are largely paralyzed in their efforts to develop a sound corrections strategy. Perhaps most importantly, corrections is not being directed by those who are the most knowledgeable about it; instead, policies appear driven by public opinion, fear, and political hype.

One of the biggest challenges now facing corrections is to regain control of the profession. One direct and effective way to do this is through research. Those who can quantify what they do, with whom, and to what benefit will have a competitive advantage.

Too much of current corrections practice is based upon untested assumptions, the validity of which rests on tradition or common sense, and not on proven effectiveness. Inflation and sluggish economic growth mean that criminal justice agencies have less money for adopting future innovations or sustaining old ones. Now, more than ever, insights are needed that will enable targeting of scarce resources on programs that are likely to succeed.

This article reviews the current state of corrections research, discusses the evolving importance of policy experiments in learning "what works" in corrections, and suggests how research findings should appropriately be used in public policy debates.

The State of the Art in Corrections Research

If we are honest, we must admit that we don't know the answers to most of the basic questions the public justifiably asks of corrections. For instance: Do community programs reduce recidivism rates? By how much? More than institutional programs? Less than doing nothing at all? Are some offenders affected more than others? It is not that we can't answer such questions, but rather that we have not had money, expertise, or willingness to answer them.

The Federal Government is, by order of mag-

nitude, the largest funder of criminal justice research, and it has never chosen to spend more than a small fraction of 1 percent on such research. For every U.S. citizen, the National Science Foundation reports that Federal funders spend about \$32 on health research, \$4 on environmental research, \$1.20 on education research, but only 13 cents on criminal justice research. And, dollars allocated to research have steadily decreased since 1980, as a proportion of all monies spent on criminal justice. This allocation hardly accords with priorities of the American public, for which crime has nearly always ranked first among domestic policy concerns.

That dismal investment has seriously affected both the quantity and quality of corrections research, and for the most part, it remains badly flawed. A major reason is the nature of the research itself. The vast majority of corrections research is descriptive, not evaluative. Yet, policy-makers and practitioners typically want answers to the question: "Did the program work?" Answering that question requires credible program evaluations, which are rare in criminal justice. Even when program evaluations are attempted, researchers and practitioners often fail to create adequate control groups. In other words, they end up comparing apples with oranges, and the conclusions remain ambiguous at best.

Most corrections research is trying to discover whether there is a relationship between some program (e.g., intensive supervision) and some outcome (e.g., recidivism). To answer that question, researchers often compare two study groups. For example, they might compare the rearrest rates of those on intensive supervision with those of persons on routine parole. If they discover that intensive supervision cases have lower rearrest rates, the evaluation might conclude that the program "worked." But such data are insufficient to claim that intensive supervision was responsible for the observed outcome. The lower recidivism rates may actually reflect systematic differences between the types of offenders placed on intensive supervision and on routine supervision.

In fact, this is exactly what recently occurred in Georgia. Early data showed that persons on intensive supervision (ISP) had lower recidivism rates than persons on routine supervision. The

findings received considerable publicity and were used to expand the program, both within the state and nationwide. However, closer comparisons of the two study groups showed that those placed on intensive supervision had less serious prior criminal records than offenders in the comparison groups (Erwin & Bennett, 1987). Since criminal record is known to be strongly associated with recidivism, the methodology had "stacked the deck," thereby making ISP look effective (for a review, see Petersilia & Turner, 1990).

Corrections research primarily consists of such "passive" research designs because they are easier to implement, less costly, and less intrusive than "active" research designs. With such passive designs, one simply looks at a program in operation with no attempt to actively manipulate the selection of participants or the level of treatment they receive. With such designs, however, it is impossible to be sure that the "treatment" preceded the outcome or that the two study groups were equivalent prior to participating in the program. As a result, one cannot be confident about inferring that the differences in post-program behavior are due to the program, and not preexisting differences among participants.

The proliferation of this type of research has strained the relationships between researchers and practitioners. Practitioners who cooperate with researchers often expect that the final research report will provide a clear assessment about the program's effectiveness. This expectation is seldom realized, and practitioners are often left frustrated by the research enterprise, judging research results vague and complicated and the implications so couched in caveats as to be of little practical value (Petersilia, 1987).

Researchers aren't really to blame for this situation. They know that it is nearly impossible to assess program effectiveness unless one engages in more active research, in which the researcher manipulates the assignment of cases into the comparison groups, so that the two study groups are equivalent in all aspects except that one group is given a treatment and the other group is not. Any subsequent changes observed in these groups can then be attributed with a high degree of confidence to the differences in treatments.

Researchers have called for such experiments for more than 25 years, beginning with the President's Crime Commission in 1967. Yet significant progress on this front has been made only recently.

The Emerging Importance of Policy Experiments

More than a dozen correctional experiments are now under way (or recently completed) across the nation, due to the collaborative efforts of a few researchers and host agencies, backed by the financial resources of the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), U.S. Department of Justice. For example:

- In Birmingham, Alabama, and Phoenix, Arizona, researchers are assessing the effectiveness of urine testing on offender criminality. In each city, convicted drug users are being randomly assigned to different supervision levels, which vary in their personal contact levels, use of treatment, and urinalysis.
- In Indianapolis, Indiana, researchers are testing the impact of electronic monitoring on probationers. Working with the district attorney, nonviolent felons who are granted probation are being randomly assigned to a home detection program with or without the simultaneous use of electronic monitoring.
- In Salt Lake City, Utah, researchers are working with the juvenile court to measure the effectiveness of probation. Eligible youths are being randomly assigned to three supervision levels: no contacts, routine supervision, or intensive supervision plus treatment.
- In Ohio and New Jersey, researchers are working with corrections officials to compare the effectiveness of public versus private correctional facilities for juveniles. Eligible youths are being randomly assigned to traditional state training schools or private-sector alternatives.
- In Detroit, Michigan, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, researchers are assessing the effectiveness of intensive aftercare for juveniles released from state training schools. Eligible youth are being randomly assigned to routine parole caseloads or an intensive aftercare program, which involves personal and family counseling, work and employment training, and more frequent surveillance contacts.
- In 12 sites across the country, researchers are assessing the impacts and costs of intermediate sanctions for serious adult felons. Eligible offenders are being randomly assigned to either routine supervision or a locally developed intermediate sanction, which might include electronic monitoring,

house arrest, drug testing, and more frequent personal contacts.

Successfully implementing one of these experiments is extremely difficult and requires considerable time, resources, and energy from both the agency and research staff (see Petersilia, 1989). Yet, when successfully completed, these experiments are likely to provide more solid and credible information than has ever existed before on the effects of correctional interventions on offender behavior.

For most of these efforts, results are just now being published. How corrections chooses to respond—and utilize—the research findings will likely dictate whether the progress recently being made is the first step toward accumulating a more solid body of information of “what works,” or whether this important collaboration proves short-lived.

If the research results show favored programs effective, administrators will likely judge their time with researchers well-spent. But, what if the results fail to show that the program made a difference? It is true that researchers often discover that they know a good deal more about what doesn't work than about what does. Some will take this to mean that researchers are merely critics who have nothing “positive” to offer. Administrators may well believe that their efforts provided them with nothing useful or, worse, provided their opponents with stronger evidence that their programs were ineffective. The door that has been gradually opening over the last 5 years, permitting important collaborative efforts between scholars and practitioners, may begin to close.

It is important that the progress continue. Research findings, regardless of their nature, need not be threatening. When they are perceived as such, it is due to a misunderstanding of the appropriate use of science in public policy debates.

How Research Should Be Used in Policy Deliberations

Research should *contribute* to policy and practice but is not meant to provide the sole or even primary basis for it. In other words, research findings are meant to inform policy, not make it.

I use the word “inform” advisedly. Research is not and cannot be an unambiguous guide to policy: Though a useful source of knowledge, that knowledge usually makes statements about rela-

tionships between two or more phenomena (such as, the relationship between intensive supervision and recidivism). The fact that X produces a change in Y is not, in itself, sufficient grounds for a policy decision about Y; nor is the evidence that a change in X does not have any effect on Y sufficient grounds for abandoning an intervention based on X.

It may turn out, for instance, that research based on the experiments above fails to demonstrate that increasing supervision and services to probationers reduces recidivism. That finding, by itself, does not provide compelling grounds for disbanding intensive supervision efforts. There are moral, justice, and economic issues that must be considered, along with the scientific findings (see Tonry, 1990, for some of ISP's latent goals). It is quite possible that intensive supervision efforts are justified, regardless of their impact on recidivism, for purposes of proportionality in sentencing, cost savings, or a myriad of other organizational and bureaucratic goals. Judgments about whether or not a program should be continued are, in the final analysis, not solely scientific judgments.

Researchers have a responsibility to provide *policy relevant* information, but correctional leaders have the responsibility to derive *policy prescriptions*, based on research and other considerations. If each takes those responsibilities seriously, we will establish a cumulative body of information about what works. With such data, we should again be able to inspire the confidence of policymakers and the public and ultimately return the development of policy back into the hands of corrections professionals—where it clearly belongs.

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