

SOURCES OF USEFUL POLICY RESEARCH:
THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE EXPERIENCE

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One of the hard lessons we have learned from years of applied and policy research is that such research rarely pays off. Before the social sciences stumbled upon this bitter truth, it had already been learned in high-technology fields. Around mid-century, a former president of du Pont reportedly asserted that only about five percent of that firm's research projects ultimately paid off (Lessing, 1950).

We began to hear the bad news from the social sciences in the 1960s. Bailey (1966), reviewing 100 of the more rigorous evaluative studies in corrections, noted that "evidence for the efficacy of correctional treatments is slight, inconsistent, and of questionable reliability." Gideonse, reporting to the Senate Committee on Government Operations (1967), stated that in the past several years over \$100 million had been spent on educational research and development, and we have "pretty little to show for it." Moynihan (1969) rounded out the decade by lambasting social scientists for having bungled the war on poverty.

Medicine joined the doleful chorus in the 1970s. White (1973), in "Life and Death and Medicine," spoke of the failure of medical science in coping with the social illnesses now predominating in economically advanced countries. Greenberg (1975),

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in "Cancer: Now for the Bad News," suggested that the billions spent on cancer research had been largely wasted. And Nisbet (1975), summing up the current disillusionment with science in "Knowledge Dethroned," concluded that the vastly expensive war on cancer would probably bring the greatest disillusionment of all.

Returning to education, the General Accounting Office (1975) closed out 1975 on a consistent note. It reported that a \$1.8 billion reading program to help poor children reach the skill level of the average child actually seemed to increase the gap between the two groups.

Discounting some of these evaluations heavily for rhetoric, we are left still with the impression that applied and policy sciences, whatever the field, have been poor performers over the past twenty-five years. There remains the crucial question: During those twenty-five years, has the firing of money broadside at research targets taught us to sharpen our sights and to direct our expenditures more wisely?

The answer is still unclear. We note the growing number of evaluations of evaluation, seeking wisdom about what kinds of studies carry impact, under what circumstances, and by what kinds of researchers. We have treatises on academic and entrepreneurial research (Bernstein and Freeman, 1975); on the evaluations of correctional treatment (Lipton et al, 1975); on criminological research and decision-making (UNSDRI, 1973); and on research, demonstration, and social action (Wilkins and Gottfredson, 1969).

A forthcoming volume in this genre is entitled "Impacting Criminal Justice Through Research" (Adams, 1976). The volume reports the results of a survey of 185 major criminal justice agencies -- large police departments, state court administrations, and state departments of correction. The survey sought information on agency perceptions of the usefulness of research, the areas in which utility was most evident, and the sources of the useful research. This paper is a preliminary report on selected aspects of the survey.

Methodology

Initially, the survey planned to focus on evaluative research in the subject agencies. However, the pretests disclosed that agency staffs had difficulty in distinguishing varieties of studies, so the general term "research" was substituted for evaluative research.

The final questionnaire included eight to ten questions, varying slightly by type of agency. This was mailed to the heads of 185 agencies, with a cover letter on U.S. Department of Justice letterhead explaining the purpose of the study and accompanied by a return envelope.

Initial returns of the questionnaire varied from a low of 62 percent for the court administrators to about 80 percent for the police departments. Second or third mailings and telephone calls raised the final returns to 100 percent for the correctional agencies, 97 percent for the police departments, and 81 percent for the state court administration offices.

The following discussion deals with responses to questions

relating to 1) general perceptions of the utility of research, 2) rankings of specific operational areas by improvement through research, 3) rankings of sources of useful research, and 4) impact of research by type of study design.

FINDINGS

The opening question in the survey was, "To what extent do you find that research has improved the operation of your agency (or department)?" This was a "warm-up" question, but the responses from the three groups of agencies contain some points of interest.

Comparative Levels of Utility Perceived

The modal response of the 61 responding police departments was that research was of "considerable" use in improving operations. The modal response from departments of correction was one step lower -- "moderately" useful. Court administrations gave a bi-modal response: "considerable" use, and "little" use. The distributions are shown in Table 1.

(Table 1 about here)

It is of interest that police departments, which have come to use research somewhat more slowly than corrections, historically speaking, show higher perception of the utility of research. Two possible reasons suggest themselves. First, corrections has focused heavily on studies of correctional rehabilitation, only to find that this is an elusive goal. Currently, the field is confused by the "nothing works" doctrine.* Second, corrections has

*Martinson, 1974

Table 1

Criminal Justice Agency Perceptions of the
General Usefulness of Research

Perceived Level of Usefulness	Police Departments		Court Administrations		Correctional Agencies	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
None	1	2%	4	10%	2	3%
Little	4	7	12	31	19	25
Moderate	18	29	9	23	37	50
Considerable	38	62	14	36	13	18
No response	0	-	0	-	3	4
Total	61	100%	39	100%	74	100%

drawn more heavily on academic researchers, while police departments have contracted with management analyst and operations research firms, whose work may give the appearance of greater impact in management-conscious police agencies.

Areas of Perceived Utility

Research that was perceived as useful showed some uniformity of structural or functional location across agency types. The police emphasized manpower utilization, equipment improvement, better management, and upgraded communications. Corrections nominated new programs, betterment of old programs, better planning, and system improvement generally. The courts mentioned better use of judges' time, more rapid processing of cases, expanded use of information systems, improvement of record organization and use.

Ironically, the areas in which research was perceived as least useful were those embodying the primary missions of the agencies. The police found research least useful in reducing the crime rate; corrections found it least useful in reducing recidivism; and the courts reported it least useful in deterring further crime.

(Table 2 about here)

If we sum these findings into a sentence, the three criminal justice subsystems found research useful for modifying their structures and processes but not for changing offenders or improving public safety. This outcome appears to support the pessimistic view of results from contemporary applied and policy research.

Table 2
Areas of Greatest Research Impact

1) Police Rankings	Ranked 1st	2nd to 10th	Checked	Total
Better use of manpower	16	17	16	49
Improved equipment	10	18	15	43
Better management	8	20	14	42
Improved communication	1	18	14	33
Better community relations	1	18	7	26
Decreased response time	-	16	8	24
Better attitudes and morale	-	11	7	18
Improved staff composition	-	9	7	16
Increased clearance rates	-	9	6	15
Reduced crime rates	2	12	1	15
Other	-	1	6	7

2) Court rankings	Ranked 1st	2nd to 11th	Checked	Total
Efficient use of judges' time	6	10	7	23
More rapid processing of cases	3	12	8	23
Organization & use of records	1	14	6	21
Use of training & information	3	9	7	19
Diversion from adjudication	1	7	3	11
Reduction of pretrial detention	1	4	3	8
Use of computers for scheduling	-	6	2	8
Greater equity in sentencing	1	3	3	7
Social services to defendants	-	5	2	7
Equity to disadvantaged defendants	-	4	2	6
Positive tracking of dfndts & wtncs	2	2	2	6
Innovative sntncg & dispositions	1	4	1	6
Deterrence of new crime	-	1	-	1
Other	3	2	2	7

3) Corrections Rankings	Ranked 1st	2nd to 6th	Checked	Total
Developing new programs	22	17	11	50
Improving existing programs	10	26	14	50
Better planning & budgeting	5	29	12	46
General systems improvement	3	23	7	33
Better management	6	15	5	26
Reduced recidivism	3	7	-	10
Other	-	-	6	6

Sources of Useful Research

The most highly ranked source of useful research was the in-house research unit. All three subsystems were in agreement on this point. In-house researchers were present in about two-thirds of the reporting agencies, which means that they were less widespread than university staff or private research firms, generally speaking. For in-house units to be ranked first under such circumstances means either that they were highly regarded for their work or organizational loyalty biased judgments in their favor.

The design of the survey did not permit a test of organizational bias arising from administrator loyalty or completion of questionnaires by chiefs of research. Reference will be made later to independent evidence on this point.

Police departments ranked in-house research as most useful, contracting firms (i.e., entrepreneurial research) second, and foundation research third most useful. The questionnaires for corrections and court administrations offered two additional choices not offered the police: research of similar agencies, and conferences and literature. The effects of these choices were conspicuous. Corrections ranked in-house research first, conferences and literature second, and other agencies' research products third. State court administrations ranked in-house research first, contracting research firms second, and conferences and literature third.

(Table 3 about here)

Table 3

Sources of Useful Research: Comparative Rankings by Three
Criminal Justice Subsystems

Sources: High to Low*	Police Rankings**	Court Rankings	Corrections Rankings***
In-house research	1	1	1
Conferences and literature	-	3	2
Other agencies' research	-	4	3
Consulting firm	2	2	4
University faculty	4	6	5
State planning agency	5	5	6
Research foundation	3	7	7

*Sources are ordered on rankings by Corrections, subsystem with largest N.

**The Police questionnaire did not offer "Conferences and Literature" and "Other Agencies' Research" as choices.

***See Table 5, page 6b, for details of Corrections rankings.

Table 4

Sources of Useful Research: Rankings of Five Sources*

Sources: High to Low	Police Rankings	Court Rankings	Corrections Rankings
In-house research	1	1	1
Consulting firms	2	2	2
University faculty	4	4	3
State planning agency	5	3	4
Research foundation	3	5	5

*The revised distributions for Courts and Corrections assume that nominations formerly accorded to "Conferences" and "Other Agencies" would distribute proportionately, or roughly so, over the remainder of the list.

Table 5
 Details of "Useful Sources" Rankings by Corrections

Sources of Research	Ranks							Check Marks	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Consulting firm	7	5	3	4	4	3	4	-	30
Research foundation	3	4	7	-	4	3	2	2	25
University faculty	1	4	5	4	4	4	3	3	28
Other agencies' research	5	7	9	7	1	3	-	1	33
In-House research	41	5	1	3	-	-	-	5	55
State planning agency	2	7	7	2	1	2	3	3	27
Conferences and literature	2	19	9	7	4	-	-	8	49
Other*	-	-	2	1	1	1	-	-	5

* Three specified journals and LEAA Newsletter; LEAA publications and National Criminal Justice Reference Service disseminations "as distinct from Conferences and Literature"; "Inmate on special assignment"; "university students interning or doing dissertation topics of use to Department -- by mutual arrangement"; "Student research, particularly by correctional employees working on a thesis or dissertation."

If two of the seven possible choices -- other agencies, and conferences and literature -- are omitted, the first three choices of the three agency types are as follows: (Cf. Table 4.)

	<u>Police</u>	<u>State Courts</u>	<u>Corrections</u>
1st	In-house research	In-house research	In-house research
2nd	Contracting firms	Contracting firms	Contracting firms
3rd	Research Founda- tion	State planning agency	University faculty

One matter of interest in these choices is the place of university faculty in the rankings. This has been a point of focus in recent discussions of academic and entrepreneurial research.

Academic researchers are ranked most highly by corrections, where evaluative studies of correctional rehabilitation by controlled experimental designs have been relatively prominent in the past twenty years.

A second matter of interest is the third-place nomination of research foundations by police departments. This choice apparently reflects the high esteem accorded the Police Foundation, a privately funded non-profit research organization. The Foundation has carried out, or provided funds for, a number of key studies in the use of women as police officers, in patterns of cruiser patrolling, and in team policing. Given the limitations of its resources and its one-of-a-kind status, the rank accorded the Foundation is considerably higher than might have been anticipated.

Kinds of Study Designs Associated with Utility

No question was asked specifically about the design of

studies that were especially useful. However, in copies of research reports, narrative descriptions of agency activities, and sketches of studies that were believed to be the most useful, it was possible to draw rough conclusions as to the kinds of research designs that went with high utility ranks.

Studies that were perceived as useful were primarily case studies, management analyses, and surveys. The controlled experiment or quasi-experiment did not stand out conspicuously. Such designs have been used more in correctional agencies, primarily to evaluate treatment programs. However, even in corrections, controlled experimental studies appear to make up no more than five percent of all evaluative studies (Berkowitz, 1973), and quasi-experiments not much more. Police departments and court administrations show heavy emphasis on designs that are featured in the work of management analysts or operations researchers. Some attention has been given experimental studies in these two subsystems by the Police Foundation and by a number of contractors who have applied quasi-experimental designs to the study of pretrial diversion in court systems.

DISCUSSION

Several points worthy of discussion have thus far emerged:

- 1) the high rank accorded to agency modification in estimates of research utility;
- 2) the growing importance of in-house research;
- 3) by inference, how researchers should be trained for in-house research roles; and
- 4) the relation of research design to research utility.

Agency Change as Product

In 1973, Bennett, chief of research of the California Department of Corrections, suggested that proper strategy for correctional research was to seek changes in the correctional system rather than in the correctional client. About the same time, Adams (1974), examining the level of impact of various kinds of studies in corrections, concluded that research with the heaviest impact appeared to be associated with system change rather than offender change. Reform of the offender continued to be a relatively unrewarding target, while reform of the system seemed readily possible. A fairly simple study could generate administrative decisions, and, if need be, political action to change structures or processes.

Three developments may be evident here. First, policy-oriented persons in corrections seem increasingly to see the system rather than the client as primary target of modification. Second, research observers are more frequently concluding that system-change objectives are more accessible than client-change objectives. And third, a climate favorable to system change may be evolving as a result of these and other factors. Part of this climate consists of emerging rationales for system change.

Two of these rationales deserve comment. One is the rather obvious argument that unproductive instruments deserve only limited trials. If the present system is not achieving the agency's goals, try changing the system. At some later date it may be possible to show greater success in achieving the primary goal through a new system.

The other rationale is that circumstances are easier to change than people, and both the public and policy makers may come to accept the first when the second proves difficult or costly. Etzioni (1973) stated this principle some time ago in his article on the relative ease of changing human beings. In criminal justice, the principle has been recognized in those jurisdictions that have ceased arresting inebriates and subjecting them to short-term detention, turning the task of caring for such persons over to health or welfare agencies instead. The possible uses of this strategy in criminal justice are quite extensive. We can think of decriminalizing drug use, soliciting for prostitution, gambling of many kinds, and miscellaneous types of sex offenses.

Other system changes, beyond decriminalizing public drunkenness, are already in evidence. New developments have occurred in diversion from the traditional criminal justice processes, in delinquency prevention, and in environmental manipulation to reduce crime opportunities. The Maine youth aid bureaus, which are new adjuncts of police departments, seek to prevent delinquency and divert arrested juveniles from adjudication through new skills exercised by specially trained police. Since 1969, about one-fourth of the police departments in Maine have become preventive, diversionary, and environment-minded in their work with juveniles (Adams, 1975).

Growing Importance of In-house Research

Fifteen years ago few criminal justice agencies had research units or research-and-planning activities. During the

intervening years, most state correctional agencies and court administrations have acquired such units. The same is true for most of the larger police departments. Are these units effective?

Morris (1972) observes that "California is now producing more meaningful evaluative research than any other state or country in the world." The reason is that the adult and youth correctional agencies in California "have built their research programs deeply into their administrative structures." Morris sees the same as being "in small part true" in the United Kingdom, in the U.S. federal prison and parole systems, and in some of the more progressive states in the U.S. However, he sees these as the exception rather than the rule.

The correctional agencies themselves reverse Morris on what is exception and what rule. Furthermore, the police and court administrations follow suit. However, such optimistic judgments by the agencies may, as noted before, be organizational loyalty or research unit bias in the data of the present survey. To help us resolve the issue, we may cite findings by van de Vall, reported at the 70th ASA meetings, on applied research impact in 120 industrial and social agencies. Van de Vall (1975), in interviews with decision-makers - administrators - in these agencies, reportedly discovered that in-house research impacted agency policy more heavily than research by outsiders.

This conclusion helps somewhat in discounting the possibility that research unit completions of the criminal justice questionnaires biased responses in favor of the in-house unit. How-

ever, it does not resolve the issue of whether administrators over-rate the work of their research units. Adequate resolution of that issue may require further investigation.

In the meantime, it seems reasonable to conclude that one reason for the rapid spread of research units throughout criminal justice agencies is that their research is believed to be useful. There may be other reasons for this growth. Morris noted that it is difficult to evaluate correctional agencies from the outside (1972). The barriers to understanding, communication, and effective cooperation are just too great. Furthermore, in-house researchers are in advantageous position to design research closer to the needs of policy makers. Finally, such research is less costly; it insures better carry-over from evaluation to planning and development; and it fosters the accumulative process, so important for growth in applied as well as in basic research.

The higher value placed on in-house research by agency heads does not mean an exclusion of interest in other sources of research, even in those agencies that have the strongest research units. There are occasions and needs best met by outsiders, and in the criminal justice field there is likely to continue to be a balance of some kind between in-house, entrepreneurial, academic, and state planning agency evaluators. And where there is no in-house unit, there must be evaluation by outsiders if there is to be any at all, although one suspects that if there is no in-house unit, there will not be extensive outside evaluation either -- only the minimum that is required to meet the demands of funding agencies, legislatures, special commissions, or the like.

The Training of Research Staff

While Professor Morris believes that it is difficult to evaluate correctional agencies from the outside, Professor Abelson, Editor of Science, notes that some organizations are reluctant to employ as in-house researchers individuals trained to the Ph.D. level in academic institutions. As Abelson puts it, the new Ph.Ds. tend to keep on re-doing their theses. As a result, some organizations prefer to recruit their future researchers at less than the Ph.D. level and finish their training in the agency research unit (Abelson, 1973).

This raises some difficult issues at empirical as well as affective levels. Can't Ph.Ds function effectively as criminal justice agency researchers? The best of such research units usually have a high proportion of Ph.Ds. on their professional staffs, so it would seem that some Ph.Ds. have made the transition with apparent success. They have made careers for themselves doing things other than repeating their theses, and sometimes lose even their former compulsion to write papers for scientific journals.

However, the typical careerist in agency research seemingly has different goals and self-concepts than the academician who engages in research either full- or part-time. Since in-house research is here to stay -- and, indeed, is likely to grow, both in criminal justice and in other state and federal agencies -- it would appear to be prudent to inquire into how effective in-house researchers are produced. Both the agency and the university need to consider how to select able persons with research

aptitudes and interests and open to them avenues through which both personal and agency interests may be well served. As yet we have little insight into these processes, even with Abelson's caution against academic Ph.Ds. and Morris' admiration for some in-house research units.

Rethinking Research Designs and Strategies

Van de Vall (1975) noted that not only were in-house researchers more likely to impact agency policy, but also that policy was more likely to be influenced by qualitative than by quantitative studies. Furthermore, atheoretical research was more likely to have an impact on policy than research based on formal theory.

If we add another observation (Adams, 1974), that in correctional agencies simple, "weak" research designs are as likely to be associated with policy impacts as strong designs, we may wonder whether numerous aspects of conventional research wisdom may not need re-examination. Are there any anchor points in this shifting universe of research experience?

It is difficult to speak with conviction in this matter. One is reminded of Tocqueville's observation that men of action are "more often aided by the seasonableness of an idea than by its strict accuracy." This may be why correctional administrators reportedly find "conferences and literature" useful in shaping agency policy, second only to in-house research. It may also help explain why academic researchers, with their striving for precise knowledge, have apparently fallen from first place to

fifth place in the esteem of correctional personnel as the latter continue their quest for aid through research.

Whatever the explanation, the correctional administrator and his police and court counterparts persist in making decisions on approximate knowledge, relying usually on professional judgment, but looking increasingly to studies that are much more often inexact than exact. Meanwhile, the knowledge-oriented researcher promotes the controlled experimental design, seeking "quality" in method, but aware that he often fails to meet action schedules, and that his findings are often narrow in scope and supportable on occasion only by uncomfortable amounts of equivocation.

In this divergence between the needs and traditions of the administrator and the ideals of the academic researcher, the growing vacuum begins to be filled in various ways. Management studies, qualitative analyses, case investigations, cost analyses, quasi-experiments, and simulations take over increasingly the research aspects of guiding policy decisions. And in the funding arena, the research grant tends to be replaced by the research contract as funders and users seek surer ways of inducing outside researchers to live up to their commitments to the policy-maker.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

We have examined responses of major police, court, and correctional agencies to selected issues in applied and policy research. We note that respondents are

- 1) Generally favorable in their regard for research as an instrument of management and decision-making;

- 2) Viewing research as more useful for changing structures and procedures than for rehabilitating offenders or deterring law violators; and
- 3) Inclined to see in-house research as increasingly more useful than entrepreneurial or academic research.

We might expect, on the basis of such observations, to see further growth of in-house research in governmental agencies, both state and federal. This trend is likely to be accompanied by increased flexibility in the roles of researchers and in the designs and strategies of research.

Present shifts among types of research and locations of researchers may be temporary, spurred perhaps by unprecedented demands for more effective policy. The near-term roles of academicians in the criminal justice field may depend largely on how well they can adjust to the need to be "useful" in a dynamic policy-forming setting. The long-term roles are obviously more difficult to foresee, although one might acknowledge the changing balances of need for theory, precise knowledge, and action, and conclude that for some of these elements, the academic environment and traditions are undoubtedly essential.

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