

Evaluating What Works

With the creation of an Evaluation Division in 2003, NIJ enhanced its ability to conduct evaluations of programs funded by other agencies and to develop policies and procedures for ensuring the quality and utility of evaluations.

Improving the quality, rigor, and utility of NIJ evaluations

Many agencies at all levels—Federal, State, and local—must make choices about which of their programs to evaluate. Size and policy interest are important factors in selecting the programs. But other considerations are important too, such as whether the programs are capable of being evaluated and what kinds of questions can realistically be answered.

In attempting to select the best evaluation candidates from literally hundreds of choices, NIJ uses a process called evaluability assessments. With a modest investment in time and money, researchers answer key questions about the programs to identify the right ones to evaluate using the most rigorous evaluation designs.

The evaluability assessment has two phases. First, researchers read project proposals and call the program director to identify how long the program has been operating, whether any significant changes are anticipated, what the totality of program resources are, and whether program goals are realistic given those resources. After a program passes these screening criteria, short site visits are made by NIJ staff and independent researcher teams. The site visits serve to further clarify evaluation options by assessing program activities, data systems quality, and the validity of potential comparison groups—similar people who did not participate in the program—that could be used to compare outcome measures. Each site visit is usually completed in a single day.

NIJ's experience with evaluability assessments in 2003 was exceptionally positive. In addition to having more and higher quality information for making investment decisions, NIJ is now better able to price evaluations and to assess the feasibility of proposed evaluation designs.

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NIJ BYRNE EVALUATION AWARD ACTIVITIES IN FY 2003

The following table lists 2003 NIJ awards to evaluate 2002 programs funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance under the Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance program:

Anchorage Wellness Court Evaluation

University of Alaska—Anchorage
Robert Langworthy
\$633,880
2003-DD-BX-1015

Assessment of the Bureau of Justice Assistance Mental Health Court Initiative

Policy Research Associates
Henry J. Steadman
\$296,617
2003-DD-BX-1012

Assessment of the Harold Rogers Prescription Drug Monitoring Program

Abt Associates, Inc.
Douglas McDonald
\$248,283
OJP99-C-008*

Building Bridges: A Correctional Option Program

Caliber Associates
Lucy B. Wilson
\$586,762
2003-DD-BX-1016

Doe Fund of New York City: Program Review

Abt Associates, Inc.
Dana Hunt
\$99,917
OJP99-C-008*

Evaluation of the Agricultural Crime Technology Information and Operation Network

Urban Institute
Daniel Mears
\$447,070
2003-DD-BX-1017

Evaluation of Model Training Program

Institute for Law and Justice, Inc.
J. Thomas McEwen
\$999,981
2003-DD-BX-K101

Evaluation of Statewide Ridge House Collaborative

Urban Institute
Daniel Mears
\$724,874
2004-DD-BX-1123

* Conducted as subtasks to the Analytic Support Program contract held by Abt Associates, Inc.

Expanding the scope of NIJ evaluation activities

NIJ has improved its capacity to conduct evaluations of the cost-benefits and cost-effectiveness of justice programs. A partnership with the British Home Office was initiated to further improve the quality of such economic evaluations. The partnership builds upon the strengths of each agency. The Home Office's Research, Development, and Statistics (RDS) Directorate conducts cost-benefit analyses on Great Britain's criminal justice programs to help the British Parliament determine crime fighting strategies. RDS staff are helping NIJ produce a textbook on the cost-benefit issues encountered in criminal justice applications. NIJ staff are helping the RDS Directorate build an evalua-

tion culture and infrastructure within the Home Office. The staff of both agencies also engage in informal correspondence in which they share research findings and data resources.

Other highlights of NIJ evaluation activity in FY 2003 include:

- Improvements in the management of evaluations by increasing the monitoring level of selected evaluations and developing new requirements for evaluation grants.
- Improvements in coordination with other agencies on which programs to evaluate and on how to better monitor their implementation status.