NIJ Seeks to Strengthen the Practitioner-Researcher Bond

By Bethany Backes

Author's Note: *Points of view are those of the author and do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

When corrections officials told the National Institute of Justice that they needed an inexpensive, handheld device that would detect everything from cell phones to improvised weapons made of wood, NIJ worked with Luna Innovations Inc. to develop the system. Luna engineers tested the prototype, which is similar to a handheld metal detector, at the Virginia Peninsula Regional Jail in Williamsburg. They found that the device works well with various clothing fabrics, including standard jumpsuits. Collaborations between people in the field and researchers often produce better results than efforts that do not involve both groups.

NIJ is developing a program focused on the development and enhancement of researcher-practitioner partnerships. NIJ has always acknowledged the importance of these partnerships and the involvement of the practitioner throughout the research process — from the formulation of research questions and accessing data to advising a study as it progresses and ensuring practical perspectives in the analysis of data and report writing. Despite NIJ's long-standing interest in and support for researcher-practitioner partnerships, there is a clear need for activities that capture and build upon previous partnership work and that provide supportive opportunities for new and existing researcher-practitioner partnerships. It is NIJ's goal to create, enhance, and sustain new and existing partnerships that work to improve criminal justice prevention and response.

Collaboration between criminal justice researchers and practitioners is important for a number of reasons. For example, research can provide practical solutions to obstacles faced by criminal justice practitioners. Furthermore, criminal justice practitioners involved with ongoing criminal justice research and evaluation can gain new skills in assessing and measuring their programs and can better understand the benefits of research. Likewise, by working closely with practitioners, criminal justice researchers are better able to understand the goals and purposes criminal justice practitioners seek to achieve and what measures of success will be credible. When partners function as equal contributors, shared skills, responsibility for outcomes and motivation to fulfill responsibilities will likely develop and help to ensure high-quality research results.

NIJ recently closed a solicitation titled "Building and Enhancing Criminal Justice Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships" and is currently reviewing proposals. This solicitation was aimed at developing existing partnerships, establishing new partnerships and capturing significant lessons that have been learned through past and current criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships. Working together, researchers and practitioners can better validate practices, determine cost-effectiveness, and identify promising programs. The solicitation was the first step in providing a targeted venue for researchers and practitioners to not only work together on criminal justice issues, but also to expose each group to the daily work of their respective fields. The solicitation covered three areas, and NIJ anticipates funding at least one application under each area.

The first area focused on capturing past and current accounts of criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships and asked applicants to gather information related to assessing the need for a partnership, obstacles to and solutions for the development of a partnership, balancing the needs of the two parties, successful strategies for dissemination and translation of results, and sustainability of partnerships. Products generated through this area of the solicitation will assist in the creation of an interactive toolkit for criminal justice researchers and practitioners. Capturing and making available these experiences will provide helpful information to those currently engaging in or developing new partnerships.

The second area of the solicitation encouraged criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships by pairing knowledgeable senior faculty members with junior faculty members. This is intended to develop the junior faculty's research skills and chosen fields of concentration while conducting research that will inform criminal justice practice or policy. It is NIJ's hope that funding for this area will increase the interest of up-and-coming researchers in working directly with practice-based organizations and provide opportunities for long-term partnerships.

The final section of the solicitation supported the placement of criminal justice researchers within practice-based organizations to develop and conduct needed research and evaluation that impacts the organization. It is anticipated that this program will establish new researcher-practitioner collaborations that will continue throughout the career of the researcher and organization. Additionally, it will provide the partners with a

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realistic overview of the day-to-day challenges faced by practitioners, policymakers and researchers in their work.

During the next several years, NIJ hopes to continue supporting efforts of researchers and practitioners in conducting timely and effective research that will have great benefit for local, county, state and national organizations. Internally, NIJ plans to create a Web topic page, on its Web site, dedicated to criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships as well as embed common language related to the importance of research-practitioner partnerships in all NIJ research solicitations and adjust the selection criteria for proposals to reflect the additional focus on partnerships. NIJ plans to support partnerships through a variety of contract actions, solicitations, workshops and staff involvement so that relevant research will be conducted and tangible products and programs created.

Providing opportunities that link research and practice will ultimately lead to better criminal justice policy, practice and research. Regular integration of researchers and practitioners will build trust, and both parties will be equally invested in the outcome of research and the success and improvement of programs and services. Through continuous support of researcher-practitioner partnerships, NIJ expects to decrease the gap between the two fields and to increase the number of evidence-based practices implemented throughout the criminal justice system and supported by key funding agencies.

Bethany Backes, MPH, MSW, CHES, is a social science analyst for the National Institute of Justice. She also teaches victimology courses at the University of Maryland University College, and she is working toward her doctorate in social work at the University of Maryland-Baltimore.

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Likewise, under the Federal Communications Act, Title 47, section 333 of the U.S. Code, any "willful or malicious interference" with licensed radio signals is prohibited, and the manufacture, importation or sale of any device intended to jam or disrupt wireless communications is illegal under Federal Communications Commission regulations 47 C.F.R. section 2.803. As a result, products that can prevent cell phones from working inside of a prison, though technological realities, are legally unavailable. (It should be noted that the Safe Prisons Communications Act of 2009 was introduced in both the House — H.R. 560 — and the Senate — S. 251 — on Jan. 15, 2009. The bill would authorize cell phone jamming in prisons).

Legally, prison officials are limited to technology that can acquire a signal without the words, and track the signal to its source in order to perform a traditional search and seizure of the contraband communication device. New technology, such as signal jamming devices, will have to wait for changes in the law.

Drug Detecting Walk-Through Scanners

Devices will soon be wide-spread to detect traces of illegal drugs on people as they walk through an archway, as easily as they now detect metal. These devices do not constitute a search. And even if they did, an appropriately posted sign in an entryway would validate the procedure by pronouncing "consent" on the part of any visitor choosing to enter. The legal issue that arises relates to "what next?"

Unless a correctional officer is simultaneously a law enforcement officer of the jurisdiction, there is no broad power to arrest or search. Moreover, if these devices are as good as advertised and are capable of alerting to the trace levels claimed, absent constant attention to calibration and an "expert" on hand to validate the outcomes, it will be difficult to evade challenges to the process. There is no legal impediment, however, to turning the visitor away. Nor is there an impediment to closely monitoring the inmate who sought to have a delivery made, or shaking down that inmate's cell.

Alternative Weapons

Many systems have elected to deploy stun weapons in facilities, or to make them available to trained officers in limited circumstances. A new generation of these weapons will increase range and effectiveness. Weapon systems in development for the military that use sound waves may also become available to law enforcement and corrections. A reminder of applicable law is in order.

When dealing with nonlethal force, it is not so much the use of force that is subject to question as the motivation for the use of force. Is the force being applied for a legitimate penological purpose for the security of the institution, and then only as much force as is necessary to accomplish the purpose? Or is the force being applied maliciously for the purpose of causing harm? The former circumstance is the only legally acceptable motivation and training must be in accord, regardless of whether the weapon in question is high-tech or bare hands.

Conclusion

While the law should not be determinative of whether a high-tech solution or practice is selected for correctional use, careful analysis and legal advice should accompany any change in practice. Just as one would not rollout new technology without training, one should not go down the path of change without an understanding of all possible ramifications.

Richard B. Rosenblatt, JD, is assistant secretary of the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services.

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