

Unlocking knowledge

Florida's researcher-practitioner partnerships work

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Author's Note: Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

In an effort to increase the use of research in criminal justice and correctional practices, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) supports research to study and develop the best strategies to achieve this goal. Translational criminology studies, such as those by Laub¹ and Innes and Everett,² often found that researcher-practitioner partnerships (RPPs) serve as an effective strategy to increase the use of research in practice.

Providing more support for the effective use of RPPs in correctional agencies is a recent NIJ-funded translational criminology study that focused on RPPs in Florida's adult and juvenile correctional agencies. Findings from this study indicate that RPPs can provide mutual benefits for practitioners and researchers, and that successful partnerships require trust, reciprocity, and frequent communication and involvement.³

The Florida study

The Florida State University (FSU) College of Criminology and Criminal Justice study

included 20 in-depth interviews and 19 online surveys with researchers and key state-level decision-makers within Florida's adult and juvenile correctional systems.⁴ Based on interviews and surveys, researchers identified common barriers to the process of knowledge translation and examined if and how various factors, including RPPs, facilitated the translation of correctional research into practice. Study participants provided a number of examples of RPPs they believed were mutually beneficial to researchers and practitioners in analyzing administrative data, evaluating programs, or developing and implementing new programs.

Analyzing the partnerships

This article focuses on two specific RPPs often cited by the interviewees as examples of effective partnerships.

Florida Department of Juvenile Justice partnership

Interviewees from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (FDJJ) often cited a successful partnership with Georgetown University and Vanderbilt University that involved the implementation of the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP) for Assessing Juvenile Justice Programs. This

tool was designed to compare residential programming with interventions supported by prior research.⁵ Serving as a fidelity assessment tool, it also includes a comparison of the dosage and quality of treatment and is used in all residential programs. FDJJ was introduced to a researcher from Vanderbilt through an existing partnership with Georgetown that focused on increasing the use of evidence-based practices and overall system improvement. Seeing the utility of SPEP, FDJJ volunteered to implement the program.⁶

FDJJ's desire to improve residential services, reduce recidivism and ensure residential programs produce positive outcomes for juveniles motivated them to engage in this partnership with Vanderbilt — and it resulted in a number of characteristics interviewees cited as responsible for this partnership's success. First, practitioners noted a mutual respect between both parties (Vanderbilt and FDJJ). One practitioner noted each group had unique knowledge and skills that worked well together: Vanderbilt had research knowledge and expertise with the SPEP, and FDJJ had an intimate understanding of their own data, programs and overall system. Second, the partnership was characterized by collaborative communication between both parties, which was critical during the project planning stages in identifying

areas for improvement. For example, FDJJ sought feedback from Georgetown and Vanderbilt with their development of a disposition matrix (DM). The DM takes into account the offense and risk of reoffending to assist juvenile probation officers when making recommendations to the court and in matching youths to appropriate treatment programs.⁷ FDJJ integrated this feedback into the DM, and an interviewee cited it as important to the program's development. Finally, interviewees noted that FDJJ leadership was supportive throughout the partnership, and they viewed this support as critical to the success.

Interviewees also cited a number of positive outcomes from the partnership. Ultimately, the SPEP provided FDJJ with information on residential services and dosages of the services received by juveniles. The implementation of the SPEP also helped FDJJ identify differences between contracts with private service providers and the programming provided. Due to this success, the use and reporting of the SPEP indicators were included in all contracts with private residential service providers. Members of FDJJ were proud of the contributions the partnerships made to research, pointing to peer-reviewed journal articles that emerged from the Georgetown and Vanderbilt partnership.⁸ Furthermore, this cross-department partnership increased the research capacity of the organization as practitioners discovered new methods of analysis, which were subsequently used to conduct further research.

Florida Department of Corrections partnership

Interviewees from the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) cited a successful RPP with FSU that sought to evaluate numerous FDOC programs by a credible third

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party to make evidence-based decisions and improve correctional practices. The programs included prison-based substance abuse treatment, work release and postrelease supervision. FSU's and FDOC's decision to collaborate developed from prior partnerships and a long-standing relationship they held with each other. Specifically, the lead FSU researcher was a former FDOC employee familiar with the agency, and many former FSU students gained employment at FDOC.

The interviews noted several characteristics that contributed to the success of the partnership. First, the partnership involved the recognition that each group had unique knowledge and resources. In part, this collaborating began because FDOC lacked the time and resources to conduct the extensive research. The primary role of FDOC's research unit is to provide operational data analysis for the agency, the Florida legislature and the Governor's office. Meanwhile, FSU researchers had the time and expertise, but lacked data and knowledge of agency practices. In combining their strengths, they produced research FDOC could use to inform its decision-making. Second, interviewees cited frequent communication as a reason for the partnership's success. This, they claimed, was critical in establishing research questions, the goals of the project and interpretations of the findings. This process produced more meaningful results tailored to FDOC's needs.

Moreover, FDOC viewed this partnership as beneficial because it produced findings that could be used to inform practice. For example, although results were mixed, findings indicated that substance abuse programming was more effective in reducing recidivism if provided closer in time to the inmate's release. Further, the project increased FDOC's research capacity by modifying their recidivism dataset from one used for operational purposes to one used for other research projects. The partnership also allowed FSU to advance their research interests, and a number of graduate students began using this data for their dissertations. Results from these dissertations and other future publications will be provided to FDOC to help increase the research capacity of FDOC at no cost. The success of the partnership resulted in the development of other projects on issues of importance to the agency, such as examining the elderly inmate population and the detrimental effects of inmate self-injurious behavior for other prisoners and correctional staff.

Common characteristics of successful partnerships

Correctional organizations often enter partnerships seeking to identify and/or validate effective programming. Successful

partnerships at FDOC were viewed as mutually beneficial when groups with different skills worked together to achieve goals that were unlikely to be achieved without a partner. Researchers indicated these collaborative partnerships allowed them to better understand the policy questions of practitioners and the intricacies of their data, and it also enabled them to provide findings and recommendations tailored to the organization.⁹ Practitioners noted these partnerships provided evidence to be used in decision-making and increased their research capacity.

As described by the study participants, successful partnerships were characterized by trust, reciprocity, frequent communication and involvement of practitioners in the planning stages of research. Researchers and practitioners established trust and reciprocity when they viewed one another as collaborators with different strengths. As noted by one FDOC practitioner in describing the FSU partnership, "... it wasn't purely academic. ... [There were] questions that we wanted answered for practical reasons." Open communication and reciprocity led to successful long-term relationships that lasted beyond specifically funded projects.¹⁰

Recommendations for effective partnerships

Four recommendations for developing effective partnerships emerged from the study. First, in selecting an area for research, one interviewee suggested that correctional organizations should identify areas where their data is most valid and reliable. Research focused in areas with high-quality data would more likely produce useful findings, while conducting

research in areas where data quality is poor may limit the impact of a partnership and produce incomplete or misleading results.

Second, identification of an appropriate research partner is key to the success of an RPP. One way practitioners can identify potential partners is to approach researchers who attend practitioner-based trainings or conferences. Practitioners should also search local university websites for researchers who are experts in specific areas of need.¹¹ Researchers should seek out partnerships by attending practitioner conferences and by approaching local and state correctional agencies. While this study focused on partnerships with state agencies, researchers also mentioned relationships with local jails and county criminal justice commissions.

Third, researchers and practitioners should openly and clearly communicate with one another to clarify research questions and increase trust between them. Frequent communication can lead to long-term, mutually beneficial relationships. In contrast, some interviewees noted that a lack of communication resulted in limited understanding between the parties and less useful findings for practitioners and researchers.

Fourth, practitioners should allow researchers to use agency data to publish and disseminate their findings without restrictions; this increases their willingness to collaborate with practitioners. In return, researchers should provide policy-relevant findings and recommendations to practitioners and should work with practitioners to improve policy and practice to make the partnership mutually beneficial. The findings discussed add to the mounting evidence that RPPs can be a successful method for implementing evidence-based

Researchers should seek out partnerships by attending practitioner conferences and by approaching local and state correctional agencies.

practices in correctional agencies and indicate that RPPs may face a promising future.

ENDNOTES

¹ Laub, J. H. (2012). Translational criminology. *Translational Criminology: The Magazine of the Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy*, Fall, 4–5.

² Innes, C. A., & Everett, R. S. (2008). Factors and conditions influencing the use of research by the criminal justice system. *Western Criminology Review*, 9(1), 49–58.

³ Pesta, G., Ramos, J., Ranson, J. W. A., Singer, A., & Blomberg, T. G. (2016). *Translational criminology: Research and public policy*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. (2014). *Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP) treatment quality rating guide*. Retrieved from [www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-justice-system-improvement-project-\(jjsip\)/standardized-program-evaluation-protocol-\(spep\)](http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/latest-initiatives/juvenile-justice-system-improvement-project-(jjsip)/standardized-program-evaluation-protocol-(spep))

⁶ Baglivio, M., & Greenwald, M. A. (2014). *Juvenile justice system improvement project: An overview of the comprehensive strategy and disposition matrix*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice.

⁷ Baglivio, M. T., Greenwald, M. A., & Russell, M. (2014). Assessing the implications of a structured decision-making tool for recidivism in a statewide analysis: Disposition matrix for court recommendations made by juvenile

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⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bales, W. D., Scaggs, S. J. A., Clark, C. L., Ensley, D., & Coltharp, P. (2014). Researcher-practitioner partnerships: A case of the development of a long-term collaborative project between a university and a criminal justice agency. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 27(3), 294–307.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sullivan, T. P., McPartland, T., & Fisher, B. S. (2013). *Guidelines for successful researcher-practitioner partnerships in the criminal justice system: Findings from the researcher-practitioner partnership study (RPPS)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

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