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# HOW RESEARCHERS CAN DEVELOP SUCCESSFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITH CRIMINAL JUSTICE PRACTITIONERS



Findings From The Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships Study (RPPS)

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## Summary

The benefits of researcher-practitioner collaborations within the criminal justice (CJ) system are many. They enhance responses to critical challenges facing communities. They lessen the gap between those who work on the front lines and those who study the system. They provide practitioners with evidence upon which to base their practices, services, and policies, and researchers with experience upon which to further their programs of research. By working together and pooling their distinct knowledge, experience, and talent, researchers and practitioners can create uniquely comprehensive projects and products that have the potential to change practices, policies, and services.

To help ensure that collaborations proliferate, all parties must understand what contributes to a collaboration's success. Therefore, we conducted interviews and focus groups with researchers and CJ system practitioners from the United States and Canada who have collaborated successfully. These individuals' experiences can inform future collaborations and the production of evidence that can be translated into new or improved policies, practices, and services. Based upon the information we gained, this brief will provide recommendations for researchers on how to collaborate successfully with CJ system practitioners.

## How to Make a Collaboration Succeed

Build a Solid Relationship

Network with Practitioners, Organizations, and Colleagues in the Community

Communicate Expectations and Mutually Agree Upon Goals

Actively Seek and Value Practitioners' Involvement

"Walk in the Practitioners' Shoes"

Clearly Explain the Research Process: Research 101

Maximize the Usefulness of Products for Practitioners

Budget for Extra Time

## RPPS STUDY OVERVIEW

**Goal:** To improve understanding of successful researcher-practitioner collaborations<sup>1</sup> between those working within and outside of the CJ system so that the knowledge learned can be used to promote the creation of new partnerships and enhance existing ones.

**Design:** There were two components to this study.

**1. Individual interviews and focus groups** were conducted with practitioners and researchers who self-identified as having at least one past or current “successful” research partnership (though many also had past unsuccessful partnerships). The purpose was to learn from them what they thought made their partnerships successful. Practitioners, as defined by the National Institute of Justice for the purpose of this study, were CJ system employees (including administrators of CJ state administrative agencies, SAAs) and those who provide services to CJ system clients. Researchers were those who conducted research but were not CJ system employees.

**Participants** were 55 women and 17 men of various racial/ethnic groups. They were employed in a range of settings located in urban, suburban, and rural settings in the United States and Canada, including family violence and sexual assault programs, private practice, and SAAs such as departments of corrections, local county courts, independent research institutes, and colleges/universities. They had 4 to 40 years of experience (average of 12 years).

- 49 people (38 women and 11 men) participated in individual interviews (8 of which were with SAA staff) face to face or via telephone.
- 23 people (17 women and 6 men) participated in 5 focus groups convened at professional or academic conferences.

**Data analysis.** The audio/video recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. With the aid of a qualitative analysis software package the transcribed files were coded with identification tags corresponding to the RPPS research questions related to the following categories determined a priori: highlights of the collaboration, lowlights of the collaborations, reasons the collaboration was needed, benefits of the collaboration, characteristics desired in a collaborator, characteristics desired in an organization, characteristics of a successful collaboration, facilitators of a successful collaboration, barriers/challenges to a successful collaboration, balancing the needs of researchers and practitioners, products and results of the collaboration, usefulness of resulting products, sustainability of partnerships, advice for researchers, and advice for practitioners. The research team reviewed the coded responses to identify salient patterns or themes.

**2. A Web-based survey** of CJ-system SAAs aimed to (a) determine each state’s infrastructure and general experiences regarding research in the CJ system and (b) document lessons learned from past or current successful collaborations with a researcher not employed within the CJ system.

**Participants** were those whose responsibility it was either to oversee the conduct of research in the SAA or to conduct research on behalf of the state. Seventy-five participants from 49 states completed the survey, with several states having multiple respondents from different SAA research departments (i.e., department of corrections, office of the courts, etc.). Of respondents, 41% were administrators or directors of the agency, 35% were supervisors or managers, 21% were front-line or support staff, and 3% were university-employed Statistical Analysis Center (SAC) directors<sup>2</sup>.

**Data analysis.** Data were analyzed to present simple descriptive statistics such as an average or the percentage of participants who endorsed a response.

<sup>1</sup> “Collaborations” and “partnerships” are used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> SACs are funded by the Bureau of Justice Statistics to contribute to effective state policies through statistical services, evaluation, and policy analysis. SAC contracts may be awarded to SAAs or researchers at academic institutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Build a Solid Relationship

*“It’s not all about counting and numbers; it is all about your relationship.”—Practitioner/Organization Administrator*

Nearly unanimously, practitioners and researchers who participated in the RPPS identified a strong relationship based on trust as the most critical element of a successful collaboration—namely,

“I found [the researcher] ethical, I found her thoughtful, I found her listening.”—Practitioner/Organization Administrator describing how trust was established with a researcher

having a positive experience during the collaboration regardless of the results.

In the face of timelines and deadlines, it can be easy to move quickly through the early

stages of developing a relationship and beginning a project and therefore miss the opportunity to lay the foundation of trust. As one academic researcher states, *“You don’t get to know people in day-to-day life over a night, so why would you expect it with professionals?”* Yet the trust that a relationship engenders between practitioners and a researcher is well worth the time commitment.

It is understandable why some practitioners distrust researchers in general—many have had bad past experiences with or misunderstandings about researchers and the research process. Taking the time to develop the relationship can help the practitioner learn if the researcher is like the many who have tremendous respect for practitioners and the work they do, and knowledge about the very real constraints of conducting research in the practitioner’s system, or if she or he is like those who have contributed to the bad reputation of researchers and research. Learning this information sooner rather than later will serve the organization well.

Some of the academic researchers in the RPPS described the development of the collaborations as similar to a dating/courting process in which both the

researcher and practitioner were trying to determine if they were a match for one another and the likelihood of success of their relationship:

*“The dating story—This was kind of a joke in our relationship about when we first started to meet and talk about this project. ‘Okay, we’ve agreed to date for a little while, and we’re just going to see where this goes.’ And that was the pilot process of this, and we just kind of continued to talk about ‘How is this going? Are we going in the direction that’s going to meet your needs?’”*

*“But then, you know, I felt like she [also] really appreciated what I bring as the researcher in terms of ... understanding the [research] method and what you can and cannot look at. And as the relationship and the pilot work continued to progress and we got to the point of writing a grant to [the National Institute of Justice], I remember calling [the practitioner] and saying ‘Ok, this is the next step in our relationship. We’re moving from dating into a longer-term commitment here—and are you ready for that?’”*  
—Academic Researcher

Study participants identified the following as necessary for practitioners to develop trust in researchers:

- Researchers’ genuine respect for practitioners’ work and the clients they serve (which is built cumulatively).
- Researchers’ presence and accessibility (rather than the presence of a study team member like a project coordinator or graduate student).
- Researchers’ willingness to modify the study design based on practitioners’ input.

### 2. Network with Practitioners, Organizations, and Colleagues in the Community

*“I have really benefited over the years as a researcher, from developing partnerships that I instigated (sometimes others did). And that while some of these projects have been at times frustrating, ‘I’ve felt overcommitted, why did I do this?’ In the end, there are some real benefits. Not only within my profession, but seeing the outcome of research and the impact that it can make in your local community and beyond.... I don’t even have*

*words to describe how great of a feeling that is. So I highly encourage researcher-practitioner partnerships, but with the caveat that for some, [partnering] may not come naturally to them. [They] may have to work on that a little bit more in terms of making this work.”—Academic Researcher*

Early on, researchers can reach out to local CJ system agencies and related nonprofit organizations to build relationships. Doing so will allow them to gain insight into the cultural environment, language, daily responsibilities and barriers faced by practitioners, and obstacles confronting the clients being served. Doing so also serves to build trust and respect cumulatively. As one academic researcher stated,

*“See what the organization does. Sit with people who work there, talk to them about what their work is like, what their clientele is like. And get to know who they are ... hopefully they’ll be able to trust you a bit more. And in that way you will have a better handle on what it is that they need, and what they do so that you can think about that when you’re developing the research project as it goes along.”—*

*Practitioner/Attorney*

By taking the time to go into the community and build relationships based on the needs of these agencies, both researchers and practitioners can gain a new perspective on research and partnerships that involves a positive view of researchers and their intent and of practitioners and their assets.

### 3. Communicate Expectations and Mutually Agree Upon Goals

Clearly communicating expectations and mutually agreeing on project goals are necessary for a collaboration to be successful. At times, this involves the researcher and practitioner having “shared” goals, meaning that they both desire the same outcomes of the collaboration. At other times, this involves the researcher and practitioner wanting different outcomes but agreeing to work toward the goals articulated by and important to each, respectively. Participants in the RPPS underscored how important it is to document expectations about individuals’ roles and responsibilities as well as expected outcomes of the research in a formal

agreement such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU) at the outset of the project.

### 4. Actively Seek and Value Practitioners’ Involvement

According to RPPS participants, the successful collaborations are those in which researchers actively seek and value practitioners’ involvement. As one academic researcher explains, *“Just because we have PhDs doesn’t mean that we have all the answers.”* For example, while researchers typically have a better understanding of study design and rigorous methods, practitioners tend to have more experience working directly with clients and a better understanding of the system in which the research is conducted. Additionally, since “researchers don’t know what they don’t know” about the CJ system, practitioners can enhance researchers’ understanding and correct misconceptions, thereby enhancing the study’s credibility and the findings’ utility. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to enter a collaboration seeking practitioners’ involvement in the development of the study rather than with a firm plan already in place.

*“If your practitioner that you’re working with is giving you compelling information about why something that you have built your research project on is off or not okay, don’t go on to the next practitioner. That’s the drive-by researcher.”—Practitioner/Organization Administrator*

Practitioners may be resistant or unwilling to collaborate because of unpleasant or negative experiences with researchers in the past. Negative experiences can be avoided when researchers and practitioners are given the opportunity to commit to a study that fits both parties’ needs, by facilitating balanced contribution from each party, open communication, and respect for each other’s professionalism, expertise, and trust. The collaboration has a chance to succeed because the researcher and practitioners are committed to integrating their complementary strengths, which ultimately will benefit the CJ system and its clients.

## 5. “Walk in the Practitioners’ Shoes”

*“[Researchers] need to really spend some time thinking about what it is like to walk a mile in the shoes of these practitioners and to understand that their daily lives are a lot more about going from like one fire to the next and trying to put out those fires.”—Academic Researcher*

A highlight of successful collaborations was when the researcher was knowledgeable about the practitioner’s system or organization, “lived in the trenches,” and was “a fly on the wall.” This led to a greater understanding of the system/organization and much, much more, including practitioners having greater confidence and trust in the researcher, which translated to more effective partnering.

Several collaborators encouraged researchers to visit their practitioners’ sites, preferably multiple times, to learn about the inner workings of CJ systems and practitioners’ roles within these. Although researchers may be well informed about the system the practitioners work in or the clients that they serve, there is no substitute for the researcher gaining direct experience of practitioners’ unique settings. By observing and asking questions, researchers can better understand all that their collaborating practitioners do, and better structure the project to make it most useful.

*“That’s what [the researcher] said to us, ‘I need to see your context, I need to understand this,’ and so we sent him to an urban site, to a rural site, to a mid-urban site, and when he realized the pressure that the family relations counselors faced to process those cases, it became clear that we are not going to ask 37 questions—that’s just not practical.”— Government Systems SAA Practitioner/Senior Administrator*

One caveat to learning from practitioners is that it is best to be an enthusiastic student, not an overwhelming one. One practitioner suggested that a good way to learn about practitioners’ work without becoming burdensome is to request training manuals and related materials such as policy documents.

## 6. Clearly Explain the Research Process: Research 101

For collaboration to be as successful as possible, all collaborators should understand the project and rationale for its design. This can occur most naturally and effectively when the study is designed collaboratively. Yet, even when designed collaboratively, certain aspects of the study may not be clear to everyone involved.

Researchers should recognize that most practitioners are not being irrational if they resist a component of the research. Practitioners’ concerns may be due to a genuine misunderstanding. In this circumstance, researchers should try to correct the misunderstanding with a clear, non-condescending explanation of why a particular component of the study is appropriate and necessary, and how it will ultimately help practitioners to improve their services. Researchers should also be willing to compromise and change the study design to better fit practitioners’ needs and capabilities. Doing so can contribute to an open learning environment that helps practitioners understand the conduct of research and interpretation of its findings.

One Government Systems SAA practitioner explained his approach to empowering his staff in the research process:

*“I wanted to do some seminars on research ethics, not only for my department but for the entire organization, specifically the people who were involved in our research review committee. So we [the practitioner and researcher] set up a half-day [training] on research ethics and how to look at research proposals, confidentiality, human subjects, and stuff like that. I think [the training] has been our biggest success because it has provided us [the practitioner agency] with a lot of flexibility, and I think it is the example of the true researcher-practitioner collaboration because it’s an entire department of a state organization and an entire department at a university. And it’s been nice because we got to know [the researchers] outside of work, and it’s been a really good relationship-building piece. And, we’ve been able to utilize them in so many different ways because of this agreement; it’s open ended.”*

Seasoned practitioners who participated in the RPPS emphasized the importance of training staff in the basics of research methods. Staff who are trained in the basic concepts and workings of the research process are better able to understand the limitations of conducting research and rationale for decisions made. Therefore, they can be even more active in the process. Training can be done by an experienced practitioner or a researcher (ideally the one in the collaboration) or done jointly and may include the entire spectrum of organization staff, from higher-level administrators, mid-level managers, and supervisors, to direct service staff. Training can focus on the basics of conducting a research study; developing questions that are pertinent to the organization and clients' needs; analyzing data with basic statistics or quantitative techniques; accessing/collecting and managing data; and interpreting, writing up, and disseminating findings. Training can foster an environment where everyone's input is valued and all parties are invested in and accountable for the research conducted and its subsequent outcomes.

## 7. Maximize the Usefulness of Products for Practitioners

*"My sort of biggest thing is: Take the research and distribute it to the people who are doing the work and do it in a way that they can see it. Go 'Here are practical, concrete things that I can do in my everyday job that comes from this research.'"— Academic Researcher-Practitioner*

Researchers and practitioners alike emphasized the necessity to deliver tangible products—not just those that are academic (e.g., peer-reviewed articles) or funder related (e.g., technical reports) but targeted to practitioners, organizations, and the community being served. Tangible products can be in the form of assessment tools or measures; provisions for services or interventions; development of programs, trainings, manuals, and curriculum; conference presentations; briefs; fact sheets; jointly written papers in "trade" newsletters or journals; Web content; and so on. Beginning with project development, researchers should aim to develop products explicitly for practitioners, in a form that

will be of greatest utility to them. Specifically, products should be relatively brief and straightforward, and they should give clear recommendations. As one practitioner puts it, *"Practitioners do not have time to sit down and read stuff, nor do they want to. . . . They just want to know: what is it and where do I go from here?"*

## 8. Budget for Extra Time

Collaborating is rewarding and effective, but also time intensive. Nearly everything takes longer when it is done in collaboration—research or otherwise. Also, research takes longer than practitioners imagine. One researcher describes collaborative research as a marathon, and non-collaborative research as a 100-yard dash. Budgeting for additional time, which often coincides with needing additional funds, will help to avoid frustration down the road.

*"This project went on for ages—I don't know, seven years? Something like that. A long time. And we only ended up with a sample of like 145 people."—Academic Researcher*

"Things are always going to take longer than we expect them to take, no matter what."—  
Community-based Practitioner

*"And from the practitioner's point of view, this is a project that needs to be done in the next month and can be done in the next month. And in my view, nothing gets done in a month; nothing gets done really in three months, or sometimes a year."— Academic Researcher/Department Chair*

Collaborations, by nature, require substantial time since those participating have distinct viewpoints that must be discussed. Examples follow of frequently occurring issues that affect the time it takes to complete a collaborative research project:

- Researchers likely will need to take the time to explain the research process to practitioners.
- Practitioners leave their positions, and new staff are hired and need to be trained; frequent staff "turnover" was emphasized as a lowlight of collaborations. To overcome this, study participants gave the advice to (a) be prepared for this to happen and (b) engage practitioners across

the spectrum of direct service staff to higher-level administrators.

- Researchers may have to wait for data from practitioners whose schedule and priorities likely are not centered on the research.

Moreover, as one academic researcher states, *“You can’t staff this out. You need to show up.”* In other words, researchers must be prepared to immerse

themselves in all aspects of collaboration, the good and the bad. This involves a fair amount of professional (and sometimes personal) time. Clearly, researcher-practitioner collaborations have considerable time demands, but can be moderated by committed collaborators, which can yield equally considerable benefits.

## Conclusion

This brief has provided several recommendations for successful researcher-practitioner collaborations: build a solid relationship; actively seek and value practitioners involvement; network with practitioners and colleagues in the community; have a shared vision for the project; walk in the practitioners’ shoes; clearly explain the study design and its rationale, which may entail providing a “research 101” training; maximize the usefulness of products for practitioners; and budget for extra time. The purpose of sharing the insights of researchers and practitioners who have partnered successfully is to promote future partnerships. As one academic researcher notes, *“The way in which you behave individually as a researcher is going to impact whether or not future researchers are welcomed into that agency as a partner.”* It is important to work to ensure that researcher-practitioner collaborations continue and multiply, because they have the potential to yield profound benefits. They may provide the best solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing the CJ system today.

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