Improving evaluation of anti-crime programs: Summary of a National Research Council report

MARK LIPSEY
Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies, Nashville, USA

CAROL PETRIE*
Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, National Academies, Keck Center, 500 5th St. NW, Washington, D.C., 20001, USA
*corresponding author: E-mail: cpetrie@nas.edu

DAVID WEISBURD
Institute of Criminology, Faculty of Law, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel
Criminal Justice and Criminology, The University of Maryland, Baltimore, MD, USA

DENISE GOTTFREDSON
Criminal Justice and Criminology, The University of Maryland, Baltimore, MD, USA

Abstract This article summarizes a report of the National Research Council: Improving Evaluation of Anti-crime Programs. It is based on a workshop, held in September 2003, in which participants presented and discussed examples of evaluation-related studies that represent the methods and challenges associated with research at three levels: interventions directed toward individuals; interventions in neighborhoods, schools, prisons, or communities; and interventions at a broad policy level. The article, and the report on which it is based, is organized around five questions that require thoughtful analysis in the development of any evaluation plan: What questions should the evaluation address? When is it appropriate to conduct an impact evaluation? How should an impact evaluation be designed? How should the evaluation be implemented? What organizational infrastructure and procedures support high quality evaluation? The authors highlight major considerations in developing and implementing evaluation plans for criminal justice programs and make recommendations for improvement of government funded evaluation studies.

Key words: anti-crime programs, evaluation, experiments, impact evaluation, observational methods, quasi-experiments, randomized trials, research methods

Introduction

Effective guidance of criminal justice policy and practice requires evidence about the effects of the policies and practices on the populations and conditions...
they are intended to influence. The role of evaluation research is to provide that
evidence and to do so in a manner that is accessible and informative to policy
makers. In recent years there have been increased calls from policy makers for
“evidence-based practice” in health and human services that have extended to
criminal justice as, for example, in the joint initiative of the Office of Justice
Programs and the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy on evidence-based crime
and substance-abuse policy.¹ This trend has been accompanied by various
organized attempts to use the findings of evaluation research to determine “what
works” in criminal justice.

The Maryland Report (Sherman et al. 1997) responded to a request by
Congress to review existing research and identify effective programs and
practices. The Crime and Justice Group of the Campbell Collaboration has
embarked on an ambitious effort to develop systematic reviews of research on
the effectiveness of crime and justice programs. The Office of Juvenile Justice
and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Blueprints for Violence Prevention
project identifies programs whose effectiveness is demonstrated by evaluation
research, and other lists of programs alleged to be effective on the basis of
research have proliferated (e.g., the National Registry of Effective Programs
sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administra-
tion). In addition, the National Research Council’s (NRC’s) Committee on
Law and Justice has been commissioned to prepare reports assessing research
evidence on such topics as the effectiveness of policing policies (NRC 2004),
firearms policies (NRC 2005), illicit drug policies (NRC 2001), and the
prevention, treatment, and control of juvenile crime (NRC and Institute of
Medicine 2001).

These efforts reflect recognition that knowledge of the ability of various
programs to reduce crime or protect potential victims allows resources to be
allocated in ways that support effective programs and efficiently promote these
outcomes. Fulfilling this function, in turn, requires that evaluation research be
designed and implemented in a manner that provides valid and useful results of
sufficient quality to be relied upon by policy makers.

Criticism of methods

Methodological issues are at the heart of what has arguably been the most
influential stimulus for attention to the current state of evaluation research in
criminal justice. A series of reports⁷ by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO
2002a, b, c) has been sharply critical of the evaluation studies conducted under the
auspices of the Department of Justice. The GAO review identified a number of
problems that highlight the major challenges that must be met in an impact
evaluation. Among the problems identified were the following:

- The sites selected to participate in the evaluation were not representative of the
  sites that had received the program.
- The program participants selected at the evaluation sites were not representative
  of the population the program served.