

Getting the most out of research partnerships

Inviting inclusive research that shares program implementation findings and informs improvements in correctional climates

By Nancy La Vigne, Ph.D., Director, National Institute of Justice



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The first time I ever entered a correctional facility was in the early 1990s. I was the research director for the Texas sentencing commission, touring what was then a brand-new prison unit with a collection of staff and commissioners. As the warden proudly guided us through the facility, I marveled at the level of cleanliness, the ample natural light, and the court-yards that were partially landscaped

(albeit modestly). A prosecutor on our tour questioned the warden about why the prison had to be so nice — *aren't people sent to prison to be punished?* The warden explained that prisons are also populated by the people who work at them. *Shouldn't they have a reasonable work environment?*

To an outsider, it can be difficult to think of correctional facilities as communities. However, they are

composed of a mix of people who live and work there, just like communities “on the outside.” Prisons and jails house not only people who are sentenced to serve time or are awaiting court disposition, but also correctional officers, healthcare workers, educators, volunteers, and all manner of facility staff. These individuals all perform a role within the prison setting, and impact the climate and safety of the institution, whether positively or negatively.

The role of NIJ in correctional research

Roughly 30 years later, I carry observations from my first prison visit, along with years of subsequent correctional research, with me in my role as the director of the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), the research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. NIJ convenes criminal justice practitioners and stakeholders to help craft a research agenda and distill which research investments would most benefit them, awards grants to conduct that research, and communicates research findings to inform improvements in policies

and practices in the field. My role as NIJ director affords me the opportunity to oversee critical and impactful research on corrections and to influence how the findings are disseminated to the correctional leaders and practitioners who need them. As illustrated in past *Corrections Today* articles, NIJ has invested in a wide swath of corrections research, including studies on reentry, desistance from crime, and the impact of COVID-19 on corrections, to name a few.¹

Having conducted many studies of reentry programs and technologies myself, I have pondered several persistent challenges. Why do some agencies open their doors to research while others are resistant? Why do seemingly identical programs work better in some facilities than in others? To what degree do correctional departments use research findings to guide decision-making? If so, how?

Many of the answers to these questions are embedded in the “Aha!” moment I had during my very first correctional facility visit: Most researchers are not conducting their studies with the understanding that prisons are *communities*. Approaching research with that recognition front of mind could lead them to pose more relevant research questions and generate more actionable findings — and would likely improve the policies and practices that result from them.

Let’s face it: Inviting researchers into your facilities isn’t easy. It’s disruptive and adds another degree of complexity to your efforts to ensure a safe and secure environment. That makes it essential that your research partnerships yield a return

on investment. Those returns could be improved considerably if correctional leaders invited researchers that (1) employ inclusive methods, (2) measure and routinely report on program implementation fidelity, and (3) include an assessment of the underlying facility climate.

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Invite inclusive research studies

How do we measure climate while also producing strong and effective correctional programs? I think the answer lies in “inclusive research.” Originally established in the context of research on people with learning and intellectual disabilities, inclusive research happens when researchers engage those who are affected by the issue, problem, or intervention under study and incorporate the knowledge that comes from their lived experiences.²

At a minimum, inclusive research demands that research findings be shared with the people who helped generate them. Doing so can aid in the interpretation of findings and help in developing actionable steps to make improvements informed by them. And when researchers engage

the entire prison community, correctional staff are more likely to perceive changes in policies as valid and thus will be more invested in their faithful implementation.³

Inclusive research could be full-on participatory research, which engages with stakeholders as equal partners in all facets of the research process, or it could be more limited, such as soliciting their participation in the crafting of survey questions.⁴ Who better to enlist in developing survey questions on institutional safety than the people who work and reside in the facility?

Require feedback on program fidelity

When I first entered the field of criminology, the most common research studies in corrections were those for which researchers petitioned a department of corrections to gain access to data on incarcerated populations for projects related to their own research interests. Rare was the case when researchers shared their findings with corrections leadership (much less institutional staff or people who were incarcerated); instead, they prioritized publication in academic journals.

By contrast, the program evaluations of today hold promise for being highly relevant. But far too often, we unknowingly set those studies up for failure through lack of attention to program fidelity. To avoid this pitfall, researchers need to answer fundamental questions about program implementation, such as: Were the right people enrolled in the program (e.g., based on assessed risk or need)? Were they exposed to the intended number of program hours

and full degree of program content? To what degree did transfers and lockdowns interfere with program delivery and completion?

Not all studies of correctional programs document implementation as thoroughly as they should, with some simply foregoing it altogether. That is a disservice because, absent an implementation evaluation, even the most rigorous design in the world won't tell you that your program didn't work because it wasn't implemented as intended. I would argue that implementation evaluations are as important as impact evaluations — if not more so. What's the point of measuring something that you aren't even confident will work? We need to invest more resources in ensuring that programs are implemented with fidelity.

Yet even among evaluators who attend to implementation fidelity, relatively few share what they are learning *as they are learning it*. Instead of summarizing those findings in a final report after the evaluation has concluded, researchers should document and share implementation challenges routinely throughout the course of an evaluation. Termed “action research,” researchers

should feed this information back to program implementers and prison officials in real time.⁵ Doing so enables improvements in program delivery, increasing the likelihood that program participants benefit from the program and experience a successful reintegration into their communities when they leave prison.

Welcome studies that measure climate

Implementation fidelity is important, but documentation of the context of program delivery should not stop there. Program evaluators also need to make note of the prison climate. I've spent years reading, reviewing, and synthesizing reentry program evaluations and have not unearthed a single study that documented program participants' victimization experiences or degree of access to basic needs in the context of describing program effectiveness. Yet if you are in



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constant fear for your personal safety or don't have routine access to your prescribed medication, it is unlikely that you will absorb and make good use of program content, regardless of how evidence-based or well-delivered the program was.

Prison climate affects staff as well. Staff who feel overworked and underappreciated, and who don't embrace the goal of rehabilitation, have little incentive to ensure that people get to their classrooms. I've conducted research in prisons where correctional officers embrace their role as professionals whose job is not just to ensure the safe and secure custody of the people housed there but also to help promote positive change in those people's lives. I've also been in facilities where correctional officers feel that the people in their care are treated better than they are, where officers are being promoted based on favoritism rather than merit, and where staffing is so low officers on duty don't drink liquids during the day because calling for backup to take a bathroom break is a futile endeavor. It is unrealistic to believe that an identical prison program will yield the same result in these two very different climates.

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Be discerning consumers of research

Correctional research is at a pivotal moment. Program evaluation has become the norm, and yet the share of programs that yield statistically significant impacts remains lower than any of us would like. By making research more relevant and inclusive, we can improve that success rate.

But much depends on the engagement of correctional leaders. This isn't about opening your doors to any researcher who aspires to conduct a study. Be discerning. Interrogate prospective research teams on their goals, their methods, and their strategies for engaging with the

prison community. By being discerning consumers of research and demanding that studies be relevant and inclusive, you can increase the odds that the findings will make for healthier and more rehabilitative prison communities and improve the quality of life for all who reside and work in your institutions.

ENDNOTES

¹ Vivian Aranda-Hughes, George Pesta, and Daniel Mears, "TRANSITIONING: incarcerated individuals out of extended restrictive housing," *Corrections Today* 84 no. 3 (2022): 44-49; Benjamin Adams, M. Applegarth, and M. Garcia. 2022. Desistance from crime: On the frontier of criminal justice research. *Corrections Today*, 84(1): 14-19; Marie Garcia, D.M. Applegarth, E. Martin, B. Adams, and M. Durose. 2021. Using Data and Science to Understand the Impact of Covid-19 on Corrections. *Corrections Today*, 83(5): 12-16.

² James Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³ Jan Walmsley, Iva Strnadová, and Kelley Johnson, "The added value of inclusive research," *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 31 no. 5 (2018): 751-759.

⁴ Budd Hall, "Participatory research, popular knowledge and power: A personal reflection," *Convergence* 14 no. 3 (1981): 6.

⁵ Kurt Lewin, "Action research and minority problems," *Journal of Social Issues* 2 no. 4 (1946): 34-46.



Nancy La Vigne, Ph.D., is the director of the National Institute of Justice and is an expert on corrections policy and practice and a researcher in the field.

Happy Holidays!

Division of American Correctional Association

ACA extends our deepest gratitude for your dedication to the correctional profession. We wish you and your families a safe and happy holiday season.

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