What types of evidence should OJP use in drawing conclusions about the efficacy of programs and practices? What role should randomized experiments have in the development of evidence?

It is easy to argue that decisions in the justice system should be based upon research evidence, but most decisions are—and will always be—made without solid evidence. There will never be enough research to inform all decisions made by stakeholders in the justice sector. The fact that research will never be able to address all possible questions about justice programs and practices suggests that the funding of research is a critical part of the evidence-generating process. Funding agencies create the evidence base of the future when they decide where, when, and how to deploy the tools of research.

**Randomized Controlled Trials**

Randomized controlled trials (RCT) generally provide the strongest or most defensible causal evidence for programs and practices, but it may not always be possible to implement successful RCT evaluations in the field. Many important questions in the field of justice are not answerable using RCT studies—either for practical, economic, political, or ethical reasons. Research questions that are very difficult or expensive to answer using experimental methods may merit the necessary investment if they have widespread or profound social consequences, just as research questions with only modest consequences still merit experimental investment if they can be answered easily and at little cost. Funding for RCT evaluations should be managed like an investment portfolio with resources concentrated on the most effective combinations of theoretical salience, research feasibility, and social benefit.

Well designed and managed RCTs provide the most convincing evidence of causality, but the strength of such evidence depends on the quality of the management and implementation of the research itself. Consistent with its...
responsibility for guiding and informing justice systems, OJP should strengthen the
capacity of state and local entities to conduct randomized trials.

**Maintaining a Diverse Portfolio**
The SAB recognizes many programs and policies related to criminal justice are either not
amenable to randomized trials or are not sufficiently urgent to merit the investments
required to conduct randomized trials. In fact, a wide array of evaluation methods are
capable of generating evidence strong enough for causal inference. The decision to
pursue any particular method should be made on a case-by-case basis. Research designs
should be assessed for their cost, feasibility, the complexity of their implementation, and
their potential to generalize results to other jurisdictions or settings. Agencies proposing
to test the effects of justice programs and policies should choose research designs with
the highest possible levels of validity. These would include strong quasi-experimental
designs with credible methods for estimating the counterfactual—i.e. what *might have*
occurred without the introduction of the policy or program being evaluated. Strong
designs, for example, have used comparison groups identified with probabilistic methods
such as propensity score matching. Other methods may include, interrupted time series
studies, staggered-start designs, and regression discontinuity analyses. When RCT designs
are impractical, OJP should encourage studies that use these or other rigorous quasi-
experimental methods, and it should discourage evaluations that use weaker methods of
estimating the counterfactual, such as pre-post comparisons or single sample exploratory
studies. With rare exceptions, such studies are unlikely to provide evidence strong
enough for reaching causal conclusions.

**Recommendation:**
The SAB recommends that OJP exercise its responsibility for building the nation’s criminal
justice evidence base across the full array of research activities. Well designed and
managed RCTs provide the most convincing evidence of causality. However, the strength
of causal conclusions that can be reached from a randomized experiment are dependent
on the quality of the management and implementation of RCT studies. The resources
required for RCT studies should be deployed in a way that achieves the strongest
information possible on the widest spectrum of policy and program issues. When
randomized experimental designs are not practical, OJP should encourage evaluations
that are supported by clearly articulated theory, detailed and coherent logic models,
accurate and relevant data sources, and with research designs that estimate the
counterfactual condition as rigorously as possible.