

Research Methodology and Evidence Translation
Subcommittee
Advisory Statement #1

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

Office of Justice Programs
Science Advisory Board
Advisory Statements

The advisory statements developed and adopted by the Office of Justice Programs (OJP) Sciences Advisory Board (SAB) are intended to provide advice and guidance to assist OJP's efforts in providing innovative leadership to federal, state, local, and tribal justice systems by disseminating and promoting state-of-the-art knowledge and practices across the country.

The recommendations are grounded in the current body of scientific knowledge and developed via consensus among the SAB Board member practitioners and scholars representing a wide array of criminal and juvenile justice fields. However, the statements are not intended to substitute for OJP staff's expert judgment nor are they intended to be exhaustive of all possible situations and scenarios. It is anticipated that during the term of the SAB, multiple Advisory Statements may be adopted, so they should be considered in their entirety as a complimentary and cumulative volume of recommendations.

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.