

POLICY RELEVANT CORRECTIONAL RESEARCH

Question: How does correctional research influence public policy?

Answer: By definition, good public policy is knowledge-based public policy. And by its nature, research produces – indeed creates – knowledge. Simple logic would therefore dictate that all public policy is, or should be, informed by research. But it often is not. The reasons are many and, to a large extent foreseeable and surmountable.

For many years, research has been regarded as a “frill”, last to be funded and first to be cut. During recent program review cutbacks, many research units suffered significant reductions. Recently however, recognition of the consequences of this lost capacity has given rise to Canadian government initiatives such as the Policy Research Initiative.

In order to maximize its contribution to correctional policy development, research must have certain characteristics. First and foremost, it must be scientifically sound, based on valid methodology and build on past research. When oriented to the field of interest of the policy-maker, knowledge is accumulated that will help inform policy

questions that arise, even when they have not been anticipated in a strategic plan. In corrections as an example, a great deal of research has been undertaken on the prediction of risk and the treatment of sex offenders. This work has not only contributed to improved correctional practice and outcomes (e.g., declining recidivism rates) but has helped answer policy questions related to risk management.

As important as the quality and relevance of research is the issue of timeliness. Often, the best policy response is defined by its timeliness. Seldom can policy decisions await the long-term results from research. Where a relevant knowledge base exists, the information may be available. But, when the answers are not immediately available, researchers can devise a short-term process to provide answers that are reasonably supported by evidence. Time-limited research of this type may not, of necessity, meet the highest methodological standards. However, its credibility is best assured when it is conducted by researchers with access to specialized knowledge, with informed judgement about reasonable assumptions and estimates, and

guided by objective, scientific principles. A good example of timely, responsive research is a recent project that estimated the recidivism of pardoned sex offenders. A prospective study could have taken years to complete. However, using sound sampling techniques, very useful results were made available in a matter of months.

The ability to demonstrate that expert knowledge can be brought to bear on policy questions in the near and medium term, highlights the value of a research capacity within a government context. With carefully planned subject areas, research findings will accumulate and ultimately be drawn on to deal with short-term, even crisis-proportion policy pressures. To do this successfully, an on-going partnership must be maintained between Research and Policy sectors based on respect for the role of each and recognition of their interdependence.

Policy implications:

1. Investment in research capacity is essential for sound public policy-making.
2. Research programs should be planned jointly by research and policy officials.

3. Anticipation of future policy needs is important to proactively engage in long-term research projects so that appropriate knowledge will be available when needed.
4. Short-term research is essential where critical pressures demand action, and can best be done by expert researchers who are also well suited to conducting more strategic, longer term projects to address the persistent and enduring issues in the field.

Sources: Federal/Provincial/ Territorial Working Group on High Risk Offenders (1998). *Information Systems on Sex Offenders Against Children and Other Vulnerable Groups*. Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

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For further information:

Richard Zubrycki
Solicitor General Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P8
Tel (613) 991-2821
Fax (613) 990-8295
e-mail zubrycr@sgc.gc.ca

Also available on Solicitor General Canada's Internet Site @<http://www.sgc.gc.ca>