

NIJ Seeks to Strengthen the Practitioner-Researcher Bond

By Bethany Backes

Author's Note: Points of view are those of the author and do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

When corrections officials told the National Institute of Justice that they needed an inexpensive, handheld device that would detect everything from cell phones to improvised weapons made of wood, NIJ worked with Luna Innovations Inc. to develop the system. Luna engineers tested the prototype, which is similar to a handheld metal detector, at the Virginia Peninsula Regional Jail in Williamsburg. They found that the device works well with various clothing fabrics, including standard jumpsuits. Collaborations between people in the field and researchers often produce better results than efforts that do not involve both groups.

NIJ is developing a program focused on the development and enhancement of researcher-practitioner partnerships. NIJ has always acknowledged the importance of these partnerships and the involvement of the practitioner throughout the research process — from the formulation of research questions and accessing data to advising a study as it progresses and ensuring practical perspectives in the analysis of data and report writing. Despite NIJ's long-standing interest in and support for researcher-practitioner partnerships, there is a clear need for activities that capture and build upon previous partnership work and that provide supportive opportunities for new and existing researcher-practitioner partnerships. It is NIJ's goal to create, enhance, and sustain new and existing partnerships that work to improve criminal justice prevention and response.

Collaboration between criminal justice researchers and practitioners is important for a number of reasons. For example, research can provide practical solutions to obstacles faced by criminal justice practitioners. Furthermore, criminal justice practitioners involved with ongoing criminal justice research and evaluation can gain new skills in assessing and measuring their programs and can better understand the benefits of research. Likewise, by working closely with practitioners, criminal justice researchers are better able to understand the goals and purposes criminal justice practitioners seek to achieve and what measures of success will be credible. When partners function as equal contributors, shared skills, responsibility for outcomes and motivation to fulfill responsibilities will likely develop and help to ensure high-quality research results.

NIJ recently closed a solicitation titled "Building and Enhancing Criminal Justice Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships" and is currently reviewing proposals. This solicitation was aimed at developing existing partnerships, establishing new partnerships and capturing significant lessons that have been learned through past and current criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships. Working together, researchers and practitioners can better validate practices, determine cost-effectiveness, and identify promising programs. The solicitation was the first step in providing a targeted venue for researchers and practitioners to not only work together on criminal justice issues, but also to expose each group to the daily work of their respective fields. The solicitation covered three areas, and NIJ anticipates funding at least one application under each area.

The first area focused on capturing past and current accounts of criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships and asked applicants to gather information related to assessing the need for a partnership, obstacles to and solutions for the development of a partnership, balancing the needs of the two parties, successful strategies for dissemination and translation of results, and sustainability of partnerships. Products generated through this area of the solicitation will assist in the creation of an interactive toolkit for criminal justice researchers and practitioners. Capturing and making available these experiences will provide helpful information to those currently engaging in or developing new partnerships.

The second area of the solicitation encouraged criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships by pairing knowledgeable senior faculty members with junior faculty members. This is intended to develop the junior faculty's research skills and chosen fields of concentration while conducting research that will inform criminal justice practice or policy. It is NIJ's hope that funding for this area will increase the interest of up-and-coming researchers in working directly with practice-based organizations and provide opportunities for long-term partnerships.

The final section of the solicitation supported the placement of criminal justice researchers within practice-based organizations to develop and conduct needed research and evaluation that impacts the organization. It is anticipated that this program will establish new researcher-practitioner collaborations that will continue throughout the career of the researcher and organization. Additionally, it will provide the partners with a realistic overview of the day-to-day

challenges faced by practitioners, policymakers and researchers in their work.

During the next several years, NIJ hopes to continue supporting efforts of researchers and practitioners in conducting timely and effective research that will have great benefit for local, county, state and national organizations. Internally, NIJ plans to create a Web topic page, on its Web site, dedicated to criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships as well as embed common language related to the importance of research-practitioner partnerships in all NIJ research solicitations and adjust the selection criteria for proposals

to reflect the additional focus on partnerships. NIJ plans to support partnerships through a variety of contract actions, solicitations, workshops and staff involvement so that relevant research will be conducted and tangible products and programs created.

Providing opportunities that link research and practice will ultimately lead to better criminal justice policy, practice and research. Regular integration of researchers and practitioners will build trust, and both parties will be equally invested in the outcome of research and the success and improvement of programs and services. Through continuous

support of researcher-practitioner partnerships, NIJ expects to decrease the gap between the two fields and to increase the number of evidence-based practices implemented throughout the criminal justice system and supported by key funding agencies.

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