

Is Your Corrections Research Policy Adequate?

By Lettie Prell, Steve Van Dine and Gary Zajac

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) are two jurisdictions whose corrections research policies are robust and specifically address the new federal regulations on human subject research with regard to inmate populations. These regulations go beyond informed consent when research involves inmate subjects directly, and specify a broader consideration of the potential risks to the subjects that might be inherent in a particular study. Such attention to the federal regulations in policy appears to be uncommon. Review of a small sample of 10 corrections research policies collected in 2009 found that only half provided a review mechanism to ensure these new human subjects issues are addressed.

That percentage could be higher today. The corrections department in one of the states providing its research policy in 2009 indicated it had recently initiated an internal review with the intent to ensure compliance with the federal regulations. It is likely that a number of states may have, or are in the process of, revising their policies as well. There is sound reason to do so. While correctional agencies may be in compliance with ACA research standards, they could still be at risk of jeopardizing their federal funds due to the stricter federal regulations, especially when research involves surveys of or interviews with inmates.

What should a good corrections research policy look like? While individual correctional agencies and research agendas vary, some basic elements of a corrections research policy can be

identified. First, the policy should outline a basic research agenda for the agency, i.e., what does the agency want to do with the results of the research? Second, if external research partnerships are used, the policy should provide some guidance on how such partnerships are formed and governed. Third, the policy should provide some basic organizational structure for the correction research office (if there is one). Fourth, the policy should provide detailed guidelines for those wishing to submit unsolicited research proposals to the agency. Fifth, human subjects issues should be addressed. Finally, the policy should also address research conditions or limitations that are specific to the agency, such as release of inmate information.

Correctional agencies today engage in a wide variety of research that can be placed into one of several categories. These categories are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but they cover much of the research activity likely to be going on within a correctional agency:

- Internally initiated research conducted by in-house corrections research staff;
- Internally initiated research conducted with external research partners (e.g., universities), which may involve third party sources of funding; and
- Unsolicited research proposals submitted to the agency.

To illustrate, ODRC uses and supports correctional research in three main ways, which reflect the above categories. ODRC uses:

- A unit of research professionals to prepare reports, answer questions and conduct studies;
- Occasional contracts with outside researchers, especially from Ohio's universities; and
- A review process to help independent researchers conduct correctional research, while ensuring human subjects protections.

First, ODRC maintains a staff of about 15 people who provide information for management decisions in a number of different ways, such as routine reports, answers to questions and an assortment of structured research studies. The emphasis is to provide information that helps managers at ODRC and at the state level make better decisions. In addition to providing basic information that is useful for planning and monitoring, researchers conduct studies to improve operations, determine policy and evaluate programs. The research bureau also prepares the department's population projections and analyzes legislative bills, often helping ODRC and the state save money.

Second, on occasion ODRC will contract for research support. This primarily occurs with regard to community corrections. Much of this is done in collaboration with the College of Criminal Justice at the University of Cincinnati. Outsourcing research is especially done when community partners are concerned about the objectivity of ODRC assessing its own funding efforts, or when particular expertise is desired for a project.

Whatever the agency's research agenda, it is important for the agency to develop a policy to guide research activities.

Third, ODRC, through its Human Subjects Research Review Committee (HSRRC), reviews, approves and supports many projects that are proposed by outside researchers, mostly from university settings. HSRRC has posted its standards, policies and processes on its website.¹ Students, faculty and research organizations are expected to demonstrate that the research will bring no harm to study participants, fits within a correctional context, and is of sufficient quality to justify resources provided, including staff time and security costs. Up to 30 proposals are received most years, with about two-thirds eventually approved, usually in less than two months.

All of the research policies of the 10 correctional agencies reviewed require basic safeguards such as informed consent when research involves inmate subjects directly, in order to maintain confidentiality of the data. ODRC's HSRRC presents one model for providing a mechanism to ensure that human subjects issues are adequately addressed per the federal regulations. HSRRCs and similar bodies such as institutional review boards (IRBs) and ethics committees center on consideration of two crucial issues: that the degree, nature and management of risk to the subject and the researcher have been delineated explicitly in the research proposal, and that appropriate balance exists between the potential benefits of the research to the subject and/or to society and the risks assumed by the subjects.

Whatever the agency's research agenda, it is important for the agency to develop a policy to guide research activities. The development of a good corrections research policy requires some work up front for the agency, and the policy will likely require periodic updates, but it is critical to provide at least some basic framework to channel research activities in a manner to protect offenders and advance the agency's research needs, while providing opportunities for researchers to conduct studies within the public agency setting.

ENDNOTE

¹ To view Human Subjects Research Review Committee standards, policies and processes, visit <http://www.drc.ohio.gov/web/hsrrc.htm>.

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