

# EVIDENCE-BASED CRIME POLICIES: BETTER SOLUTIONS FOR CRIME

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## Abstract

The criminal justice policy process is under scrutiny from academicians who relay a notable absence of reliable empirical evidence to produce policy solutions that objectively allocate scarce resources. Scholars have argued that the lack of an evidence-based approach has allowed the implementation and continued retention of unproven policies and program. In lieu of the unrealistic leap from status quo to informatics and empirical research, the paper promotes the long-term goal of intensive agency collaboration, systemic review, cost-benefit analysis, crime trend analysis, and informatics standards to increase the capacity of criminal justice policy to reduce crime in the most cost-effective manner.

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**Keywords:** Crime Policy, Collaboration, Systematic Review, Evidence-based

## 1. Introduction

The criminal justice policy process is under scrutiny from academicians who relay a notable absence of reliable empirical evidence to produce policy solutions that objectively allocate scarce resources (Cohen, 2000; Aos et al, 2006). Scholars have argued that the lack of an evidence-based approach has allowed the implementation and continued retention of unproven policies and program. Subsequently, key components of policy analysis—outcome-based performance, rigorous evaluation, and positive return on taxpayer investment are ignored in favor of political expediency, ideology, and special interests (Robinson, 2003).

Currently, political representatives that formulate public policy action with limited general public input, and criminal justice agency representation has proven to be an obstacle in the resolution of interrelated issues under strained global economic instability and lack of dedicated research funds. However, the establishment of collaborative community partnerships that capitalize on existing investigative strengths can foster an integrated

approach to maximize efficiency at little or no cost. Intensive collaboration is recommended as a core crime agency component necessary to reach permanent solutions that seek action for the most critical systemic needs. Collaboration is a process of evaluation that includes the constructive exploration of differences intended to generate common objectives and promote positive outcomes (Taylor-Powell et al., 1998; Chisholm, 1998).

In lieu of the unrealistic leap from status quo to informatics and empirical research, the paper promotes community collaborations that incrementally transform criminal justice investigative skills into tools of literary and data mining. These critical components move towards the long-term goal of intensive agency collaboration, systemic review, cost-benefit analysis, crime trend analysis, and informatics standards to facilitate data sharing.

## **2. Literature Review**

Policy makers and criminal justice agents have not converged on efforts that reduce crime in the United States. Instead, a gap exists between the need to appease public sentiment and the ability to propose legislation that systematically implements corrective public policy action with the goal of crime reduction.

Evidence that policymakers and public representatives lack scientific knowledge in regards to decision-making on aggregated criminal activities (e.g., type and crime incidence) is apparent. Existing sanctions direct funding to programs that limit the execution of investigation and prosecution of criminals, and promote continued support for unproven programs (Mears, 2007).

Limited research capacity and lack of priority given to monitoring implement policy across each jurisdiction level has resulted in laws that are more indicative of political positioning to satisfy public safety perception than they have been able to improve crime policy. Blumstein (1997) advised that empirical research was a potential tempering instrument to prevent political influence on politics. But criminal justice agencies have not heeded recommendations to dedicate at least 5 percent of their budget to research despite the potential to correct misuse stemming from competition for scarce resources (Mears, 2007). Funding competition among agencies creates barriers to the necessary ingredient of information sharing and often results from policies that either assign responsibilities for a common issue to multiple agencies or formulate unnecessary agencies (Downs, 1996).

National demand for government accountability across the US has placed the emphasis on economic tools such as cost benefit analysis to predetermine the efficacy of proposed projects before allotments are granted.

In spite of these public demands and national cost-effective objectives, crime policy development does not require this essential analysis tool.

Several examples of uncoordinated policy efforts start with the development of juvenile courts formed on the basis that they would adjudicate less severe sanctions to youth than existing courts (Fagan and Zimring, 2000). However, evidence indicates that separate facilities were not required since youths in adult courts were already receiving less severe sanctions. Petrosino and his colleagues (2001) performed a systematic review of 9 randomized controlled studies in the Scared Straight program. None of the interventions were found to be effective in preventing juveniles from engaging in criminal activity compared to a control group who did not receive the program. Furthermore, Welsh et al. (2005) found that interventions actually produced harmful results. Despite this discovery, Scared Straight programs are still used in many jurisdictions. Welsh et al. also produced evidence of trivial effects on substance use and crime for the Drug Abuse Resistance Education school-based substance abuse prevention program known as DARE. In these examples, a systematic review of the judicial system, prison population and assessment needs for this facility type would have generated a comprehensive statement and increased the feasibility of subsequent policy (Petrosino et al., 2001; Aos et al, 2006). However, they were not initiated or required. In the Petrosino and Welsh studies, evidence-based assessment techniques were simply disregarded. These examples illustrate the failure of policy makers to identify and implement policy that will positively impact the criminal justice system.

Another example is that few criminal justice officials would be expected to favor reductions in prison funding, personnel, or expenditure on new surveillance equipment and many agree that more funds are required to hire personnel dedicated to fight crime (Miller, 2004). Miller's perspective is supported since crime rates in the 1980s either remained steady or declined when federal law enforcement spending was dramatically increased.

Mears (2007) also cites the example of the US justice system 165 per cent expenditure increase between 1982 through 2001 and then proposes the following question, "*Should this money have been spent to prevent crime? Was it needed?*" The logic supporting this approach lies with consideration of alternative methods that may have garnered similar results but at decreased costs. Further, this position suggests that the need for additional personnel cannot be supported without information regarding the proportion of crime that merits response in comparison to the amount of crime that can be addressed with current funding. This brings another critical item into view, the lack of consensus in the criminal justice system that defines 'need'.

Miller (2004) indicates that citizen and community groups were not actively involved in the national crime policy process. Instead, criminal

justice system agents were able to apply first-hand knowledge of systemic issues to drive policy.

Reflection on the differences in criminal justice agents must be established and resolved in a collaborative manner since costly disparate strategies to reduce crime exist in government, non-government, police, and correctional services. Often these strategies have not produced the desired effect of crime prevention, particularly for youth. Hence, credibility of the research community must be established in conjunction with criminal justice agents, politicians, and community representatives (Foster-Fishman, 2001). Otherwise, the development of criminal justice policy will continue to suffer to the detriment of the greater public.

Multiple inputs through interagency collaboration can more accurately define the problem and propose solutions that incorporate law enforcement knowledge with consideration of known systemic limitations such as the lack of dedicated funding.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical premise of this paper supports the establishment collaboration within the criminal justice system across multiple jurisdictions to utilize fundamental aspects of interagency collaboration expected to increase the capacity of criminal justice policy to reduce crime in the most cost-effective manner.

Differences in ownership attributes of organizational structure—private, public, profit, and non-profit, were once perceived as a barrier to cooperative efforts partnerships. However, the increased demand for all organizations to demonstrate relationships in a networked environment brought on by cost considerations has placed the priority on achieving solutions to complex policy goals regardless of organizational structure. In this context, collaboration is seen as an efficient option to allocate scarce resources to build better communities (Thomson et al., 2007).

This approach is more likely to achieve desired benefits and present opportunities for incremental gains in the elimination of barriers across jurisdictions, conflicting policy control, and improved ability to elicit positive outcomes.

The key to understanding these factors of collaboration is based on the ability of partners to establish rules of engagement and collective action that will shape expected behavior and responsibilities within the relationship. Ostrom (1998) distinguishes three required elements in the development of collective action that contribute to collaboration in the establishment of norms. They are trust, reciprocity, and reputation.

Since implementation in collaboration is considered a voluntary task, the ability to reach goals successfully may be influenced by how well

collaborative efforts have managed the tension between individual and collective interests (Thomson et al., 2007). However, mutuality is achieved when interdependent partners are able to recognize mutual benefits from one another based on shared interests. Identification of shared interests will serve as an adhesive to establish collaboration feasibility (Thomas, 1997; Thomson, et al., 2007).

#### **4. Policy Recommendations for Effective Crime Policies**

First of all, one of important fact that everybody have to keep in mind that the immediate option to maintain status quo would simply allow every agency to proceed with their present crime policies based on the flow of information currently available to them. With this alternative to do nothing, this option will continue to yield crime policy programs and policies throughout criminal justice jurisdictions that produce no discernible evidence of effectiveness and efficiency. It is also a fact that wasting limited funds on ineffective solutions will eventually result in economic failure.

In contrast to keep status quo, the second policy alternative relies on the development of an integrated interdisciplinary crime policy supported by 4 major elements—systematic review, cost benefit analysis, future crime trend analysis, and data infrastructure standardization. This approach embeds a rational and evidence-based crime policy driven by systematic policy review, predetermination of program efficacy, and increased focus on research and informatics platforms. Petrosino (2000) emphasizes the importance of integration of rigorous evaluation results into decisions by policymakers. The interest in adopting evidence-based criminal justice programs in the U.S led States to aid in the elimination of ineffective programs.

Inter-organizational alliances (e.g., coalitions, coordination council) can be used to facilitate the exchange of information among member organizations and secure a strong link between researchers and policymakers. A national multi-sectoral crime policy council should be legislated, enacted, and convened by government. Crime policy membership should include subject matter expert from economics, government, non-governmental agencies, academicians, the private sector, and other organizations. Responsibilities of each organization should be clearly defined during public sessions.

Rational and evidence-based crime policies must incorporate researchers that partner with criminal justice agents in order to evaluate a wide range of proposed individual and community policies. The expressed goal of these partnerships must be to develop policies that have the greatest likelihood of generating large-scale benefits to the criminal justice system. Collaboration with key partners at local, provincial, territorial, and

international levels should focus on factors that seek to understand individual characteristics at risk for criminal activity.

Interdisciplinary crime policy agenda should be created that requires expert representation from all related agencies. Methodologies must be created to systematically integrate and coordinate multiple perspectives with the aim of crime prevention while concurrently tackling waste.

Future crime trends and threats should be analyzed. Analyzing future crime trends and their societal impact should be a policy development priority in efforts to minimize the greatest expected future negative impacts. The evidence-based approach, known as informatics, can provide the foundation for practitioners to communicate and interact with government and communities, gather information and intelligence about community needs, and analyze information gathered from information science, computer science, and technology (Wan, 2006).

Develop mechanisms should be established to collect, store and share information between agencies. Data standards must be initiated across three infrastructure types which are 1) set of conventions to drive data collection, 2) adequate storage capacity, and 3) interpretive community inquiry capability (Munger, 2006).

Rigorous systematic impact evaluations (Welsh et al., 2005) and research that relies on statistical standards—large-scale, multi-site, randomized experimental design that meet high internal validity standards in order to eliminate errors in cause-effect analysis due to focus on the differences directly attributed to the intervention must be promoted (Mears, 2007). These efforts must begin immediately in order to increase access to crime policy options that have been subjected to rigid evaluation and establish effective crime reduction interventions. Cease all funding to programs that do not produce statistical evidence of crime reduction.

Economic evaluation tools like the cost benefit analysis should be compulsory as a part of evaluation process. However, there is no agreement on which costs and benefits are required in the analysis (Cohen, 2000). A primary goal of the proposed crime policy council should include evaluation and consensus of the most reliable variables from which to produce final analysis.

## **5. Summary and Concluding Remarks**

Evidence indicates that collaborating agencies are able to produce more innovative and comprehensive solutions to complex crime policy. Establishment of effective partnerships under multi-level participation could be an effective way to reduce crime. However, current lack of research allotment within the criminal justice system requires low or no cost, incremental steps towards developing a sound empirical research base.

No cost options can be implemented that apply investigative capabilities to literature review to achieve effective and efficient crime policy standards. Utilization of local and collegiate library personnel can advance bonds and boost incremental knowledge through collaborated efforts to help determine the best available current options.

A comprehensive US criminal justice systematic review conducted by individual organizations and presented to the proposed crime policy council will provide law enforcement agents with appropriate information to make informed decisions regarding program efficacy. Decisions will be unbiased and result from information gathered to support whether or not a program works. Subsequently, appropriate decisions to reallocate funding from ineffective programs to those most likely to succeed will ensue.

Ultimately, mutuality among criminal justice agents and skilled community representatives can yield initial CBAs and value matrix that prepare stakeholders for data standard requirements, help determine the best available options, and establish long-term commitments until dedicated research funds are available.

Informatics and empirical research should have a dedicated role in the criminal justice system with the expressed goal of crime trend analysis to support future policy. Data infrastructure standardization will play a key role in the ability to share data and compare among multiple agencies. But, incremental gains during the transition period can optimize use of current data in the collaborative efforts that lead to normative standards through the potential for increased acceptance.

The agenda encourages the formation of a policy council to promote collaboration, systematic review beginning with each related organization and combined to reach mutuality in the form of a cost benefit and future trend analysis. The following path is expected to help conform normative standards across the criminal justice system for increased effective and efficient policy outcomes.

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