

Research Methodology and Evidence Translation  
Subcommittee  
Advisory Statement #2

**What policy should be used to define the level of evidence necessary for OJP investment in criminal justice programs?**

The Science Advisory Board suggests that OJP develop general policy to define the level of evidence needed for investment in criminal justice research and innovation.

The first question to be considered in developing such policy is the nature of the investment. Is it for pilot projects that examine promising new innovations or wide scale support for established programs and practices? For investments in new innovations we recommend that the OJP require some basic research evidence supporting the logic of a practice. For example, if a jurisdiction proposes to develop a new way of managing offenders after release from prison, it should be able to document why such an approach would be expected to succeed based on existing research and knowledge about recidivism. The proposer might show, for example, evidence of a strong correlation between the proposed innovation and recidivism. The level of evidence needed to support this type of innovation is credible basic research that supports the logic model for the program.

For investments that could expand the use of more established programs and practices, the OJP might require the proposer to show initial evidence of success with credible evaluations of pilot programs. The proposer should be able to show that the innovation has been tried and evaluated using methods that provide confidence in the potential for the innovation. The level of evidence needed would vary, but the SAB recommends that proposers demonstrate sufficient controls for threats to internal and external validity.

**Recommendation 1:**

*In making decisions about investments in programs and practices OJP should begin by defining whether the investment is to support development of a new intervention or the broader implementation of an existing intervention. The scale*

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.

*of evidence needed to justify OJP support should vary depending on the scale of program implementation.*

### **Judging the Efficacy of Programs and Practices**

The strength of evidence required to judge the value of programs and practices in the justice field is a question of balance. Judgments should be based on the best available evidence, but the strength of evidence required for any decision is gauged by the costs of error and the burden of increasing evidentiary quality. Decisions with little consequence require less accurate evidence and less exhaustive evidence. Highly consequential decisions require more evidence. Navigating the continuum of evidence-supported decision-making is complex and subjective. The available evidence for any policy, program, or practice is not the product of a straightforward and untrammelled search for effectiveness. It emerges from a contentious and inherently political process that governs social investment in research.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

*The value of a particular program or practice should be judged at least in part by the strength of available research evidence, but such an assessment should also account for the decision-making processes that lead to the creation of programs and to the funding of research required to generate evidence. An intervention backed by several rigorous studies is not necessarily superior to one without such backing if previous research investments have been asymmetrical.*

### **New Innovations Versus Broad Implementation of Programs**

The SAB would like to reiterate that modest standards of evidence for funding innovations apply only to programs that represent innovations and are being tested in a single or small number of jurisdictions. To support a broad implementation of programs in the real world, a much more stringent set of requirements should be applied. Broad implementation of a program demands a level of evidence that can justify large OJP expenditures. There is a long and unfortunate history of investment in large scale programs that were begun without sufficient evidence of program success. At a minimum, innovations should be tested in a smaller group of jurisdictions before large scale investment in the program should be made across regions or the US.

There is no easy method to define the extent of evidence needed to justify a large scale investment. One trial is likely not enough to justify a large investment, but a randomized trial in one jurisdiction may provide sufficient evidence to support additional trials. A careful step by step approach to evaluation is recommended. A limited amount of evidence for an innovation could justify an expansion to additional jurisdictions. If feasible, replications should be randomized experiments or rigorous quasi-experiments. When evidence is credible that the program is effective and that it can be applied across different contexts reliably and successfully, it is ready for large scale support.

**Recommendation 3:**

*Large scale support for wide implementation of a program or practice should be carried out only once there is a significant evidence base. One field trial is not enough to justify such a large scale investment, but there are no clear metrics for making such decisions. The SAB recommends that the OJP take a step-by-step approach building evidence across a number of contexts before funding large scale implementation of programs and practices.*