

Research Methodology and Evidence Translation
Subcommittee
Advisory Statement #3

What types of outcomes should OJP consider in drawing inferences about the effectiveness of justice programs and practices?

OJP has a national leadership role in the justice field that includes criminal justice, juvenile justice, and crime victim services. One prominent element of the OJP mission is to develop, evaluate, and otherwise identify promising and effective justice programs.¹

Justice programs are generally designed to achieve specific purposes, and produce intended effects. The effects of an intervention on the target population, both intended and unintended, are known as outcomes. Recidivism is the most common outcome of interest within the justice field, but other measures are used, including satisfaction with services, impacts on drug use, employment, educational success, and the legitimacy of criminal justice agencies across communities. Identifying the correct outcomes for a policy, program or practice is a basic task associated with program development, performance measurement, and program evaluation.

There are a number of considerations related to outcome measurement that OJP must consider in drawing inferences about the effectiveness of justice programs. These include: primary and secondary outcomes, unintended outcomes, cost/benefit, implementation fidelity, and efficacy versus effectiveness research.

Primary and Secondary Outcomes

Justice programs may have both primary and secondary outcomes of interest as well as proximal and distal outcomes. For example, a reentry program may have a primary outcome of reducing recidivism and secondary outcomes related to increasing employment, housing, and education levels. Near-

¹ The term “program” is used here to indicate programs, practices, and various interventions. One term is used for the sake of simplicity with recognition that there is great variation in the level of development and specificity of activities across the justice field.

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.

term or proximal outcomes related to employment, housing, and training may influence the likelihood of achieving longer term or more distal outcomes related to reducing recidivism.

Recommendation 1:

Primary and secondary outcomes for programs should be identified early in program development. Their relationships to program activities should be articulated (e.g., in the form of a logic model) and those relationships should inform data collection, performance measurement and program evaluation.

Unintended Outcomes

Social programs may have unintended outcomes, but unintended outcomes do not have to be unanticipated outcomes, particularly where they may be harmful. For example, many programs related to improving school safety have incorporated law enforcement officers in the school setting. In some instances, this has been associated with increasingly severe and exclusionary disciplinary practices that move students into the juvenile justice system for misbehavior more properly handled in the school setting.

Recommendation 2:

Throughout the program development and program evaluation process, OJP should ensure that careful consideration is given to the identification, mitigation, and measurement of potentially harmful unintended consequences.

Cost/Benefit

Cost/benefit analysis may provide valuable and practical information for decision-making because it relates the inputs and outcomes of a program in intuitive, monetary terms. Cost/benefit information is most useful when it accompanies effectiveness research (see below).

Recommendation 3:

OJP should encourage and support the use of cost/benefit analysis, particularly for effectiveness research that estimates program outcomes under conditions of routine practice.

Informal Social Controls and Legitimacy

Informal social controls often play a key role in the promoting community safety, but justice research does not always measure social factors such as the willingness of communities to intervene or the extent to which they can work together to deal with community problems. Measurement of “collective efficacy” is often an important outcome for crime prevention, as is public perception of the criminal justice system.

Recommendation 4:

OJP should encourage the collection of data on informal social controls in evaluations of programs.

Implementation Fidelity

Implementation fidelity refers to the degree to which a program is implemented according to its original design. Well-developed programs typically include clearly specified program components, target populations, and implementation characteristics. Whether it is a well-developed program that is being replicated or a new program being implemented for the first time, information about implementation fidelity is essential to determining the meaning of observed outcomes.

Recommendation 5:

OJP should encourage and support clear articulations of program implementation requirements and measures of implementation fidelity.

Efficacy vs. Effectiveness Research

Program implementation under routine conditions often varies from implementation under “ideal” conditions, and programs implemented under routine conditions may be less likely to produce their intended effects. Efficacy research determines whether a program is capable of improving outcomes under ideal conditions, including intensive support from program developers, ample funding, and highly trained personnel that may be unavailable under routine conditions. Effectiveness research estimates the outcomes of programs when implemented under routine conditions with no unusual involvement by program developers and typical levels of funding and human resources.

Recommendation 6:

OJP should acknowledge the distinctions between program outcomes achieved through efficacy research and effectiveness research and apply greater weight to evidence derived from effectiveness research in wide-scale dissemination of programs.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methods may provide greater depth of understanding about complex phenomena and hard-to-study justice topics. Many experts in the social and behavioral sciences embrace both quantitative and qualitative research methods as they tend to have complementary strengths and limitations. Research on the effectiveness of justice programs may benefit from mixed methods designs. Studies will frequently incorporate a larger proportion of qualitative methods when assessing programs and practices during their earlier, formative stages.

Recommendation 7:

OJP should encourage and support research using qualitative methods as well as mixed methods designs. OJP should favor research methods, individually or in combination, that represent the most rigorous appropriate approach for addressing the research question or questions of interest.