

2012 Annual Report
Subcommittee on Bureau of Justice Assistance
Office of Justice Programs - Scientific Advisory Board
6/11/12

I. Introduction

This report summarizes the impressions of the Subcommittee on the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) of the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) for the Office of Justice Programs based on its activities for the period from June 1, 2011 to June 1, 2012. The report also presents potential future areas of activity for the subcommittee and/or the SAB. Members of the subcommittee are: Edward Mulvey (chair), Alfred Blumstein, Timothy Bynum, Anthony Fabelo, Edward Latessa, Mark Lipsey, Cynthia Lum, and Faye Taxman. This subcommittee is the newest of the SAB subcommittees; its first meeting was in January, 2012 at the last meeting of the SAB. Prior to that meeting, BJA director, Denise O'Donnell, and her staff liaisons, Elizabeth Griffith and Edward Banks, met with Alfred Blumstein and Edward Mulvey to discuss current activities of BJA and potential opportunities for collaboration. At the subcommittee meeting, Denise O'Donnell and several staff members provided detailed information about the programs and priorities for BJA. Since the January meeting, the subcommittee has had two phone conferences and Edward Mulvey has had several conversations with Elizabeth Griffith and Edward Banks about potential projects and activities.

It is necessary to keep the mission of BJA in the forefront of discussions about potential future activities. BJA provides leadership and services for the development of programs and criminal justice policies that support local, state, and tribal justice strategies to achieve safer communities. BJA, the largest arm of the Office of Justice Programs in terms of annual expenditures, has a broad mission to support and inform programming in criminal justice. Its overall goal is to improve the functioning of the criminal justice system by bringing evidence-based, promising, and innovative practices to the field and stimulating innovations in the criminal justice system.

This has two implications for structuring activities involving the SAB. First, operational effectiveness is paramount, and initiatives are considered valuable if they improve service provision or justice system processing. Similarly, BJA wants knowledge generation that is rooted in the realities of "real world" service provision and criminal justice systems operations. Second, BJA has a broad reach and highly varied set of programs, making it prudent to think in terms of targeted areas rather than agency-wide projects. Circumscribed efforts focused on particular programs or funding initiatives should be more manageable and likely to succeed. There is the potential for focused projects to inform broader BJA strategies and policies, but the preferable approach is incremental, rather than systemic, change. These considerations have framed the subcommittee deliberations about potential future activities.

II. Assets of BJA for collaborative activities

BJA has several significant organizational assets. Most notably, it has receptive, highly competent administration and staff. Our discussions to date have been frank exchanges of views

about opportunities and barriers for increasing the scientific base in the operations of BJA. It is clear that the director and top staff members have an enthusiasm and openness to ideas that make successful collaborations likely. They have demonstrated a commitment to improving the quality of their work and several impressive examples of their continuing efforts to ground their approaches in sound social science. Agency personnel have been open to sharing information about their internal operations and the data collected in the field from their initiatives.

There also appears to be an existing culture within the agency that values and promotes the idea of collecting and considering empirical information. There is an explicit message from the director on down regarding the need to have data rather than anecdotes regarding the scope of a problem and the impact of an initiative. The difficulties of translating research findings into routine practice are acknowledged as challenges that have to be taken on directly.

As a result of this orientation, the agency can point to several current initiatives that integrate empirical data collection and the development of models for sound practice. These include the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, smart policing projects, the Second Chance Act demonstration projects, and the development of specialty courts. In the Justice Reinvestment Initiative, BJA has established partnerships with the Council of State Governments (CSG) and private foundations to promote planning and implementation of efforts to reduce correctional populations in selected states. This initiative is distinguished by its use of data to guide and assess policy formulation as well as a structured approach for promoting action on the part of public officials. Smart policing also uses data effectively to focus policing resources and adapt practice to the particular needs of communities. The Second Chance Act demonstration grantees have been receiving assistance from BJA staff and the National Reentry Resource Center to: (a) collect performance data, (b) use risk & needs assessments to assess and assist offenders, (c) develop program models that focus on working with high-risk offenders, and (d) help parole officers interact more effectively with offenders to change their behavior. The establishment of specialty courts (e.g., drug courts, mental health courts) has been an ongoing effort to transform an emerging innovation into a structured model that can be implemented and evaluated broadly. While somewhat different in their focus and strategies for improving practice, these efforts all emphasize the need to judge model adequacy for its fit to community needs and the necessity of relying on data for planning as well as ongoing evaluation and program improvement.

BJA officials also point out a recent history of working effectively with NIJ on joint projects. These include the current evaluation of the Project H.O.P.E. model for intervening with high-risk probationers and the evaluations of the Second Chance Act projects for promoting positive prisoner re-entry. In both of these initiatives, BJA implements a potentially innovative and effective model in a way that accommodates a research design to assess program effects. BJA funds the implementation of the model and NIJ funds the evaluation component. These efforts are seen as templates for generating useful information about the feasibility and impact of putting seemingly efficacious program practices into broader operations.

The subcommittee's initial impressions are that BJA has considerable potential to engage in both the development of innovative practices and the generation of knowledge about the implementation of approaches already empirically demonstrated to be effective. The scope of

BJA activities provides a rich laboratory. The positive energy and inquisitiveness of the staff provides a resource for both in-house and collaborative activities with potentially high impact.

III. Potential Areas for BJA/SAB collaboration

The subcommittee has identified four areas for potentially fruitful projects. These areas represent opportunities to use the skills and resources of the SAB to promote the development of innovative practices and to promote the translation of scientific knowledge into ongoing practice. They have come up repeatedly across the discussions among the subcommittee members and BJA officials. These areas and the issues connected with each one are presented to prompt discussion among the SAB members and BJA administrators regarding more focused future efforts.

III.A. The development of program models and accompanying solicitations. Many of the funding opportunities offered by BJA are the result of mandates from Congress to spend a designated amount of money on a particular type of program. These Congressional mandates usually come with specific requirements about the time frame in which the programs of interest have to be implemented and when information about the effectiveness of the programs should be provided back to Congress. Meeting these requirements means that BJA spends considerable resources defining the programmatic realities of the envisioned “solution,” soliciting and reviewing applications in a reasonable time frame, monitoring implementation in the field, and collecting performance measures. The time frames for politically useful results, however, are almost always shorter than the periods needed to gather solid evidence regarding program operations and outcomes. As a result, data collected regarding program implementation and outcomes are usually vaguely specified and scientifically feeble.

This program solicitation process undermines the capacity of the agency in two ways. First, it does not allow the agency to develop a portfolio of programs or findings that systematically build upon each other; in the way, for example, that the medical field does in establishing funding priorities to develop a treatment approach for a class of diseases. Second, it hampers the ability of the agency to provide convincing (and transferrable) evidence about the components of effective practice. There is simply not enough time or resources to mount detailed evaluations or to allow for program evolution across the range of programs funded to get solid evidence regarding the mechanisms of effective interventions. The consensus of the subcommittee is that the SAB could work with BJA in two ways to increase the scientific yield of its funding solicitations.

First, a review process regarding the validity of the scientific information or logic behind certain solicitations could be established. Adding a layer of scientific review to the generation of all solicitations would be a cumbersome and ineffective mechanism. In select instances, though, review of a draft solicitation by a panel of researchers familiar with the substantive area of the solicitation could highlight weak aspects of the proposed program or identify opportunities for data collection. This committee could also comment on how well findings from prior research have informed the solicitation. Emerging work on the principles of effective interventions or findings from “implementation science” regarding what promotes adoption of effective practices could be especially important to consider for their integration into the solicitation requirements.

This review group would probably be most useful if it had several standing members, specialized researchers working in the area of the solicitation, and individuals who do research on effective implementation practices. BJA staff could incorporate or ignore suggestions of the committee. A by-product of this process would be an increase in the sophistication of the BJA staff to examine solicitations and reports from a scientific perspective.

Second, researchers could work with BJA to identify empirically verified program models that can be developed and tested in subsequent solicitations as well as opportunities for focused data collection across several sites implementing a particular program. As mentioned previously, the prospects seem dim for raising the quality of “performance measures” to a level of scientific acceptability across BJA projects in general. Nonetheless, it would be possible to identify certain initiatives where there is considerable opportunity for focused data collection at several sites implementing a particular program. The current Second Chance Act sites, for instance, might provide valuable opportunities for collection of baseline data on recidivism or information on the expected target population that could inform the solicitation or replication process. This might entail an additional set of data collection requirements and additional funding over the level for program implementation. The potential for a small investment aimed at exploring a clearly defined research question in multiple sites seems rather high, though, especially given the already “sunk” costs accompanying many of these programs. This type of focused data collection for a relevant research question could be done in conjunction with private foundations, other federal agencies (e.g., National Institute of Drug Abuse), or other OJP or DOJ entities (e.g., COPS program, NIJ).

III.B. Technical assistance. Providing technical assistance to local programs and state level policy makers is a central activity of BJA. Over the years, the agency has contracted with several consulting firms and individuals to provide guidance regarding program development, program content and operations, and evaluation. There is a lingering concern among BJA staff and program providers, however, about the inconsistent quality of these technical assistance services. There is an additional concern that some of the information provided in these technical assistance activities may not be well grounded scientifically. The SAB is well situated to provide support for the improvement of this critical service.

Currently, BJA has a portfolio of over 300 cooperative agreements to provide training, technical assistance and other support services. Recently BJA has shifted one cooperative agreement project to a contract (with Booz Allen Hamiltons) that will allow better coordination of these training and technical assistance partner resources through information sharing about location and type of services, creation of protocols to ensure more consistent provision of services, and the development of methods to better assess the impact of training and technical assistance efforts.

The SAB could assist in two ways with this reformulation of the technical assistance services at BJA. First, a group or set of experts could be convened by the SAB to assist in the review of the scientific information provided in selected, stand alone TA activities and trainings. These groups could operate much like the panels suggested above for reviewing selected solicitations, but instead focus on technical assistance content. Second, the SAB could assist in

the identification of opportunities for focused implementation research or other basic research opportunities in locales receiving technical assistance. Along with the BJA staff, a group organized by the SAB could regularly review selected technical assistance efforts to see if there are natural experiments to be assessed or opportunities for collaborative research projects across sites.

Other SAB-related activities could supplement BJA technical assistance efforts. The SAB could, with the help and guidance of BJA and Booz Allen Hamilton staff, convene short-lived work groups of individuals to provide content guidance for issues arising regularly in program sites. Another possibility would be the establishment of several regional "resource banks" of experts who could be called upon, depending on the nature of the question being addressed. The SAB could serve as a recruiting center and clearinghouse for the establishment of these consortiums of experts in different areas of the country.

III. C. Joint projects with NIJ. As mentioned previously, BJA has had several positive experiences working with NIJ to do evaluations of BJA-funded projects. Further work could be done to solidify and strengthen this working relationship. From the perspective of BJA, this type of collaboration brings the technical skills of NIJ staff or consultants into their world of practice. This produces sound empirical information about the operations and the impact of ongoing BJA projects. At the same time, these collaborative projects provide BJA staff with exposure to the thinking and methods of individuals rooted in research and evaluation as well as the operational realities of doing research. The continuation and expansion of these types of projects thus offers the possibility of increasing the capacity of BJA to conduct more rigorous evaluations on its own. It can promote the development of staff with research skills at BJA.

The SAB can promote these types of collaborative projects and assist in framing the projects so that they make substantial contributions to the field and strengthen the scientific capacity of BJA in particular. The SAB can assist in the process of identifying areas of funding where focused research can provide useful scientific information. It can also assist in identifying locales with the mix of careful program implementers and solid academic/evaluation resources. The SAB might function most effectively in these efforts as a consultant body for choosing appropriate collaborative projects and as a convener of outside consultants for the projects chosen.

III. D. Joint training and projects with academic institutions. Partnering with academic institutions provides an obvious strategy for BJA to expand its evaluation and research capacities. Prior efforts in this regard, however, have often been disappointing. It is clear that not all academic researchers are equally skilled at evaluation and research and that many academics are ill suited or uninterested in questions related to improving practice in justice settings. In addition, young researchers often receive inadequate training in applied methods and policy relevant research. Finally, many academic institutions do not reward researcher-practitioner partnerships, often making it ill-advised for junior faculty to spend the considerable amount of time required to make these collaborations work effectively.

Several activities could promote more productive working relationships between BJA and educational institutions as well as improve the training of young researchers in how to do solid,

applied studies in the criminal justice system. BJA could establish and require the collection of “core” data sets for particular types of projects, like mental health courts or other specialty courts. Although administrative data sets can vary considerably from site to site, a funding requirement might be the collection of primary data using certain instruments. This would create an attractive resource for researchers, i.e., a large, multi-site data set that individual researchers cannot feasibly collect on their own. These data sets could be the frameworks for collaborative projects involving practitioners and researchers, mechanisms for training experiences with graduate students, and valuable sources of information about program operations or impacts. In addition, BJA could expand their current efforts to sponsor joint training programs for academic researchers to work with practitioners and for practitioners to work with academics. Programs to place practitioners or policy makers in academic settings and vice versa (e.g., visiting fellow programs) have been done successfully by several foundations, and these could provide models for such efforts. Other programs to provide academic trainees with experience in practice settings would give young researchers exposure to the realities of service provision and the difficulties of choosing a useful research question at a critical time in their professional development. Improving the collaborative skills and training of academic researchers to do sound, applied work relies on providing resources and experiences that get them out of their standard academic environment, confronting the reality of issues connected with the criminal justice system.

IV. Summary

The BJA subcommittee has identified several areas where the SAB could make contributions to strengthening the science in BJA operations. BJA presents a potentially very valuable site for collaboration with the SAB. The agency is energetic, open, and competent. Starting points for exploring potential joint activities include the development of model programs and solicitations, the strengthening of technical assistance, the promotion of joint projects with NIJ, and the establishment of academic training programs. Each of these activities offers considerable challenges to be successful. Thinking about whether these proposals are worthwhile and how the SAB could be useful in moving ahead positively is the next task.