

Identifying and Working With a Research Partner

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

*Modified for the New York Research Consortium
March 2018*

1. Who is a research partner?

In traditional terms, a research partner is someone who has received formal training in research and evaluation methods and has applied those skills in a specified field (e.g., criminal justice). They tend to have advanced quantitative and qualitative skills as well as significant training in criminological theory. As experts in their fields, research partners tend to be well versed in relevant crime control and prevention literature and also tend to be aware of the state-of-practice in criminal justice. Research partners are most frequently found in university and college criminology, criminal justice, sociology, public policy, and urban affairs programs. Research partners can also be found in private research or consulting firms, research centers, and in state and local agencies.

2. How can a research partner assist an agency?

In most cases, a research partner is well-suited to provide support for the following reasons:

- Research partners can be an independent and objective voice;
- Research partners may be well known and respected by multiple agencies due to prior engagements in similar efforts/grants;
- Research partners are experienced in dealing with the privacy and confidentiality issues presented when working with multiple, combined data sets;
- Research partners can conduct quantitative analyses of data and are likely specifically trained in qualitative analysis methods;
- Research partners are trained theorists, who can bring a broader perspective to compliment the practitioner team;
- Research partners generally have the backing of a higher education community, which includes access to graduate students and other experts as a means of additional resources for the agency;
- Research partners are trained evaluators, who can assist you in designing measurable interventions and actually measuring them.

Generally speaking, research partners will enhance an agency by providing:

- *Specialized Knowledge and Ability.* The primary advantage of partnering with a researcher is the same that comes with hiring any expert – specialized knowledge and ability. Action research partners will understand how to analyze data, document program operations and processes, how to measure program outcomes, how to collect and analyze data to determine program effectiveness, and present those findings in a meaningful way. Program managers and staff members usually do not have expertise in all of these areas comprehensively.



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- *Objectivity.* The hallmark of good research partner is objectivity; that is, the ability to look at information about the program and form unbiased conclusions about whether the program is achieving what it wants to achieve. In general, most program managers and staff believe in the effectiveness of their programs, thus there is the potential that they will look at evaluation findings in a biased way--even if this is an unconscious bias. A good research partner will point out both the successes and deficits in the program's operations and document how or why each happened.
- *Credibility.* Precisely because research partners can be objective, their conclusions and recommendations tend to carry more weight than those that might be produced by the program managers and staff. This credibility can be important to policymakers and funders.
- *Perspective.* In part because they strive to be objective, research partners may come to the program with fresh views about program activities and relationships between program components. In addition, a good research partner brings to the table a different way of thinking about program effectiveness, one grounded in empiricism (understanding program operations and outcomes through the collection and analysis of data, both quantitative and qualitative).

3. What can your research partner do for you?

Unlike traditional research involving neutral observation, research partners are to be fully engaged in the problem-solving process. A good research partner is part facilitator, part researcher, and part program specialist. A good research partner can help you with some or all of the following:

- Many jurisdictions will have a Crime Analysis Center which can provide county data. Researchers may be able to work with them as well to obtain necessary data.
- Identify crime and violence issues;
- Collect and analyze data to develop a dynamic, real-life, operationally meaningful picture of crime in a determined area;
- Suggest strategies or evidence-based practices to address needs presented by the data;
- Establish goals and measurable objectives;
- Assist in the development of a logic model: that is, provide a written description of how the activities and components of the strategy relate to each other and to the goals and objectives you are trying to accomplish;
- Assist in the development of a strategic action plan to determine whether the strategy is meeting its goals and objectives;



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- Develop an evaluation design to determine whether the program is having its intended impacts;
- Communicate evaluation findings and data on key indicators early and often to improve the strategy;
- Present findings to community groups, policymakers, and other constituents;
- Assist the agency with reporting requirements of the funding source.

4. What should I do in order to prepare to work with a research partner?

- Convene the agency or team;
- Develop a mission and a focus for your initiative (e.g., your focus can be as small as youth gang violence in two police beats to as large as firearms-involved domestic violence in a county). The focus of the initiative is the agency's decision to make, however, we recommend that you consider how far your resources can reasonably extend when considering your focus;
- Conduct a data inventory. Identify what data that might be useful to the problem-solving process; determine what requirements need to be met in order to share the data with a third party; attempt to remove obstacles to information sharing;
- Develop a list of questions that the agency wants answered about the crime problem (e.g. We think that all of the guns are coming from NYC, is this true? Are most victims of serious violence themselves offenders? What are gangs and how do they factor into our violence problem?)
- Determine what types of products you want to see from your research partner. If you prefer presentations over brief papers outlining major findings, you should start to articulate this preference now;
- Keep an open mind. Research/practitioner partnerships are not always easy or natural alliances. It will take time to build trust in the partnership.

5. How do I identify a potential research partner?

Resources

- Existing relationships. Does the agency have previous or on-going good experience with a research partner?
- New York State's Division of Criminal Justice Services has developed a Criminal Justice Research Consortium to match criminal justice agencies with local researchers for assistance (see contact information at end of document).



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Comparing Research Partners

- Competition is good. DCJS will consider and compare more than one research partner, potentially even from the same institution, in order to rank the best fit for your agency and project.
- To ensure a successful match, (1) carefully review the research partner's resume to determine if she/ he has experience serving as a research partner and/or conducting evaluations of programs similar to yours. Be sure that references include directors of programs that the researcher has worked with in the past, and ask those individuals about their experiences with the researcher, including how well the researcher worked collaboratively with the program managers and staff; (2) arrange an interview between the agency and potential research partners to determine if this is a person with whom you would be comfortable working. Ask potential partners to discuss: how they might contribute to the agency; what experience has prepared them to work on this project; some ideas about what the gun violence problem involves and how it might be further explored; and what type of commitment they are willing to invest in the initiative; and (3) ask for samples of potential research partner's work, including reports. Review the materials to be sure they are written clearly, without a great deal of jargon, and in a way that would be understandable to you and to those with whom you would like to share the findings.

After meeting with or interviewing the potential Research Partner, ask:

- Was the research partner qualified, in terms of training and experience?
- Did she/he seem to bring an appropriate approach to the project?
- Was she/he interested in the project for the "right" reasons?
- Can we work with this person?
- Did she/he seem to take questions from the group in a positive (non-defensive) way?
- Did the research partner seem to bring his/her own agenda?
- Did the research partner have the answers before doing the analysis?
- How was his/her interaction with the group?
- Did she/he seem to respect the members of the agency as partners?

6. What makes a good research partner?

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to identify a qualified research partner. Although many researchers are members of professional organizations, such as the American Society of Criminology or the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, membership in these organizations does not imply qualifications for the Action Research type of skills needed to work with the agency.



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There are some basic qualifications you can look for when determining whether to work with a research partner. What follows are some characteristics of a good research partner.

- *Formal Education.* Most research partners have formal training in research methods, usually in a social science discipline. Graduate-level training should provide this knowledge; for example, someone with a Ph.D. in criminology should have the research knowledge required to serve as a research partner.
- *Experience.* A qualified research partner must not only have research skills, but must also have specific experience in working with practitioners and programs. While experience working in a criminal justice/law enforcement setting is not a requirement for a research partner, experience working with criminal justice/law enforcement programs is.
- *Philosophy.* Much has been written about how research and evaluation should be conducted, and different research partners view the process differently. For example, some research partners may consider themselves to be “experts” and view their role as one of an outsider who reviews program materials, interviews managers and staff, and then makes recommendations for “fixing” the program. Others see themselves more as researchers than research partners and may avoid providing feedback to agency until after the evaluation is completed so as not to “contaminate” the evaluation. Some do not consider data and information gleaned through interviews with law enforcement officers, community members, and offenders as “evidence” and thus avoid using these methods to understand violence problems. None of these are particularly productive philosophies for working with the agency. Instead, you should be looking for a research partner who believes that the problem-solving process is a collaborative one between the research partner and the agency. In this philosophy, agency members are all seen as experts and the research partner works closely with them throughout the process of understanding the crime problem, designing interventions to deal with the problem, documenting interventions, developing performance measures, interpreting evaluation findings, and making recommendations for program improvement. The goal of such research and evaluation is to improve the program, not to declare the program a success or failure. More formal names for this philosophy include “action research”, “participatory evaluation,” “utilization-focused evaluation,” and “empowerment evaluation.” This can be considered both “research informed practice” and “practice informed research.”
- *Communication Skills.* Research partners must be able to communicate with a wide variety of individuals who have a vested interest in the results of their work, such as prosecutors, law enforcement leadership and line officers, community members, clergy



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representatives, funding agency representatives, legislators, city council members, and even offenders to whom research partners may be called upon to present their evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Research partners should not only be personable and engaging, but should be able to clearly present findings and conclusions both orally and in written form.

The MSU team is available for consultation on the research partner role in crime reduction strategies.¹

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New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services can provide more specific information on the New York Criminal Justice Research Consortium.

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¹ This document is a modification of guidelines originally developed by the U.S. Department of Justice's Firearms Enforcement Assistance Team (FEAT) working in collaboration with Michigan State University, the national research partner for Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN).

