

Strengthening NIJ: Mission, Science and Process

by John H. Laub

NIJ endorses the basic principles laid out in the National Research Council's evaluation of the Institute and has already started to implement policies and procedures that address many of the recommendations.

On June 20, 2011 — the first day of our annual conference — the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) released its response to recommendations made by the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council ("NRC report"). Our response serves as NIJ's blueprint for ensuring that we remain the nation's leader in crime and justice research.

I have been at NIJ's helm since July 2010, and during my brief tenure, I have tried to reinvigorate the Institute's dual mission: to generate knowledge through research that is scientifically rigorous and to disseminate that knowledge in ways that are useful to policymakers and practitioners, such as police, prosecutors, judges, correctional officials and

victim advocates. Indeed, one of the ways that NIJ will meet its mission is through "translational criminology," which was the theme of this year's annual conference. (See sidebar, *What Is Translational Criminology?*)

The NRC report, *Strengthening the National Institute of Justice*, offered recommendations for NIJ's continued improvement and growth. In its response, NIJ agreed with the basic principles that underlie the NRC recommendations:

- Enhance independence and self-governance.
- Cultivate elements that are essential for a science agency.
- Bolster the nation's research infrastructure.

- Foster scientific integrity and transparency.
- Achieve a culture of self-assessment.

There is no doubt that NIJ must develop an integrated, cutting-edge research agenda that brings together the agency's three bedrock sciences — the social, forensic and physical sciences. But achieving this will require a more visionary understanding of the issues that are going to be most important in the future. NIJ simply cannot fund research on every public safety and justice issue that our country faces. Rather, we must focus on building a cumulative know-

ledge base that is of the greatest value to our key stakeholders in the research and practitioner communities, to our federal partners, and to Congress.

Independence and Governance

One of the issues that NRC explored in its report is whether NIJ can maintain its independence as a science agency while residing within the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs (OJP).

In our response, NIJ, without reservation, affirmed the importance of securing and sustaining the independence and authority necessary to

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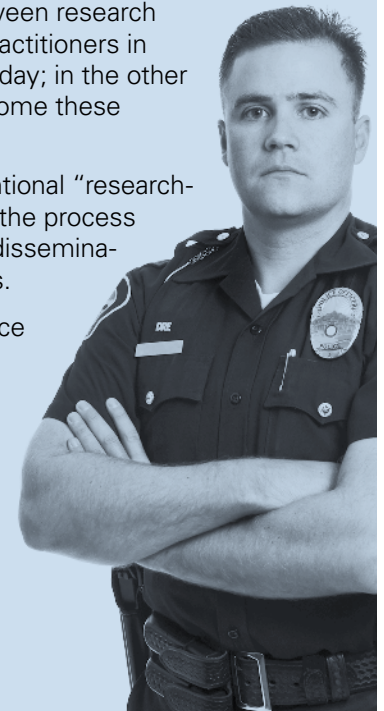
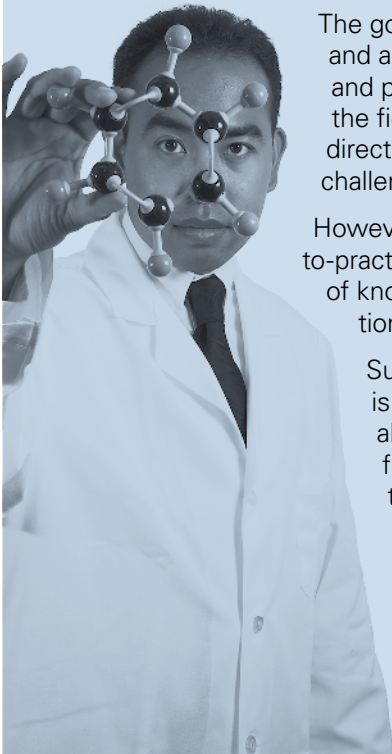
What Is Translational Criminology?

The theme of this year's National Institute of Justice (NIJ) annual conference was "Translational Criminology: Shaping Policy and Practice With Research." The idea of translational criminology is simple, yet powerful: If we want to prevent, reduce and manage crime, we must be able to translate scientific discoveries into policy and practice. Indeed, this guiding principle lies at the heart of NIJ's response to a number of the National Research Council's recommendations.

The goal of translational criminology is to break down barriers between basic and applied research by creating a dynamic interface between research and practice. This is a two-way street: In one direction, practitioners in the field describe challenges they face in their jobs every day; in the other direction, scientists discover new tools and ideas to overcome these challenges and evaluate their impact.

However, translational criminology goes beyond the conventional "research-to-practice" idea. It does this through a systematic study of the process of knowledge dissemination, recognizing that successful dissemination of research findings may require multiple strategies.

Successful dissemination also requires that the evidence is implemented correctly. In other words, it is not just about finding evidence that something works; it is figuring out why it works and how to implement the evidence in real-world settings. Moreover, this facet of translational criminology places a priority on applicability — that is, on research with the potential for real-world implementation, something that is especially attractive in an era of limited resources.



NIJ is committed to making investments in the “infrastructure” of the criminal justice research community.

fulfill its mission. NIJ currently supports NRC’s recommendation that the agency remain within OJP, but, as we stated in our response, we intend to revisit this position in a few years if the independence and authority that we require to be a premiere science agency is not forthcoming.

In the meantime, NIJ is pursuing important statutory and policy changes in four areas: appropriations and budget, grant-making and acquisitions, publication and dissemination, and functional support operations. We are currently drafting language to change NIJ’s governing statute to:

- Establish qualifications for the NIJ Director’s science and research experience.
- Make the appointment of the NIJ Director a six-year term.
- Clarify “independence” in key aspects of NIJ’s work, particularly commissioning research and publishing and disseminating research findings.

NIJ is also re-examining its peer review process to ensure a level of independence that reflects the best interests of science, including, where appropriate, departing from OJP policies on peer review.

Strengthening the Science Mission

The NRC report argues that a successful research enterprise depends on a multi-year strategic plan that establishes research priorities and articulates a path for developing a body of cumulative knowledge.

Strategic planning should clearly describe how individual research programs are initiated, sustained and culminated, and should include the commitment of resources to make the plan work. A strategic plan for research should clearly convey the agency’s priority areas for funding and should have several essential components: generating knowledge, building and sustaining the research infrastructure, supporting the adoption of research evidence in practice and policy, and disseminating knowledge through innovative communication channels.

To strengthen NIJ’s science mission, each division within NIJ’s Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) is engaged in a planning process that focuses on high-priority research areas that the agency could pursue over the next three to five years. To support this effort, ORE has already convened topical working groups of leading experts on crime prevention (Oct. 2010), gangs (Feb. 2011) and neighborhoods and crime (April 2011). Summaries of these meetings will be posted on our website, NIJ.gov.

After recent strategic planning sessions, NIJ’s Office of Investigative

Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator, Technical Update

Death investigators are the eyes and ears of the forensic pathologist at the scene. NIJ has recently updated the classic 1999 edition of *Death Investigation: A Guide for the Scene Investigator*.

The technical update, released in June 2011, reflects changes in technology since the *Guide* was originally published, such as GPS use and advances in technology for identifying decedents.

- ▶ Publication is currently available on NIJ.gov. Keyword: Death Scene.



and Forensic Sciences issued a basic research solicitation for fiscal year 2011 to supplement our applied research program. We also added “new investigator” qualifications to encourage proposals from researchers in the life and physical sciences, and incorporated a component to evaluate the effectiveness of training in the forensic sciences.

To further strengthen its science mission, NIJ’s Office of Science and Technology has restructured the National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC) system to better align it with NIJ’s physical and forensic sciences programs. This was accomplished principally through the establishment of competitively awarded technology centers of excellence (COEs), each of which is directly aligned with one or more of NIJ’s technology investment portfolios, such as forensics, communications and corrections technology.

These are NIJ’s first steps — with more coming — to ensure that the NLECTC system better supports NIJ’s science mission.

Illustrations of Processes to Strengthen Science

In an effort to strengthen science across the Department of Justice and to avoid duplication, NIJ recently launched partnerships with:

- The Bureau of Justice Statistics, to explore mining police data for statistical and research purposes, an issue that is crucial to developing and evaluating innovative policing practices.
- The Bureau of Justice Assistance, to collaborate on a multi-site field test of Hawaii Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE), an innovative strategy that emphasizes “swift-and-sure”

sanctions for probation violations and has shown promising decreases in recidivism.

- The Office for Victims of Crime and the Office on Violence Against Women, to examine issues surrounding untested evidence in sexual assaults.

NIJ’s online repository of final research reports and its support of the world’s largest archive of computer-readable social science data continue to be well-respected.

- The Justice Department’s Access to Justice Initiative, to explore a wide range of issues regarding indigent defense.
- The Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking, to do research on sex offending.

Another move to strengthen science in the agency concerns the new OJP-wide Science Advisory Board (SAB). After its first meeting in January 2011, the SAB created an NIJ subcommittee, which will provide independent guidance as NIJ works to strengthen its science mission. The subcommittee will help prevent duplication and encourage the pooling of resources and expertise.

After its initial review of the subcommittee’s composition, NIJ suggested the addition of three members to represent the physical and forensic sciences. In a few years, we plan to revisit the issue of whether or not NIJ should have its own, separate advisory board.

NIJ’s Capacity-Building Programs

The NRC report said that NIJ’s capacity-building programs — those designed to increase the productivity of our nation’s public crime laboratories — are not consistent with a science mission. Although the NRC specifically cites only the forensic capacity-building program, NIJ understands that the critique also extends to all of the agency’s technical assistance programs that operate through the NLECTC system.

Upon releasing its response to the NRC recommendations, NIJ began negotiations to transfer management of the Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grants Program to the Bureau of Justice Assistance. In the meantime, NIJ has also begun a review of other capacity-building activities in forensics and technology; I expect that decisions on whether these programs should continue to be managed by NIJ will be made later this year.

It is important to note that, beyond the Coverdell program in particular, the link between building a stronger science mission and managing capacity-building programs is ambiguous. On the one hand, for example, if a science agency supports capacity-building or technical assistance programs that have not been rigorously evaluated or are not a part of ongoing research or evaluation, the agency’s commitment to scientific principles and the integrity of its scientific processes may be called into question. An example

of this would be awarding capacity-building funds to forensic laboratory practitioners who adopt practices or policies that have not been evaluated or are not the subject of an ongoing, rigorous research or evaluation effort.

However, there are synergies between the Institute's research and development mission and its capacity-building and technical assistance programs. Having these programs located in a single agency allows research to inform decisions about the expenditure of capacity-building funds more seamlessly through a scientific identification of the field's most pressing needs and the development of evidence-based responses.

NIJ is currently examining all of the ramifications of this issue and will lay out a strategy in the near future.

Bolstering the Research Infrastructure

Despite decreasing fiscal resources, NIJ is committed to making investments in the "infrastructure" of the criminal justice research community. A few examples include fellowship grants, awards to young scholars, and the agency's data archive and secondary data analysis program.

NIJ plans to expand the Graduate Research Fellowship program to encompass a wider range of social, physical and forensic sciences and to re-establish our outreach to graduate programs at colleges and universities, including a focus on minority students and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. And I'm excited to report that NIJ's Visiting Fellows program will now include short-term residencies for senior criminal justice practitioners and policymakers, and the possibility of shared fellowships with other federal science agencies. In July

and August 2011, NIJ hosted Jim Bueermann, who recently retired after serving as police chief for many years in Redlands, Calif., as its first Executive Fellow.¹

NIJ will continue to provide important social, physical and forensic science research to help our stakeholders make the best decisions possible about criminal justice policies and practices.

NIJ's online repository of final research reports and its support of the world's largest archive of computer-readable social science data continue to be well-respected. Archiving data and making them available to other scientists contribute to increased transparency and extending research to the field so that findings can be replicated.

Enhancing Transparency and a Culture of Self-Assessment

Increasing scientific integrity and the transparency of operations is an ongoing challenge for any science agency. In June, NIJ announced the inauguration of standing peer review panels. These panels (with rolling, multi-year appointments of reviewers) will provide a stronger review of grant proposals, including greater consistency of solicitation reviews over successive years. And, as at

the National Institutes of Health and other federal science agencies, the membership on the panels will be a matter of public record, which increases transparency and safeguards against bias and conflicts of interest. (See "Improving NIJ's Peer Review Process: The Scientific Review Panel Pilot Project," page 22.)

The Institute is also taking steps to strengthen its data-archiving system, including the partial withholding of grant funds to encourage submission of final reports and other deliverables and adding a requirement that all grant applications include a data-archiving strategy.

The NRC report recommended that NIJ better measure the influence of its research on its stakeholders' practices — determining how NIJ-funded research affects the nation's police departments and crime laboratories, its corrections professionals and prosecutors and crime-victim advocates, for example. I agree. And, because I believe that such a culture of self-assessment begins with a willingness to measure return-on-investment in terms of clearly established goals, NIJ is developing new processes for routine program reviews of each of its research portfolios.

In the end, however, it is important to understand that NIJ's current level of funding allows the agency to fulfill only a small portion of its congressionally mandated mission. Funding realities have, in essence, led to the sacrifice of long-term, cumulative knowledge-building in the interest of a broad "buffet" of research and other projects. NIJ aspires to the model envisioned by NRC for a more ambitious agency, but we, like every other public-sector agency, must be mindful of our fiscal reality — a reality in which funding for

criminal justice research fails to match the widespread and persistent challenges of preventing crime, managing offenders and enhancing justice. That said, NIJ will continue to provide important social, physical and forensic science research to help our stakeholders make the best decisions possible about criminal justice policies and practices.

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Read NIJ's response to NRC's recommendations at <http://ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/234630.pdf>.

Visit NIJ's repository of final research reports and other publications at <http://www.ncjrs.gov>.

Visit the data archive at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>.

Note

1. Visiting fellows who received funding from the fiscal year 2011 solicitation were not announced as this issue goes to press. Check the Funding pages at NIJ.gov for the lists of awards.

NamUs Receives Public Service Award

The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) team was awarded a 2011 Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal ("Sammie") by the nonprofit and nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service. NamUs received the award in the Justice and Law Enforcement category.

The Partnership for Public Service presents Sammies annually to America's devoted federal workers to honor their commitment and innovation, as well as the impact of their work on addressing the needs of the nation.

Honorees are recognized for contributions that improve the health, safety and well-being of Americans.

Launched in 2009, NamUs is an online repository for missing persons and unidentified decedent records. It offers searchable databases to medical examiners, coroners, law enforcement officials and the general public.

NamUs is funded by NIJ and operated by the National Forensic Science Technology Center.

▶ To learn more about NamUs, visit <http://www.namus.gov>.

▶ For additional information about the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals, go to <http://servicetoamericamedals.org/SAM/index.shtml>.

▶ Read about how NamUs has helped agencies solve cases at <http://www.nij.gov/journals/264/solving.htm>.

