

Preface

One of the ongoing challenges in criminology has been the application of its growing body of knowledge to criminal justice policy and practice and the related relevance of criminologists (Cullen 2005). This might be puzzling to those who assume that academic criminologists regularly consult with criminal justice policymakers and practitioners, sharing their latest findings in order to improve strategies to prevent and control of crime and delinquency, and the administration of justice. Some of this occurs, to be sure, but not in any systematic or widespread manner.

Likewise, lay people might think that criminal justice policymakers and practitioners engage in work informed by theory and research. Indeed, in many instances they do their best to adopt evidence-based practices (EBPs) that will yield positive results. However, too much of what has been done to address the crime problem in the past has been unguided by theory or empirical research findings. This is not an indictment of the people who work in the “trenches” of criminal justice, but it does point to opportunities for improvement.

This disconnect between criminologists and criminal justice functionaries who could make use of criminological knowledge is no one’s fault and the fault of many. Law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, corrections officials, victim advocates and others work to promote public safety, reduce crime, and ensure justice. Some of the practices in which they engage were learned through on-the-job training and from colleagues, and are considered tried-and-true methods in their respective fields. At conferences and workshops, they are exposed to newer, cutting-edge techniques that promise to improve their effectiveness. But many of these professionals are too busy with their day-to-day workloads to spend time accessing and reading relevant journal articles or reaching out to academics, regardless of the potential benefits. They are faced with political realities that keep even professionals with the best of intentions from implementing EBPs.

On the other hand, it is safe to assert that most academic criminologists care deeply about challenges of crime and justice, but their institutions reward them for teaching and research, not for involving themselves in criminal justice policy and practice. The reward structure in academe is such that most faculty members,

particularly those without tenure, must focus on work that generates journal articles and grant monies. Certain academic environments even discourage efforts to translate work into something usable in the field. There are exceptions to this, but the academic criminologists who routinely and successfully navigate the waters between these two different worlds are relatively rare.

The unfortunate result is that both groups of well-trained, well-meaning professionals—the academicians and those in policy and practice—permit their respective role constraints to keep them from working together as effectively as they could to address the crime problem. Academics have information that could be of value to policymakers and practitioners, but few convert that knowledge into something accessible and usable. Policymakers and practitioners, those charged with preventing and controlling crime and improving the administration of justice, may appreciate the value of criminological theory and research, but often do not see its practical utility.

The federal government plays a significant role in crime control and thus should be among those leading the charge for EBPs and other manifestations of translation. There have been significant efforts by federal agencies to promote translational research, and these have expressed themselves in U.S. Department of Justice initiatives. Political forces, however, also influence federal criminal justice policy, including the allocation of monies for research and its applications. So while the federal government has contributed to translational efforts, its ability to do so is constrained by political and other considerations.

Despite the substantial role the federal government plays in setting the tone for criminal justice policy and practice, it is local communities where most of the administration of justice occurs. Law enforcement officers investigate reported crimes. Prosecutors take cases to the grand jury and represent the local jurisdiction in court. Defense attorneys try their best to protect the rights of their clients charged with criminal offenses. Judges oversee the administration of justice in their courts. Victim advocates and probation officers work closely with their clients to ensure the safety and improved adjustment of those in the community. All these local actors are on the front lines and therefore are among the ultimate end users of criminological knowledge.

In between the federal and local levels of government lie the states, and they are in a unique position to help bridge the gap between criminological knowledge and criminal justice policy and practice. For one, state criminal justice agencies are responsible for state-level policy development and implementation. State agencies receive federal funds that can facilitate the implementation of EBPs at the state and local levels. This includes not only justice-related agencies, but also public health, mental health and other agencies whose work touches on crime and justice. Other state agencies, such as law enforcement training boards, set standards for local agencies, creating a natural opportunity to promote translational criminology. Many state agencies and organizations have formed strong relationships with both academics and local criminal justice practitioners. Consequently, they may be better able to facilitate meaningful translation unencumbered by some of the structural factors that constrain academicians and criminal justice practitioners.

This brief is an effort to illustrate how state agencies and organizations contribute to the conveyance of criminological knowledge to criminal justice policymakers and practitioners. It will provide a brief history of the translational challenges facing criminology and criminal justice, including selected attempts at bridging the gap between research and practice. What cannot be found in the literature are the hypothetical examples in Chap. 5. These scenarios are realistic enough to implement, and they are intended to stimulate readers' imaginations. This brief is meant to be a blueprint of sorts, a guide to how state criminologists and criminal justice policymakers together can help define the concept of translational criminology and use it to tackle the challenges of crime and justice.

The hope is that criminal justice policymakers will read this brief and in turn reach out to academicians and be more open to how theory and rigorous research can make a positive difference for their constituents. State agencies and organizations that provide information and funding for criminal justice may benefit from this brief. Even though most justice-related state agencies are committed to EBPs, other state agencies whose work touches on crime and justice should consider incorporating the concept of translational criminology into their philosophies and strategic plans.

Another audience for this brief is local criminal justice practitioners. This group includes law enforcement officers, prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges, victim advocates and the rest of the supporting cast. They represent an untapped resource in the translational criminology movement in that because they are the end users, they have a greater need for state-of-the-art knowledge of what works. Perhaps they will read this and then find new ways of asserting their own unique expertise in the translational process. A bottom-up approach to translational criminology may well be more effective in the long run than a top-down approach.

Within each state are numerous nonprofit organizations with a stake in translational criminology. Statewide and national criminal justice associations, their memberships comprised of various criminal justice professionals, have an interest in seeing that criminological knowledge informs their day-to-day work. Many of these organizations regularly disseminate information on the latest developments to their members. Consequently, they hold tremendous potential in the translational process.

Finally, this brief may prompt more academic criminologists to pursue applied work. Despite the reality of role constraints, some criminology and criminal justice faculty members interact regularly with the policy and practice communities. Perhaps those who have not yet reached out, particularly those with job security, will consider future partnerships.

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Connecting Research to Policy

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