

# Translational Criminology

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Promoting knowledge exchange to shape criminal justice research,  
practice, and policy

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# Translational Criminology

BY JOHN H. LAUB

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I have had a longstanding belief that the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) has a unique mission. As a science agency, NIJ facilitates the production of rigorous scientific research. At the same time, NIJ must ensure that the research it produces is relevant to local and state practitioners and policy makers. In my mind, the way to fuse these two poles, if you will, is through translational criminology.

I first learned about translational research in the field of medicine from my daughter, who is a pediatrician. The idea of translational criminology is simple yet powerful. If we want to prevent and reduce crime, scientific discoveries must be translated into policy and practice. I believe the concept of translational criminology is a stepping stone to what NIJ could and should be in the future.

## What Is Translational Criminology?

Translational criminology aims to break down barriers between basic and applied research by creating a dynamic interface between research and practice. This process is a two-way street. Scientists discover new tools and ideas for use in the field and evaluate their impact. In turn, practitioners offer novel observations from the field, which stimulate basic scientific investigations. This is the knowledge creation process, and researchers and practitioners play key roles here. In translational medicine, this process is referred to as T1, taking research from the “bench” (basic research) to the patient’s “bedside” (clinical/applied research; see [www.michr.umich.edu/about/clinicaltranslationalresearch](http://www.michr.umich.edu/about/clinicaltranslationalresearch)).

A unique aspect of translational criminology is the dynamic interface between research and practice and vice versa. To have this kind of exchange assumes a great deal of trust, but there is skepticism among practitioners about researchers and researchers often do not trust the observations of practitioners as meaningful and important. Thus, translational criminology requires something that heretofore has not occurred with much regularity—the research community and the practitioner community working together as equal partners.

Another goal of translational criminology is to address the gaps between scientific discovery, program delivery, and effective crime policy. This is the knowledge application process, or T2 in translational medicine—enhancing access to and the adoption of evidence-based strategies in clinical and community practice ([obssr.od.nih.gov/scientific\\_areas/translation/index.aspx](http://obssr.od.nih.gov/scientific_areas/translation/index.aspx)).



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Translational criminology calls for the systematic study of the process of knowledge dissemination and recognizes that successful dissemination of research findings may well require multiple strategies. Along with knowledge dissemination, we must also determine whether the evidence is being implemented correctly. It is not just about finding the evidence that something works; it is figuring out how to implement the evidence in real-world settings

and to understand why it works. In this vein, translational criminology seeks to institutionalize effective programs, products, and services to prevent and reduce crime.

Finally, translational criminology focuses on dissemination of research results as much as knowledge creation. We spend much time and energy on the front end of the research process but not nearly enough time making sure that critical research findings make their way into the field in a meaningful way. Without robust dissemination efforts, NIJ’s research will not be used as intended—to inform criminal justice policy and practice.

## NIJ’s Plan Moving Forward

Since becoming NIJ director, I have sought to infuse translational criminology into all that we do at the institute. Most recently, I organized a Translational Criminology Working Group made up of NIJ staff that meets monthly. The purpose of this working group is to discuss what translational criminology really means for NIJ’s work and how we can use this conceptual framework as we move forward in our grant solicitations and dissemination of NIJ-funded research.

There are several ongoing conversations about translational criminology at NIJ. People are talking about translational criminology in distinct and different ways. For some, it is a matter of communicating research results in a more effective way by reducing jargon, which academics, who make up the bulk of our research community, are prone to use. For others, it is about how we are able to actually integrate the various kinds of studies into one place so that they are easily accessible to practitioners and policy makers (see [www.crimesolutions.gov](http://www.crimesolutions.gov)). And, finally, for some, translational criminology is really something much deeper in that it questions the very nature of the research enterprise. For example, it is promoting what we do at NIJ—action research programs, researcher-practitioner partnerships, and engaging the practitioner throughout the research process.



By coming together as a collective, I hope we will be able to articulate a set of questions that will help us not only do research better, but ensure that the research evidence generated is brought to bear on the field of practice and policy.

The William T. Grant Foundation has a research portfolio on the use of research that covers a wide range of topical areas affecting youth ages 8 to 25 (see [www.wtgrantfoundation.org](http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org)). I believe there are a number of lessons from that research program that we can bring to NIJ. For instance, emerging research has demonstrated the importance of social networks in acquiring research evidence.<sup>2</sup> The implication of this revelation is that we need to better understand how it is that criminal justice practitioners and policy makers hear about NIJ research. Drawing from the William T. Grant program of research, the Translational Criminology Working Group at NIJ has articulated a set of fundamental questions:

- Who, in fact, uses NIJ research?
- Who are those individuals or organizations?
- How do people learn about NIJ research?
- How do practitioners and policy makers define research evidence?
- How is research evidence used in their work?
- What are the conditions that facilitate the use of research evidence in practice and policy?
- What are the conditions that prohibit the use of research evidence in practice and policy?
- And perhaps most important, what other elements besides research evidence influence practice and policy?

We also need to focus on the implementation of research findings in the field. In the Translational Criminology Working Group at NIJ, the following questions have been asked:

- How do we measure successful implementation?
- How do we measure unsuccessful implementation?
- What factors influence implementation quality?
- What is the relationship between implementation quality and intended outcomes?
- What can be learned from the failures or errors in the field?

## Translational Criminology: The Time Is Now

These kinds of critical questions are being asked in a variety of domains. Moreover, new forms of engaging in research with an eye toward influencing policy and practice are emerging. For example, in education, the William T. Grant Foundation is launching “learning communities” that bring together research-practice partnerships in education (see [www.wtgrantfoundation.org](http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org)). In health, there is the Learning Collaborative on High-Risk Drinking, which is part of the National College Health Improvement Project (see [www.nchip.org/alcohol](http://www.nchip.org/alcohol)). In the violence prevention arena, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s translational program is called Applying Science. Advancing Practice. (see [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/ASAP.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/ASAP.html)).

I think it is time to bring these questions and strategies to the criminal justice and criminology domain (for an exciting example of studying the implementation of evidence based practices in the area of offender reentry, see *Advancing Practice*, March 2012<sup>3</sup>). Given budget constraints and the desire to use evidence to drive practice and policy, I think the timing for this is absolutely right. As we come together as a community within NIJ, I believe we can move forward on this idea of translational criminology and make our research results much more effective in terms of reducing crime, enhancing public safety, and bringing justice forward.

By articulating a set of questions about research use and the implementation of research findings that we can study in a systematic manner coupled with richer and deeper communication with our various stakeholders, I am hopeful that we will put some teeth in the concept of translational criminology and ensure that it gets institutionalized in the research enterprise at NIJ. Ultimately, translational criminology is about transforming the culture within NIJ and in the field and engaging in the institute’s core mission—advancing scientific discoveries that are relevant to the field—in a new and exciting way.

<sup>1</sup> Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. The author thanks Rob Sampson and Vivian Tseng for comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Yolanda Curtis for her overall assistance and good humor.

<sup>2</sup> Tseng, Vivian. 2012. “The Uses of Research in Policy and Practice.” *Social Policy Report* Volume 26, Issue 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Advancing Practice: Experimentation, Implementation, Sustainability*. A publication of the Center for Advancing Correctional Excellence (ACE!) at George Mason University, Spotlight on Reentry, March 2012.

