

Perspectives on Practitioner-Researcher Partnerships in the Criminal Justice System

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A practitioner-researcher partnership (PRP) is a practical, collaborative, and mutually beneficial relationship between an agency or program and a research or evaluation partner. The purpose of a PRP is to conduct strategic problem solving to develop, implement, and assess practices, programs, treatment, and policies. In a PRP, practitioners are immersed in programs or agencies to work with people who are impacted by the social problems they seek to address. They may be considered specialists in a variety of criminal justice issues (e.g., public safety, corrections, criminal law, investigation, forensics). Practitioners in the criminal justice system have specific responsibilities and function within subsystems (federal, state, and local jurisdictions) and across various agencies (e.g., law enforcement, courts, corrections), with differing and interrelated roles. They are specialists in the administration of services and can provide detailed and nuanced explanations of their work from information about their agency's or organization's administrative records and operational systems. A PRP can navigate political and institutional pressures for program design and support staff bandwidth for data collection efforts.

A research partner who may be affiliated with academia or a research institute has the training and the skill set to conduct rigorous evaluations, collect and analyze primary and/or secondary data, and answer complex questions that practitioners lack the time, knowledge, or resources

to investigate on their own. They offer an outside perspective for practitioners as they seek to understand and address social problems and can guide practitioners on how to leverage data to tell stories about their programs and services, which strengthens the overall sustainability of their practices.

Practitioner-Researcher Roles and Importance

The practitioner's role is to provide the research partner with information about the background, history, services, and individuals they wish to examine. This work may involve regular communication with the research partner in the form of email messages, phone calls, and meetings. They may also be asked to provide research partners with administrative data from their internal record management system and help acquire information from relevant partner agencies and organizations that might be needed for a research study.

The research partner's roles may include assisting practitioners in planning for implementing a program, collecting and reporting key information that is critical to the project, and designing evaluations that can assess (1) whether a program or practice is being implemented as initially intended; (2) whether a program has an impact on important outcomes (e.g., recidivism, opioid

overdoses); and (3) whether a program is a cost-effective solution to a social problem. They might aid practitioners in pretesting and piloting instruments that will be deployed for use by other staff members in an agency or organization.

PRPs are mutually beneficial for several reasons. On the one hand, practitioners have (1) a need for quality empirical research to guide and inform their policies and practices; (2) unparalleled knowledge about the inner workings of their programs, practices, and systems; (3) data that they track for operational purposes; (4) knowledge about the data systems; and (5) awareness of issues that are important to them. In addition, they are a conduit for disseminating research to other practitioners in the field and policymakers. On the other hand, researchers have the time and expertise to conduct rigorous research and serve as an independent entity to evaluate or conduct research of the agency's programs, policies, or practices. This is particularly advantageous to criminal justice system agencies that may not be adequately funded or staffed to conduct time-consuming research on various topics. Research partners also have expertise in developing dissemination plans that include materials that highlight the evaluation, which can create program sustainability.

Initiating and Sustaining a PRP

One challenge that practitioners commonly face is how to identify a compatible research partner. Potential partners can often be identified in the community or through local professional networks. Beyond local sources, practitioner-focused conferences and journals offer opportunities for practitioners and researchers to connect on areas of mutual interest. Local, state, federal, and foundation funding opportunities can also seed partnerships. In responding to such opportunities, researchers who understand the needs and perspectives of practitioners, as well as the subject matter, may be better prepared to engage a practitioner partner and propose compelling practice- or policy-relevant research.

To ensure success, partners must take critical actions at the outset of the partnership, which include establishing a

formal research agreement, engaging in a collaborative planning and goal-setting process, providing ongoing feedback to each other, and being attentive to the relationship. More specifically, partners should understand the degree of goal alignment they share; effectively communicate, actively listen, and ask questions; and hold regular meetings with practitioner leadership. In addition, research staff should seek to understand the substantive and procedural legal aspects of the program or practice that the practitioners are operating, while practitioners should prepare for potential changes to the program or practice based on research outcomes.

General challenges to facilitating researcher-practitioner partnerships include inadequate resources or funding opportunities to do research; limited data access, completeness, or quality; establishing trust, shared goals, and expectations; and planning the appropriate budget and amount of time needed to complete the research. In addition, practitioners should prepare for potential program or practice changes stemming from the results of the study they undertake. These obstacles can be overcome through mutual trust and understanding of each other's perspective, open communication that occurs on a regular basis, and obtaining buy-in from key stakeholders within the practitioner agency.

Tips for Successful Partnerships

Below are a number of tips that, undertaken proactively, can increase the likelihood that a PRP will work as intended.

- Roles and expectations of each partner should be incorporated in a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or similar agreement early in a partnership.
- Initial conversations and planning activities that actively involve both partners are important for setting the stage for the project and the partnership.
- Learning the needs of the other partner is critical in the planning stage of the project.

- Practitioners' concerns about how their data or information will be used by the researcher should be discussed early in the project to promote trust and inform the work of each partner and should be incorporated into the MOU or data use agreement.
- Researchers and practitioners may have competing needs and perspectives to be considered by the other party.
- Effective and routine communication between researchers and practitioners can ensure the success of the partnership and the project.
- The establishment of the partnership may be a capacity-building experience for each partner. For practitioners, partnering with a researcher may help increase their readiness and preparedness to participate in future evaluations. For researchers, such a partnership may help increase their readiness and preparedness to engage in applied research in the field.

To promote sustainability of the project and reinforce the partnership, researchers should share research findings throughout the project and allow practitioners to provide input, perspective, and context.

Conclusion

Building trusted relationships with communities that have been historically marginalized requires significant effort. It is imperative that these communities receive adequate support and resources for their well-being and safety in the community. While addressing system-level inequities can feel beyond the capacity of individual program administrators, building programs and organizations that strategically engage and invest in these populations is a critical first step to begin healing the negative emotional and psychological impacts of widespread disadvantage and trauma in these groups.

Visit the Comprehensive Opioid, Stimulant, and Substance Use Program (COSSUP) Resource Center at www.cossup.org.

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