Florida State University Libraries

2010

The Role of Research and Researchers in Crime and Justice Policy

Daniel P. Mears

Follow this and additional works at the FSU Digital Library. For more information, please contact lib-ir@fsu.edu

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Mears, Daniel P. 2010. "The Role of Research and Researchers in Crime and Justice Policy." Criminology and Public Policy 9(4):799-805., which has been published in final form at http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2010.00671.x. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving: http://olabout.wiley.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-828039.html#terms.

PRE-PRINT VERSION

Public Criminologies

Mears

Policy Essay

The role of research and researchers in crime and justice policy

Daniel P. Mears

Florida State University

If criminology is to have an impact on public policy, then presumably it should take steps to encourage research that is relevant to policy. Such a claim presumes, however, that criminology *should* have a role in public policy discussions and debates. Whether it should or should not is ultimately a moral question, and it is one that I will side step conveniently here by suggesting that most research has the potential to contribute to public policy and might do so through a myriad of ways, regardless of the intentions of those who produce the research. Imagine, for example, that we line up 100 criminologists who aim to change the world through their research.

Direct correspondence to Daniel P. Mears, College of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Florida State University, 634 West Call Street, Tallahassee, FL 32306 (e-mail: dmears@fsu.edu).

© 2010 American Society of Criminology

Then we line up another 100 who would prefer to focus on “basic science” scholarship that aims to unpack the causes and effects of various phenomena (e.g., variation in property crime rates) or to measure certain constructs (e.g., self-control) better (Merton, 1973; Rossi, 1980). I submit that it would be unclear which group would exert the greatest influence on policy.

Such a claim ultimately would have to be evaluated empirically to test its veracity. As far as I know, no studies exist that document in a rigorous, generalizable manner how research influences public views and the programs, practices, policies, laws, and court decisions at local, state, and national levels. Consequently, it seems to be an open question whether one approach would improve policy more than another and respond better to public needs and desires.

So, should those who want to promote policy-focused criminology, or its reflexive variant—“public criminology” (Uggen and Inderbitzin, 2010, this issue)—give up? I do not think so. Rather, I think the implications of the claim are mundane. What, for example, should policy-focused criminologists do? Continue as they have and hope for the best. What about criminologists who are more interested in “basic” research? Continue as they have and, again, hope for the best.

A Balanced Portfolio of Research

Yes, but what about specific types of “public criminology” research and activities, which should be pursued to ensure that the goals of public criminology are achieved? I will answer the question differently at the end of this essay. Here I would argue that what criminology should do is to pursue what in economics would be described as a balanced portfolio of investments. This approach involves diversifying one’s investments into different sectors of the economy. Doing so allows one to reduce the risk—in particular, a dramatic decrease in the value of one's investment—associated with pursuing any one stock, fund, or part of the economy and to increase the chances of a sizable return. Such a strategy seems particularly indicated in a context in which investment returns are uncertain and in which substantial profits or losses can be made in almost any sector of the economy, depending on the country, year, stock, bond, fund, and so on.

The potential benefits of a balanced-portfolio approach to criminological research are similar. By investing in all types of research, including the four described by Uggen and Inderbitzin (2010)—professional criminology, critical criminology, policy criminology, and public criminology—the field of criminology maximizes the likelihood of returns not only for public criminology but also for the others. The reason? One never knows how one type of research might inform another. Certainly, one could pursue the research equivalent of individual stock selection (e.g., investing considerable resources in a large-scale, multisite experimental evaluation of some policing program) and potentially obtain larger returns. The risk, however, is that the expenditure gains one nothing, whereas an alternative investment, spread out over different types of research, might produce at least some return.

That said, the argument for a balanced portfolio of research begs the important question, "What *should* the distribution of investments be?" For example, among all criminologists, how many should focus on a given type of research? Or, given a set amount of research dollars, how much should be allocated to each type of research? Answers to these questions would depend greatly on the current status quo. If criminologists paid virtually no attention to policy-focused research, then clearly it would be necessary to prioritize funding for such research, at least for a few years. If, however, criminologists collectively paid equal amounts of attention to each type, then perhaps we would want to allocate existing labor or resources equally across each type.

Perhaps not. Such investment allocations ultimately involve value decisions, not scientific ones. For that reason, it is relevant that, to my knowledge, no consensus has been reached about the proper amount of attention that should be given to each type of research or, to make matters worse, the empirical evidence about the distribution of current research efforts. Given that state of affairs, it is difficult to know whether we in fact need more of any type of research, whether it be professional criminology (e.g., basic research), public criminology, or any other. A needs evaluation thus might be helpful before dramatically changing criminologists' research priorities.

Empirical Evidence of a Need for Public Criminology?

In evaluation research, a "needs evaluation" stands at the foundation of the evaluation hierarchy (Rossi, Lipsey, and Freeman, 2004). The basic idea is that before devising a policy, you should measure the amount and nature of the problem before assuming that anything needs to be fixed. Assuming that a problem does exist, it is important to describe not only its nature but also what caused it. Measuring need in this way is challenging but essential. For example, armed with this type of specific information, we would have a better chance of devising a policy that would be targeted sufficiently as to have a chance at being effective.

The relevant question here is whether a need exists for public criminology. Let us assume that, yes, as a general matter, a need exists. That understanding takes us only a short distance. The larger challenge is measuring the *amount* of need and its *nature*. For example, perhaps we have a large shortfall of research that focuses on practitioners, and perhaps the shortfall is especially acute in the area of prison officer victimization. Armed with such knowledge, we can direct our attention in a way that addresses the shortfall and, at the same time, addresses the goal of increasing public criminology efforts.

Unfortunately, as far as I know, little systematic empirical evidence indicates one way or the other about the amount or the nature of need for particular types of public criminology research. Of course, any assessment of need would require defining and operationalizing "public criminology." Because many research activities might not appear to be "public criminology" at first blush, an assessment would be challenging. Indeed, if we hired an army of researchers, then what would we tell them to tally? That is, which research would count as public criminology and which would not? At present, I do not think that a clear answer exists.

Empirical Evidence of Public Criminology Impact?

The premise of any policy is that it should have an impact. That means it produces a positive outcome of some type—an improvement for society. What are the measures that we would use to examine whether public criminology produces improvements?

Some outcomes are intrinsically difficult to measure. What exactly, for example, would be an improvement in public dialogue or in responsiveness to or help for victims and practitioners? No set of researchers is likely to agree on the answer.

Even so, studies might focus on specific dimensions in which perhaps some common ground could be found. For example, efforts to communicate research findings to the public could be assessed using questionnaires. We might monitor on an annual basis the public's knowledge about various crime and justice topics and determine whether various strategies increased the accuracy of public perceptions about such topics (in those cases in which objective facts exist). Other outcome dimensions likely would be considerably harder to measure. Public criminology aims, for example, to reframe cultural images of justice, as per Uggen and Inderbitzin (2010). Some heavy lifting would be required to provide sufficiently nuanced and valid measures of such images. And, of course, the reframing is not the ultimate goal. Rather, the larger goal presumably is one of helping to make society a better place. Measuring that goal is no small task.

The perfect is the enemy of the good, according to Voltaire. Perfect measurement of public criminology's goals is simply not feasible. But that does not mean that measurement would not help matters. To the contrary, it might help clarify precisely what public criminology is and what outcomes are relevant to assessing its contributions. Absent such measures, proponents must take recourse in what they hope are its benefits, and critics simply can assert that public criminology achieves nothing. This situation is less than ideal.

How to Increase Public Criminology?

If we accept that a policy-focused public criminology is greatly needed, then the following question results: How do we increase such research? For some, the answer is clear—support more policy-focused research ("policy criminology") and policy-reframing research ("public criminology"). But that solution assumes a questionable causal nexus. In particular, it assumes that efforts, say, to evaluate a community-policy program will offer more to public dialogue (one of public criminology's goals) than, say, the effort to develop a special measure of self-control.

Such a contention rests, I believe, on shaky grounds. Scholarship on the sociology of science (see, e.g., Merton, 1973, 1982) and criminal justice policy making (see, e.g., Stolz, 2002) highlights that the causal links are diverse. A better measurement instrument might achieve even greater advances in policy and public understanding than an overtly "public criminology" undertaking, such as partnering with a neighborhood group. Perhaps, for example, a researcher with a "basic science" bent aims to develop a more refined measure of inequality. The research then unexpectedly sparks a line of policy-focused studies that builds on that measure and leads to new policies (Mears and Stafford, 2002; Rossi, 1980; Rossi et al., 2004). Perhaps this new line of research involves studies that tap into public views toward the topic, views that then might inform the new policies. In this scenario, we have something akin to a public criminology outcome emerging from a basic science endeavor.

Because we have little basis for knowing what kinds of research ultimately will contribute to or become public criminology, pursuing a portfolio of diverse types of research would seem the better part of wisdom. One simply never knows what will happen with a given study or what forces will shape policy.

I recall talking with a member of a state legislative criminal justice committee and asking whether the state's investment in supermax prisons would be swayed one way or the other by a large body of studies showing that such prisons are not cost effective. The conversation to that point included a discussion of possible benefits and costs of supermaxes. I then asked the following question: What if supermaxes were found to be effective but not more so than cheaper alternatives? The legislator said that it would not matter. The mood among the state lawmakers was that supermaxes were a good idea, and they wanted one regardless of cost.

If the legislator's assessment was correct, then it suggests that a mountain of well-conducted, policy-focused research would not have shifted the legislature's decision. It knew what it wanted. That said, perhaps one research study or another might have influenced the decision. Perhaps a public criminology enterprise that aimed to educate citizens and legislators about prison-order problems and solutions might have shifted the discussion and led to the consideration of alternatives. Perhaps a cost–benefit evaluation might have achieved the same result. Perhaps a "basic science" study widely covered in the media might have weaved its way into the legislature's deliberations or into those of the criminal justice committee. Perhaps not. The point is that it frequently might be the case that public criminology is achieved best through efforts that, on the face of it, do not look obviously like "public criminology."

At the same time, it merits emphasizing that overtly "public criminology" efforts might backfire and so undermine the goals associated with these efforts. For example, because public criminology more directly addresses the political dimension of crime and justice, its efforts entail a greater involvement in political discourse. I am no political scientist. But I do know that political winds can shift quickly. That means that a mishandled public criminology effort might create a political backlash. This possibility does not mean that public criminology should not be undertaken. It simply means that this type of work is not without risks and that in some circumstances alternative types of research might achieve public criminology's goals better.

So, absent clear guidance from empirical research about what actually influences policy and about what really counts as public criminology, what is a criminologist who wants to make society a better place to do? The answer seems simple, if mundane—keep the faith. Pursue research that you believe will make a difference. For some, that might mean policy criminology or public criminology. But for others, it might be basic research or "critical criminology" efforts. They all constitute important investments that might pay as yet unknown dividends.

Taking a Stand?

All that said, should criminologists take a stand on issues? Here, I think the policy prescription is self-evident, if self-serving—more funding should be provided and a better infrastructure should be implemented for crime and justice research. Many social scientists, such as Alfred Blumstein and Joan Petersilia (1995), have lamented the woeful state of funding for such research relative to other social policy areas. In the end, I think it is reasonable to say that criminology as a discipline produces a remarkable amount of policy-relevant research given the relative paucity of funding for basic or applied research. More and better research would position the discipline better as well as its professional organizations to take policy stands. Even then, the fact that many criminologists differ about the state of research in different areas suggests to me that it might be more productive in the long run for these organizations to focus more on ensuring that more and better research occurs and that it sees the light of day through a variety of dissemination strategies. Taking a stand on some issues, however warranted, raises the real risk of undermining the perceived credibility of criminological research in general (see, e.g., Basu, Dirsmith, and Gupta, 1999), which in turn might undermine the effort to achieve a particular policy outcome.

Conclusion

I am highly partial to the argument that criminology should aim to improve society and to inform policy discussions and debates. I also am partial to the view that too little policy-focused research occurs. Not least, I am partial to the public criminology argument that greater attention should be given to helping to reframe some debates, if only through illuminating unknown facts or helping to make a wider swath of views heard.

However, I do not believe that one has to adhere to these views to engage in meaningful or important research. Science is in no small part justified by curiosity—how does the world work? From that perspective, it is not necessary to take recourse in the notion that greater understanding will improve the world. Yet, greater understanding sometimes *can* lead to big changes. And because we cannot know which types of understanding will yield such changes, it seems important to support a wide range—a balanced portfolio—of research.

In the end, I do believe that more policy-focused research is warranted, both to increase the evidence base for the crime and justice societies we have and to contribute to more "basic science" research. Many scholars have identified ways to increase the amount and quality of policy-focused criminological work. Among the steps that could be taken, which I discuss elsewhere (Mears, 2010), are the following: Educate and train students in evaluation research; promote and reward applied research among those who work in universities and colleges; integrate applied and basic research where possible; create better ties among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners; institutionalize evaluation research into criminal justice system operations and activities; create independent criminal justice research agencies; and develop accessible sources of information about basic facts concerning crime, criminal justice operations, and a range of programs and policies. The list is not exhaustive, but it underscores the idea that pragmatic strategies exist for promoting research that better informs public policy and perhaps that in turn helps shift discussion and debates in productive ways.

References

Basu, Onker, Mark Dirsmith, and Parveen Gupta. 1999. The coupling of the symbolic and the technical in an institutionalized context: The negotiated order of the GAO's audit reporting process. *American Sociological Review*, 64: 506–526.

Blumstein, Alfred and Joan Petersilia. 1995. Investing in criminal justice research. In (James Q. Wilson and Joan Petersilia, eds.), *Crime*. San Francisco, CA: Institute for Contemporary Studies Press.

Mears, Daniel P. 2010. *American Criminal Justice Policy: An Evaluation Approach to Increasing Accountability and Effectiveness*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mears, Daniel P. and Mark C. Stafford. 2002. Central analytical issues in the generation of cumulative sociological knowledge. *Sociological Focus*, 35: 5–24.

Merton, Robert K. 1973. *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Merton, Robert K. 1982. *Social Research and the Practicing Professions*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Rossi, Peter H. 1980. The Presidential Address: The challenge and opportunities of applied social research. *American Sociological Review*, 45: 889–904.

Rossi, Peter H., Mark Lipsey, and Howard E. Freeman. 2004. *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*, 7th Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stolz, Barbara A. 2002. *Criminal Justice Policy Making: Federal Roles and Processes*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Uggen, Christopher and Michelle Inderbitzin. 2010. Public criminologies. *Criminology & Public Policy.* This issue.

Daniel P. Mears, PhD, is a professor at Florida State University's College of Criminology and Criminal Justice He conducts basic and applied research on a range of crime and justice topics, including studies of supermax prisons, sentencing, juvenile justice, domestic violence, public opinion, homicide, and prisoner reentry. In a recent book, *American Criminal Justice Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), he argues that research should play a more prominent role in crime and justice policy.