

The Challenge of Timeliness and Utility in Research and Evaluation

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There was a time, perhaps until the end of the 1980s, when researchers could conduct their work in police departments and depart with a cheery, "Hope you buy the book!" But now practitioners in the criminal justice field have grown too sophisticated to buy into this model of research or evaluation model. Today, they want to know what is in it for them, during their term of office. At my first presentation to the command staff of the Chicago Police Department describing plans to evaluate their community policing initiative, a savvy district commander rose and made his fears clear: we would get in his way and take up his time, and a book would appear five years later telling everyone what he did wrong. He did not think this was a good idea. We agreed, but other models of researcher-practitioner partnerships are a lot of work, and risky. There were advantages to wearing white lab coats and insisting that we had to keep "hands off."

Now it is necessary for evaluators to forge two-way relationships with their agency partners. Evaluators need access and cooperation, and the agencies will demand some payback for that. They have expectations about how research and evaluation can help them. What police administrators expect is information that is timely and useful for them. This paper reflects on my experience in trying to meet these twin expectations, in projects evaluating policing programs of all kinds, including activities of undercover narcotics squads and

department-wide reorganizations to carry out community policing. My message is that these are very difficult expectations to meet. Our practitioner partners may need to develop a fuller understanding of the many important steps involved in conducting quality research, and how these intersect with the very important criteria that the findings be timely and useful.

Timeliness. Timeliness is a difficult issue in research. Researchers have a commitment to being data driven and broadly representative. We cannot do "evaluation by walking around," or conclude anything reliable from anecdotes and one or two ride-alongs. Researchers need a lot of time to work through a series of steps that make up almost any study.

- 1 First, we may have to raise money to support data collection. Perhaps a project can be carried out using existing data, but in that case an outside research team might not be needed either. If an agency cannot answer its questions with the data it has, interviewers, field observers, coders, and data entry staff may need to be hired. The proposals must include careful reviews of the research literature, clearly stated hypotheses to be tested, and descriptions of the data to be collected. If the issue is important to an agency because it is "home grown" and a real problem for them, the timetable for the research may not correspond to any

- federal or state funding cycle. The agencies may have to weigh in and help with fundraising for research, often a new role for them. Although there are a few funding sources that are willing to support action research with a local focus, most funders want to support projects that address issues of national importance, and they want the issues and the answers for them to be cast with sufficient generality that the findings will be applicable in many places. Funding considerations, therefore, usually shape the nature of the research that can be undertaken.
- 2 It can take time to clarify the issues being investigated. In program evaluation, researchers have to figure out what the program really is, and monitor what it becomes. The program usually is not what the press release or the grant application said it was going to be, and plans never roll out as expected. Good projects remain a moving target for some time, as the participants learn while doing. But a useful final report will include a careful description of what was actually carried out in the field, so process monitoring has to be more or less continuous. A good evaluation will also look more deeply at the issues being addressed. A thorough assessment will look beyond the formal plan (the "manifest" strategy) to identify the "latent" issues that are also being addressed. These usually are rooted in the fundamental political and economic problems of the city, and are well understood—if unstated—by those who know what is going on. The first job of an evaluator is to clarify the real problems being addressed and the strategy being implemented (probably in more than one way) and to develop mechanisms for monitoring the implementation over time.
 - 3 Researchers then need time to design instruments and develop research designs that will fairly evaluate the program as they have construed it. They need to field the strongest designs possible, and ensure that data collection is extensive enough to detect effects of the magnitude that the program is likely to produce. The research design is how the entire project is set up to make valid inferences about what causes what or what the impact of a program was. Research designs range from randomized trials to "quasi-experimental interrupted time series" and statistical studies, and getting them right is one of the most important contributions of the researcher partner in a collaborative project. It can also take time and money to develop adequately large data sets, and this cannot be short-changed. One way to commit murder through evaluation is to collect samples of outcome data that are too small to reliably document a realistic program effect, and then pronounce the program a failure because the results are "insignificant." At this point, human subjects issues must be addressed as well. University Institutional Review Boards must process, review, and formally approve any research involving human subjects before the work can begin.
 - 4 The research team needs time to collect representative data from broad samples. All of those interviewers, field observers, coders, and data entry clerks need to be hired and trained. A police study probably will have to include people who start work at midnight, as hard as that can be. Citizen surveys have to reach hard-to-get people such as those working two jobs, and that takes many callbacks. In evaluations, the study design may call for the collection of pre-program baseline data, and this certainly will take a substantial amount of time, and many programmatic activities will have to wait until this is carried out. Crime and arrest data are usually very seasonal and so it can be difficult to gather sufficient data in less than

a year. One of the strongest non-experimental designs uses before-and-after time series, for both a project area and matched control groups, but the statistics for analyzing the data demand at least 60 months of data. Studies of particular populations, such as victims of domestic violence, often require a surprisingly long time period before enough subjects are assembled for the study. But the pressure is to come to conclusions quickly. Everyone wants results yesterday, and by the second day of a project people start asking "what your sense is."

5. Analysis of all of the data also takes time. It also takes time to come to measured and thoughtful conclusions. Data sets have many nooks and crannies that need to be investigated carefully. For example, only years after the results of a series of domestic violence experiments were released was it discovered that arrest deterred only better-off and employed men, and actually made things worse for their counterparts. Careful analysis considers and tests for alternative explanations for all of the key findings. It involves looking for complex interactions between various factors; the unexpected role that social class apparently plays in limiting the impact of arrest on domestic violence is an example of this. Finally, the researcher has the obligation to carefully consider the possibility that programs or treatments had unexpected *unwanted* consequences.
6. Many different kinds of reports may need to be prepared, in different formats for different audiences. Some stakeholders will need or expect verbal briefings. They may want to embargo the findings until a news conference can be organized. No one will want to be surprised by the release of findings; they all want to review the research and the findings, voice their disagreement over matters of fact and interpretation, and see any resulting

changes before anyone else sees the final product. All of this can be quite involved when there are multiple stakeholders in the project, including participating agencies, community groups, research funders, city council members, and other government agencies.

Academics also must make time for professional writing and publication. We work for universities that expect this as the product of research. In general, government reports do not impress university deans and departments. They want books published by university presses (which often take three years to produce) and articles in major peer-reviewed journals (ditto). They value abstraction and generality, as do the best academic journals. They currently favor things caused by "globalization." After I explained what I did to one of the most senior members of my academic department, he replied—looking down his nose—"isn't that a bit applied?"

So, how long should this all take? Three years, at a minimum, and in my experience many practitioners will not see that as timely.

What can be done to improve the timeliness of products from a research or evaluation project? Depending on the project, it may be possible to produce interim products. For example, an evaluator monitoring program implementation may be able to generate reports that keep it on target. However, it may just be that the research takes time. A domestic violence study, for example, must wait until enough qualified cases have been identified, and there may not be much that can be done to speed that process up.

Usefulness. Usefulness is another difficult criteria to meet. Part of the problem is that harried administrators usually want tactical information, material that they can use right away. This could include research-based recommendations about where or how to deploy their people next week, or identification of a list of specific high-risk potential offenders. In evaluations they might want to know where

the program is not going well, and who is not doing their job. But the value-added contribution of researchers is more likely to be their ability to provide strategic information and analysis. This could include an identification of chronic crime and disorder hot spots, coupled with an analysis of how the routine activities of victims attract offenders to a particular location rather than somewhere else. In an evaluation this could include the identification of factors supporting and retarding change. Convincing harried administrators that strategic information is what they need can be one of the educational outcomes of a research collaboration.

Collaborators need eventually to work toward a shared understanding of what is both doable (don't forget the timeliness issues) and useful. One model is a "strategic feedback" approach to communicating evaluation findings. The focus is on issues, not personalities. Strategic feedback addresses questions such as what works; in what kinds of places does it work; and what are the managerial and supervisor issues involved in making it work. Strategic analysis identifies external forces that are impacting the process, and structural features of the organization that are helping or hindering things.

A related strategy is to focus on identifying good practices and the factors that foster them. Focusing on strategic issues and identifying good practices, rather than on tactical questions, can take some of the researcher's heat off the members of the organization who are doing the work. The researchers in a collaboration have to factor in their reading of what "bad news" model is operative in the organization, and in the city. If the bad news model is "terminate with extreme prejudice," the positive or critical focus of the feedback and the level of specificity in their report has to take this into account. It has been my

experience that, the minute a head rolls down the steps of City Hall because of a revelation by a researcher, their ability to have frank conversations with the people in the department who do the work shuts down overnight. I have regularly briefed one mayor and at the first two meetings he pounded his conference table at every mention of bad news, demanding to know who was responsible for the shortcomings our research was describing. He learned that we were not going to name names and started to focus on our charts and graphs.

I have found that the briefing process should be "bottom up." My research team and I typically present our most preliminary findings at meetings with unit managers and their aides. We give them in advance a draft report section covering the issues that they are responsible for, and there has never been any difficulty in getting them to read and reflect on those carefully. They typically are very vigorous in correcting our facts, challenging our interpretations, and even in turning out new data. Later reports are much better for this process. It usually turns out that they are comfortable knowing that their bosses will be hearing what we have to say, once they have heard it first and have had concrete input into the process.

The research collaborators may also be committed to presenting their findings to the public. In particular, foundation funders may insist on public reports and presentations at their forums. Community policing evaluations usually have to find ways to effectively address the public, because the community groups and activists who get involved are themselves interested and demanding stakeholders. They are also "gatekeepers," because they control access to their own members and activities.