

Translating Research to Practice and Building Capacity to Use Data, Research, Planning, and Problem-Solving

The Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation Program

BY ELIZABETH GRIFFITH

Elizabeth “Betsi” Griffith is associate deputy director, Strategic Initiatives at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), the U.S. Department of Justice’s policy- and grant-making agency,¹ has in recent years prioritized the use of data, planning, and research knowledge to target and manage its resources to state, tribal, and local criminal justice systems, and build criminal justice professional capacity. The goals in BJA’s 2013 strategic plan include supporting effective criminal justice policy, programs, and collaborations within state, local, and tribal agencies and communities; promoting the use of data, research, and information to increase the effectiveness of criminal justice programs; improving criminal justice outcomes; and ensuring organizational excellence and accountability.

To accomplish these goals, BJA collaborates with the research community, employing a range of strategies.² These include reviewing and summarizing the research knowledge to create effective program models; using research partnerships to effectively target resources,³ implementing programs, and assessing fidelity and effectiveness; providing high-quality, relevant training and technical assistance in partnership with experts in the field; and creating tools to build field capacity to implement effective solutions, and listening and responding to gaps in knowledge, through dialogue with the field, supporting innovation, and sponsoring visiting fellows.

BJA is becoming more research- and planning-oriented because of our desire to maximize the results of our investments. The BJA director notes in our Strategic Plan:



Betsi Griffith

“BJA’s mission is executed with a keen awareness of our responsibility to manage taxpayer dollars wisely and support programs that are backed by strong research and data. This understanding reinforces our dedication to addressing public safety needs and holding ourselves accountable to the highest standards. Guided by the goals and strategies presented below, BJA will continue its work of improving the effective-

ness and efficiency of the nation’s criminal justice agencies.”

This commitment extends beyond our work within the agency to our efforts in working collaboratively with the criminal justice field to enhance practitioner capacity to use data and research. As a result, policy makers and practitioners at the state, tribal, and local levels will be able to best use the investments from BJA awards—discretionary and formula—to effectively target the highest priority issues in the most effective ways.

Our Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation (BCJI) program reflects these efforts to link research, planning, and implementation across the field.⁴ Launched in 2012, BCJI is a place-based, community-oriented process in which cross-sector partnerships are supported to address neighborhood-level crime issues. BCJI targets distressed neighborhoods where a combination of crime, poverty, unemployment, poor health, struggling schools, inadequate housing, and

1 BJA strengthens the nation’s criminal justice system and helps America’s state, local, and tribal jurisdictions reduce and prevent crime, reduce recidivism, and promote a fair and safe criminal justice system. BJA focuses its programmatic and policy efforts on providing a wide range of resources, including training and technical assistance (TTA) to law enforcement, courts, corrections, treatment, reentry, justice information sharing, and community-based partners to address chronic and emerging criminal justice challenges nationwide. BJA is part of the Office of Justice programs (OJP).

2 This includes the BJA Subcommittee of the OJP Science Advisory Board, which has informed our work on researcher-practitioner partnerships and implementation science. We also participate in OJP’s Crime Solutions and our Research Coordinating Council, and we meet regularly with our sister federal research agencies to coordinate work, develop joint research projects, and identify areas for translation of research and gaps for research needs.

3 This includes use of strategies such as crime analysis, crime mapping, surveys, evaluation and assessment, and use of risk-need-responsivity principles to support informed decision making when targeting crime issues and needs.

4 More information about BCJI can be found at www.bja.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?Program_ID=70.

disinvestment keep many residents from reaching their full potential. Within these neighborhoods, BCJI sites target their analysis, planning, and strategies on crime hot spots or very small places (e.g., street blocks, corners, intersections) in which research has consistently shown that a disproportionate amount of all crime jurisdiction-wide occurs. Studies have also indicated that crime can be very stable in these hot spots over time, creating a significant opportunity to prevent crime by focusing on these locations. BCJI helps target resources to the communities that have not experienced the same crime reductions that many communities have over the past decade.

The BCJI model also incorporates research knowledge about community trust and collective efficacy by building in time and strategies to engage residents in the process and ultimately build their capacity to exert authority in their community by developing sustainable partnerships. To accomplish this, capacity must be built for data-driven problem solving and a trusting and effective collaboration between the partners, including residents. The foundation of data-driven problem solving and assessment of strategy ensures that the strategies are implemented with fidelity and the initial results are clear.

To build these critical capacities, the BCJI model builds in a planning period where a local partner⁵ works to engage community residents and build a collaborative team of criminal justice partners, a local research partner, and other cross-sector partners. These early discussions are intended to be purposeful and educational for those involved. The team uses this time to analyze crime drivers, finalize hot spot locations, and assess needs and available resources before developing a comprehensive, evidence-based response to specific problems in the hot spots.⁶ These assessments are summarized in a written strategic plan that guides implementation. Where innovative strategies with no existing evidence-base are selected, the plan should specify a clear theory of change. The team's research partner plays a key role in identifying strategies in coordination with national training and technical assistance partners. The community partners also play an important role in providing context to empirical findings and implementing evidence-based interventions.

Because of the critical nature of the plan and analysis as a basis for the strategies to be implemented, BJA limits funding during the

planning phase to a small portion of the overall funding. The funding during the planning phase supports activities such as community engagement, partner coordination, and plan development with the researcher and includes data analysis, strategic planning, and strategy development. Once the plan has been submitted and approved, BJA releases the remaining funding to support implementation. The sites then have an additional 24 to 30 months to use the remaining funds for implementation of the plan.

The concepts behind BCJI are not new. In the areas of researcher-practitioner partnerships and data-driven problem solving, BJA is building on expertise developed over the past several decades, most recently in Project Safe Neighborhoods and Smart Policing. This knowledge includes implementing existing tools such as checklists to support analysis, planning, and problem solving; expanding training on researcher-practitioner partnerships; and piloting a tool created to assess readiness and needs for implementing evidence-based strategies.⁷ The research partnership continues through implementation to support ongoing assessment of implementation fidelity, problem-solving, and refinement of approach, and collection of data for impact evaluations.

BJA is using such projects as BCJI to innovate in researcher-practitioner partnerships. Our initiatives expand the involvement of practitioners to include law enforcement, residents, community-based organizations, education, housing, and social services. These partners provide broader access to data that define the nature and extent of crime problems. They also create opportunities to develop approaches that, while potentially more comprehensive and complex, can also have bigger impacts in reducing and preventing crime and extending the value of enforcement efforts. A strategy that combines the critical, immediate enforcement response with prevention, intervention, and revitalization efforts will build the long-term capacity that sustains reductions in crime and transforms communities into places of opportunity and promise.

While innovative and evidence-based, this approach also creates new challenges. It requires a commitment to fully engage community residents and take time to build understanding and trust between the partners. This approach requires different communication strategies and problem-solving processes, especially in the work with the research partnership. It also challenges researchers, community members, and law enforcement officials to engage in dialogue to which they might not be accustomed. Despite these challenges, the investment is worth it. Building capacity to use research and data to engage in problem solving, and building trust and understanding

⁵ This lead partner is the fiscal agent and can be local or tribal government or nonprofit.

⁶ A comprehensive strategy offers a range of effective approaches such as enforcement, prevention, and intervention to address the identified crime drivers. It should also employ evidence-based strategies about impact of physical conditions through nuisance laws, crime prevention through environmental design, use of community gardens and land banking, and code enforcement.

⁷ The BCJI communities are supported throughout the grant period with strong training and technical assistance, led by the Local Support Initiatives Corporation and working with other partners such as Michigan State University, Vera Institute, and the Center for Court Innovation.

between the partners, can enhance the willingness to share critical intelligence and perspectives to understand and respond to crime dynamics. When efforts are developed in partnership rather than in isolation, strategies are more likely to be supported. Such efforts can also build a cadre of residents willing and able to take action and serve as neighborhood guardians to create a healthier environment for schools, recreation centers, gardens, and community and faith-based facilities.

This type of multifaceted capacity building can require expert assistance. Thus, BJA also sponsors an intensive technical assistance project called the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program (BNCP), which helps those involved develop the knowledge, skills, relationships, interactions, and organizational resources that enable residents, civic leaders, the public and private sectors, and local organizations to create comprehensive neighborhood revitalization plans.⁸

BJA developed BCJI and BNCP in consultation with key partners and experts on community-based problem solving. BCJI is part of the Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (NRI), a federal place-based approach to help neighborhoods in distress transform themselves into neighborhoods of opportunity.⁹ Over the past four years, the U.S. Department of Justice has worked with NRI to coordinate and streamline approaches in programs such as BCJI, the Department of Education's Promise schools program, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Choice housing revitalization program. In recognition of the unique and important nature of these efforts, NRI was selected as one of the top five finalists for the Harvard Innovation Awards in Government for 2013. The new Promise Zones designation in 2013 builds on the NRI effort. In January 2014, five high-poverty communities were selected for the Promise Zones designation. The federal government will partner with these communities to create jobs, leverage private investment, increase economic activity, expand educational opportunities, and improve public safety. Three of the Promise Zones sites are also BCJI sites, reflecting BJA's efforts to integrate place-based projects at the tribal and local levels.

Our first cohort of BCJI grantees, funded in late 2012, is moving into the implementation stage, and a second cohort was recently selected.¹⁰ BJA and its training and technical assistance (TTA) partners are working closely with the sites to document their challenges and achievements, many of which can serve as lessons for other communities. The BCJI communities have identified a wide range of partners, developed creative ways to engage community and

seek input in the planning stage, and proposed strategies to address issues from problem properties to high-risk groups in the community to preventing youth involvement with crime. BJA and its partners support these communities by providing research summaries of effective approaches, creating reference materials and webinars, and seeking input from BCJI sites and experts.

To enhance our ability to manage such projects as BCJI, BJA engaged in a planning process to develop strong quarterly performance measures. The measures track overall crime data, steps in planning and implementation phases, and data about implementation strategies. Sites began collecting data at the end of 2013; in 2014, BJA will collect and validate data to refine the measures. In the future, BJA will issue periodic analysis of the data to help manage BCJI implementation and communicate successes. At the same time, BJA will also be launching new technology tools to support and coordinate TTA efforts across BCJI and other BJA-funded projects. We also plan a formal review of the performance of a cohort of grantees across domains, including grants compliance and financial reporting, performance measure reporting, and assessment of implementation success and fidelity through BJA's GrantStat process.

We have more work to do to enhance our use of data and research but efforts such as BCJI provide a good foundation on which to build stronger, more effective crime reduction strategies. They also help build local capacity to embrace the tools that the research field has developed to help us be more targeted and effective in reducing crime and making our communities safer. As a result, BJA and the criminal justice field can better accomplish their ultimate goals: to reduce crime, recidivism, and unnecessary confinement, and promote a safe and fair criminal justice system.



Seattle police officer with community partners

8 More information about BNCP can be found at www.buildingcommunitycapacity.org.

9 NRI engages the White House and the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Education, Justice, Health and Human Services, and Treasury in support of local solutions to revitalize and transform neighborhoods.

10 A map with the location of the BCJI grantees is located at www.bja.gov/Funding/12-13BCJIAwardsMap.pdf.