Part I

Criminological and Criminal Justice Research

1 Introduction

Research stands at the center of the criminological and criminal justice enterprise. For scholars, it permeates their lives. They conduct research and teach students how to examine the world with it. They communicate research findings. Even so, scholars are not the sole users or purveyors of research. Research features prominently in the lives of policymakers, administrators, and practitioners and in the decisions they make. The public at large also uses research. They read about it or make assumptions about the relevance of findings and "facts" that they pick up through friends and media outlets.

In an era in which lawmakers and government officials have called for greater accountability and "evidence-based" policy, research could not be more relevant.[1] Indeed, it is critical. Vast amounts of information – good and bad – are now readily available to nearly everyone at the click of a button. The ability to evaluate research therefore has assumed even greater importance than in the past. For criminology and criminal justice there is the added consideration: At the turn of the twenty-first century, a new era of crime and justice approaches emerged that greatly expanded law enforcement, court, jail, prison, probation, and parole capacity. This shift placed a tremendous burden on taxpayers that continues to the present.[2] It also raised many critical questions. What drove the changes? Were they beneficial? Harmful? What lessons can be learned for guiding crime and justice policy today? What opportunities exist to advance the understanding of crime and criminal justice?

Enter research. Good, credible studies can provide a critical platform on which to improve knowledge *and* policy. Much depends, though, on understanding just what is meant by "research." Much depends, too, on understanding how studies are conducted, how to interpret and evaluate

[1] Mears (2010). [2] Mears and Cochran (2015).

findings, and how to use them effectively and appropriately. We argue that the ability to do so requires a "researcher sensibility." This sensibility is essential for conducting research that can be trusted. It is critical as well for evaluating – that is, reading, interpreting, and judging – study results. And it is critical for using research to advance science and policy. This sensibility entails appreciating many things, but not least it involves understanding the science and art of conducting, evaluating, and using research. It has been said that "the greatest challenge of science, its art, lies in asking an important question and framing it in a way that allows it to be broken into manageable pieces."[3] Learning how to do so is an art. Science constitutes a core ingredient of research, but art comes into play as well. Fortunately, the science and art of research can be learned by everyone, not just those of us who do it for a living. That matters greatly for scientific progress and for improving policy and practice!

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

This book seeks to introduce students – as well as policymakers, practitioners, the public, and other researchers and scholars – to what it means to conduct criminological and criminal justice research, including how to conduct, evaluate, and use study results. It seeks to guide readers in developing what we term a "researcher sensibility" and the science and art, and many different considerations, that go into criminological and criminal justice inquiry. The practice of research can seem mysterious, or sometimes it may seem deceptively straightforward. Recidivism provides a convenient illustration. Advocates for a particular corrections program may tout it as being "effective." They point to the "low" recidivism of its participants. Perhaps only 10 percent of all participants go on to be rearrested for a new crime. Given such a low probability of recidivism, it seems that the program must be effective. In reality, though, the same percentage of individuals may have recidivated *without* the intervention. To determine if the program produced a beneficial effect requires a study with a valid comparison group.

Awareness of such possibilities and complexities, which comes with a researcher sensibility, should be part of a researcher's tool kit. It frequently is not, though. This problem does not necessarily stem from a lack of familiarity with particular theories or methodologies. Rather, it stems from a lack of familiarity with how to put together different research ingredients. More generally, it stems from a lack of familiarity with how to imagine the

[3] Barry (2005:60).

range of possibilities for conceptualizing and answering theoretical or policy-focused questions.

Many factors contribute to this situation. One consists of cognitive blinders that impede imagination. Consider surgeons. They understandably tend to frame medical problems from a surgical perspective. However, that can lead them to mistakenly assume that surgery constitutes the most effective treatment for a given condition, when in fact some other approach, such as radiation, medication, or physical therapy, might be better.[4] Researchers act no differently. If trained in a particular theoretical approach or methodology, they will be more likely to use these rather than some others that may be more helpful.

Academic training typically pushes individuals to specialize. What does that entail? It means that a graduate student may study a particular topic, and, in so doing, use a particular theory, data, and methodology favored by their advisor. Upon receiving a doctoral degree, the student – now an assistant professor seeking tenure and promotion – pursues this topic intensively, using the same theories, data, and methods. If he or she strays too far from the topic or these approaches, several risks arise. The newly minted PhD may alienate his or her advisor or generate fewer publications because of the time it takes to learn new theories, data, and methods. They also risk appearing to be generalists. All of these possibilities mean that they may not receive tenure or be promoted. Researchers who go into non-academic settings can face similar pressures. Confronted with a need to complete a large number of studies in short amounts of time, they may seek recourse to the conceptual and methodological tools that they acquired during graduate school. Only slowly, if at all, do they acquire new ones.

We argue that a researcher sensibility is needed for conducting better research. But it also is needed to evaluate and use research effectively and appropriately. Really? Such a sensibility may be necessary for creating credible studies, but is it really necessary for evaluating and using research? Absolutely!

Consider violence and television watching. News outlets might report that a study has found that watching violent television is associated with more violence. That seems like a common-sense finding that we can trust. Of course watching violence causes people to commit violence. But then another study finds no association between watching violent television and committing violence. We now ask ourselves, which study do we believe? While we are at it, we might start to question the television-causes-violence logic: Why exactly would watching violent shows make someone more

[4] Gawande (2007, 2009); Groopman (2007); Mears and Bacon (2009); Sanders (2009); Groopman and Hartzband (2011).

violent? Mere exposure to ideas does not typically suffice to change human behavior. It takes more. There is also the question of how much we can trust an identified association. If the association is spurious (i.e., not real or causal), then, by extension, there is no association to explain. For example, what about the possibility that violent people may be more likely to watch violent television shows? This possibility would result in an association between watching violent shows and engaging in violence, but the association would not be causal.

It turns out that evaluating research – that is, reading or hearing about first-hand or second-hand accounts of one or more studies and judging their merits – can be a tricky business. We can easily misinterpret the validity of study findings. We also can assume that a single straightforward theoretical logic exists to explain how A leads to B even though, upon closer inspection, we may find that many possible explanations can be identified.

The risk of misunderstanding research creates a related problem – study results may be misused. For example, if we accept a study's findings about a television–violence association, we may jump too quickly into developing theories to explain this association. *We should probably place greater priority on establishing whether a causal association exists in the first place*. What if none exists but we proceed, based on the one study, to be for or against a particular policy because of what the one study found? That would place us on poor footing. If we better understood the ins and outs of the study, we might find ourselves holding a quite different view of the policy. The ease with which studies may be misinterpreted or misused raises a profound challenge for policymakers and criminal justice administrators and practitioners. What studies should they trust? Which ones should guide their decisions? More generally, what kinds of facts should be relevant for making decisions about policy or practice?

Research can be a complicated undertaking, so proceeding carefully is warranted. Whether one seeks to advance knowledge on crime, victimization, punishment, or some other phenomenon, or whether one seeks to improve policy, many considerations come into play. But all too frequently, many people do not understand the nuts and bolts of research. They accept "facts" that accord with their personal predilections or they accept or reject them because they do not understand what went into producing the facts. This problem, as we have emphasized, affects researchers and others alike. Many students work through a Master's degree or doctoral degree program and never really learn how to conduct research. They read about bits and pieces of what goes into it. They even may help undertake a study or two. But by and large, they hold a highly circumscribed view of research. That leads them to think too narrowly about the kinds of studies that they might undertake or how to put other research into context.

The problem might be said to lie with the training offered in criminology and criminal justice programs. Actually, the problem – training versus knowing how to "do" research – pervades many scholarly disciplines. Law students struggle, for example, with it. They take three years of classes, many of which constitute core requirements, and have two summers during which they might intern. They barely get their feet wet in that time and obtain only a small taste of what the law entails.[5] Much the same holds true for criminology and criminal justice students. They take a research methods overview course, several statistics courses, perhaps a course on qualitative methods, sampling, or causal analysis, a course or two on theory, and at the same time they take courses on particular substantive topics. By the end of their third year, they complete course work and a thesis for their Master's degree. In their fourth year, they prepare for and take comprehensive exams and, at the same time, begin developing a dissertation. They know a bit about research, but have never really undertaken their own studies. Students at this point might be likened to chefs whose primary training has consisted of reading about various cooking and baking techniques and practicing specific skills (e.g., selecting the best produce, chopping vegetables). Perhaps they have prepared a small number of meals. What they have *not* done is actually cooked on a regular basis, created dishes that span a range of cuisines, successfully hosted large dinner events, or done so under pressure.

This lack of experience in doing research can be highly damaging. It can lead students to develop a myopic view of research possibilities and of their interests and strengths. They are limited in the types of research questions that they can envision and the methodologies that they can use to answer those research questions.

For those who have only passing knowledge of criminological and criminal justice research, the situation is even more problematic. To them, research may seem to belong to the realm of, well, researchers. Accordingly, facts and the very framing of questions are accepted or rejected outright because they trust the researcher's statements or because of how the findings or framing of questions accord with their personal beliefs or ideology. Undergraduate classes can do little to change that situation. Certainly, a few classes on theory and methods can provide individuals with a general sense of what research entails. However, they fall well short of preparing students for digesting study findings, requesting research, or using it effectively or appropriately.

[5] Turow (1977).

There are other barriers to developing a researcher sensibility. One is confusion about what distinguishes "criminology" from "criminal justice."[6] That makes sense given that scholars themselves disagree about the difference. Some view criminal justice as a sub-topic within criminology. Others view criminology as a sub-topic within criminal justice. Students frequently are confused about which term best characterizes their major or what they do professionally.

Another barrier involves policy. To some scholars, research on anything related to policy – or to programs, practices, and the everyday decision-making that is a part of crime and justice – amounts to "applied" research. Why? The focus of a given study centers on the "application" of science to inform policy in some way. That seems like an important undertaking. For some scholars, though, it amounts to second-class research.[7] The larger and more important goal for them is pure science – science for science's sake. They want researchers to focus on developing an understanding, through theory, of the "basic" or foundational causes of phenomena in society. There is, then, a seeming tension between "basic" (scientific) research and "applied" (policy-focused) research. That is so even though the two research types operate in a type of feedback loop: Important policy insights emerge from so-called "basic" research and many important scientific advances emerge from so-called "applied" research.[8]

These two barriers to developing a researcher sensibility often are intertwined. For example, to advocates of "criminology," credible and important research may be viewed as work that focuses on the causes of crime. That is "criminology." To do "criminological" work is to use theory. And theory stands as a hallmark of a true science aimed at understanding "basic," or foundational, forces in life. Consequently, "criminology" is equal to "theory" and in turn to "basic" research and, finally, "science." By implication, "criminal justice research" then must amount to an atheoretical, applied, non-scientific undertaking. Those who study criminal justice may of course disagree with this characterization. The tension around this issue pervades the field. It can be seen in part by the tendency of "criminology" programs to require a course on "theory" that primarily covers theories of crime rather than various criminal justice phenomena, such as law-making, police, courts, corrections,

[6] Hagan (1989); Bernard and Engel (2001); Kraska (2004, 2006); Bernard *et al.* (2005); Mears (2007, 2010); Crank and Bowman (2008); Mears and Barnes (2010); Cooper and Worrall (2012); Dooley and Rydberg (2014); Steinmetz *et al.* (2014); Thistlewaite and Wooldredge (2014); Duffee (2015).

[7] Mills (1959). [8] Rossi (1980); Barlow and Decker (2010); Mears (2010).

and crime prevention.[9] At the same time, some programs that embrace the "criminal justice" nomenclature may not require a course on theory at all, which can make it seem that they discount the relevance of theory. It is all a bit of a muddle. And it can lead those who have ever taken "criminology" or "criminal justice" courses – or majored in or obtained a graduate degree in one or the other – confused about research.

The role of theory introduces more confusion. "Theory" can be viewed as this strange, far-removed undertaking. Some scholars may see theory as important only to advancing science. In fact, the tendency to view theory as more important than empirical research runs throughout the history of science, including the fields of math and physics.[10] In some periods, a "top-down," "theoretical" approach has been viewed as the best way to increase knowledge. In others, a "bottom-up," data-based approach, one that entails working from empirical "reality," has been viewed as best. Plato and Aristotle can be viewed as roughly representing these two polarities, respectively.[11] One can find researchers in many programs that represent them. Not surprisingly, those who study science and how it progresses find that the accumulation of knowledge progresses from many different directions, not just these two. It stems, for example, from deductively arrived-at theories, inductive reasoning, development of better measurement devices, immersion in observing a particular phenomenon, comparison of different approaches to testing an idea, and so on.[12] No matter, scholars hew to what they believe and students frequently follow suit. The end result? Students and others who take an interest in crime and justice develop a too-narrow sense of what criminology and criminal justice encompass, how studies occur in the "real world," and how to digest, request, and use research.

College and university programs are not necessarily to be faulted. An abundance of required courses can quickly drown students or require that they remain in school in perpetuity. More classes are not the answer. Involving students and others in research would be helpful, but is not always feasible. Ideally, students, policymakers, practitioners, and the public at large could magically acquire a research sensibility. That is impossible, of course. Against that backdrop, it may seem unrealistic to think that a book might help remedy the situation. In our view, though, considerable room exists for a particular type of book to at least make a dent.

What should such a book do? Before answering that question, we should describe what it should *not* do. It should not seek to replicate or extend methods, statistics, or theory books. Such books offer critically important information. Methods books, for example, cover a myriad of

[9] Duffee (2015); Akers *et al.* (2016). [10] Seife (2000); Weinberg (2015).
[11] Weinberg (2015). [12] Merton (1973); Mears and Stafford (2002).

technical topics, such as sampling, types of data, data measurement, and so on. In so doing, they primarily introduce readers to some of the "ingredients," the "nuts and bolts," that go into research, not necessarily *how* to combine them when conducting, evaluating, or using research.

Similarly, statistics books introduce readers to important information about analytic techniques. Such books clearly have their place. They do not, however, teach students to develop a researcher sensibility. Indeed, students complete courses on advanced statistics without ever using the techniques about which they learned or without understanding when the techniques should be used. They also frequently fail to learn about a range of other approaches that would enable them to answer a much broader set of research questions.

Not least, there are books about theory. They teach a critical part of the research enterprise, but typically do not provide guidance about how to create theories, integrate theory with empirical research, or appreciate the nature of scientific progress. In addition, theory frequently gets treated as a topic separate from particular substantive questions.

The best research does not come from a focus on one ingredient or another – it comes from a sensibility that enables individuals to imagine studies that would be relevant or credible in answering particular questions. All of us, whether researchers or not, can and should have this sensibility. With it, we are better able to appreciate the limits, relevance, and possibilities of studies for advancing knowledge and policy. As we seek to show in this book, this sensibility entails appreciating the science and art of research, much as a chef's sensibility goes beyond understanding the characteristics of certain ingredients or certain rules of cooking chemistry.[13]

Who might find the book helpful or interesting? We have written it with undergraduate and graduate students in mind, especially those in criminology and criminal justice programs. But we have written it, too, with an eye toward guiding students in other fields, such as sociology, psychology, political science, social work, public policy, and law, who may be interested in or who focus on crime and justice. We want it to be helpful to students who go on to have research careers. We also want it to be helpful to those who enter into policy arenas or who become administrators or work in any type of setting where research may be needed or useful. Not least, we have written the book for policymakers, criminal justice and corrections administrators and practitioners, and the public. Indeed, it is for anyone with an interest in what social scientists

[13] It might be said, too, that a researcher sensibility involves an ability to detect "bunk" (see Mears 2002). It is more than that, though. Discerning patently absurd or misleading research is important, but so, too, is the ability to imagine or create good research.