

FUNDAMENTALS OF CRIMINOLOGICAL AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE INQUIRY

How to think about, conduct, and evaluate research is fundamental to the study and understanding of criminology and criminal justice. Students take methods, statistics, theory, and topic-specific classes, but they struggle to integrate what they learn and to see how it fits within the broader field of criminology and criminal justice research.

This book directly tackles this problem by helping students to develop a “researcher sensibility,” and demonstrates how the “nuts and bolts” of criminal justice research – including research design, theory, data, and analysis – are and can be combined.

Relying on numerous real-world examples and illustrations, this book reveals how anyone can “think like a researcher.” It reveals, too, why that ability is critical for being a savvy producer or consumer of criminological and criminal justice research.

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FUNDAMENTALS OF

**Criminological and
Criminal Justice
Inquiry**

The Science and Art of Conducting,
Evaluating, and Using Research

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
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314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316645130
DOI: 10.1017/9781108149815

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First published 2019

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-19370-3 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-316-64513-0 Paperback

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Preface

Research can seem like an impenetrable and inaccessible undertaking, even for those who do it for a living. What exactly counts as “research”? How exactly does research get produced? How can we distinguish good studies from bad ones? What is an appropriate use of findings?

We wrote this book to provide a guide that might help readers to answer such questions and to develop what we term a “researcher sensibility.” Developing fluency in criminological and criminal justice research should not be hard. It can be, though. Why? Research typically gets taught in a piecemeal fashion. Take a course on theory, a course or two on data, courses on statistical techniques or other methods, and a few on policing, the courts, and corrections – and somehow one is supposed to be off to the races. But the end result is not research fluency; it is confusion. The problem for many students or others who try to pick up research on the fly is that no good one-stop-shop source exists to obtain that fluency.

That creates a big problem. Why? Advances in science and policy depend on understanding research. How, then, can students, criminal justice policymakers and practitioners, and members of the public acquire a researcher sensibility?

We believe that it can come from thinking about research in, well, more of the way in which researchers think about it. Existing books on criminology and criminal justice do not, in our view, do that well. They help. Theory books shed light on theory, data books shed light on data, and methods books shed light on methods. Typical introduction-to-research-methods books help, too, by shedding light on core concepts in research. Many books that tackle substantive topics (e.g., criminal behavior, policing, courts, corrections) help as well by exposing students to research. But none of them shows how to integrate different parts of the research process.

Taking our cue from two classics of how to think about research – C. Wright Mill’s *The Sociological Imagination* and Howard Becker’s *Tricks of the Trade* – we created this book to address that gap. We wanted to

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highlight how science and art go into thinking about criminological and criminal justice research and, more broadly, to help readers to develop a researcher sensibility. Obtaining this sensibility is possible! And it opens the door to seeing so many more possibilities for creating knowledge and generating better crime and justice policy.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In the first part of the book, we describe what motivated us to write it, the field of criminology and criminal justice, and the nature of science. In addition, we provide an overview of the central theme of the book – that a researcher sensibility can be easily acquired and that it is essential for conducting, evaluating, and using research. It then turns to a discussion of theory, data, and analysis, the essential ingredients of research studies. Building on that account, the book identifies different types of research. We discuss science-focused versus policy-focused research, varieties of causal relationships that research can examine, and the vast array of criminological and criminal justice areas and topics that can be investigated. In the final part of the book, we conclude with a focus on how readers can appraise research. We identify specific strategies that we and many others have found useful in developing a researcher sensibility. The chapters, described below, all build to that one central goal.

Chapter 1 (Introduction). In Chapter 1, we discuss the varied motivations for the book. A central starting point is the concern that too many students – as well as criminal justice policymakers and practitioners and members of the public – do not understand how to think about research. They therefore do not know how to evaluate or use it. We argue that anyone can develop a researcher sensibility and, with it, learn to see the science and the art that go into criminological and criminal justice research.

Chapter 2 (Science and Criminological and Criminal Justice Research). Chapter 2 steps back and zeroes in on what science is and what the field of criminology and criminal justice encompasses. The chapter highlights how an understanding of science lays the foundation for understanding all types of research and “evidence-based” policy.

Chapter 3 (The Science and Art of Conducting, Evaluating, and Using Research: Initial Observations). In this chapter, we describe the science and the art of research. We demonstrate the need for a researcher sensibility and emphasize that no cookie-cutter approach works in conducting, evaluating, or using research. The chapter underscores the importance of recognizing the different goals that guide research and how these goals can and should

affect research designs and studies. The goals include empirical description, understanding social meanings and the causes of crime and criminal justice phenomena, testing causal relationships, and answering different types of criminal justice policy questions.

Chapter 4 (The Role of Theory in Research). Theory constitutes a cornerstone of research. We show how theory, even if not articulated, guides all research and why it can assist us in discerning and explaining patterns and trends. We show, too, how theory dictates the types of data and analyses that go into credible research.

Chapter 5 (The Role of Data in Research). Data can be considered the second pillar of research. It grounds the scientific enterprise – indeed, without data, there is no science. In this chapter, we describe types of data, what data can best answer research questions, and consequences that flow from the limitations that attend to almost any data source. To think about data is to think like a researcher; as we argue, doing so does not require special training.

Chapter 6 (The Role of Analysis in Research). Analysis can be viewed as the third and final pillar of research. Chapter 6 showcases a range of analytic techniques and methods that can be used to discern patterns in data and to show cause-and-effect. More importantly, it identifies how theory and data together dictate the types of analyses that are appropriate. It identifies, too, how awareness of different types of analyses can lead to more creativity in thinking about and evaluating research. To think about analysis is also to think like a researcher!

Chapter 7 (Basic (Science-Focused) vs. Applied (Policy-Focused) Research). We discuss how these two types of research – studies that seek to advance science and those that seek to advance policy – have always been central to the field of criminology and criminal justice. Awareness of them can open the door to considering questions and ideas that otherwise would go unnoticed. The chapter includes a discussion of needs, theory, implementation (or process), outcome and impact, and cost-efficiency evaluations. Policy research requires use of such evaluations. Yet, these evaluations can provide unique opportunities for simultaneously advancing science.

Chapter 8 (Identifying Causal Effects). Causality stands at center stage in many criminological and criminal justice studies. But what is a causal effect? What kinds exist? This chapter presents different types of causal effects and identifies their importance in developing more accurate explanations and in improving policy.

Chapter 9 (Criminological and Criminal Justice Research Areas and Topics). The field of criminology and criminal justice covers so much terrain that it can be difficult to appreciate its scope. We present a “research matrix” to convey this scope. It provides a platform for

thinking about criminological and criminal justice research possibilities. For example, considering the goals of research, different units of analysis, and types of data and analyses opens the door to imagining more research ideas than otherwise would be possible. We argue that this ability to imagine possibilities goes hand-in-hand with developing a researcher sensibility.

Chapter 10 (Criteria for Conducting, Evaluating, and Using Research). Research does not magically produce results that stand on their own. The credibility and relevance of findings instead depend on different criteria. A lack of awareness of these criteria can lead to misunderstanding and misuse of research. We therefore describe criteria that can be used to judge the credibility of studies and their relevance for science and policy.

Chapter 11 (The Science and Art of Conducting, Evaluating, and Using Research: Practical Steps). Chapter 11 wraps up the book by reinforcing the core theme – that a researcher sensibility is necessary to conduct, evaluate, and use research appropriately and effectively – and by identifying nuts-and-bolts guidance for developing this sensibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have happened without Robert Dreesen, Senior Editor at Cambridge University Press. We owe him a debt of gratitude. He believed in the idea before it was fully articulated and then supported it and us wholeheartedly. Thank you as well to Lisa Pinto, the Development Team Lead at the Press, and several reviewers for guidance in adding final polishes. We thank Sonja Siennick and Brandon Welsh for early conversations about possible topics to include in the book and ways to demonstrate what a researcher “sensibility” means. Frank Cullen may not know it, but he has influenced this book through many conversations with both authors and by sharing many important works in criminology and criminal justice. Dan owes a special debt of gratitude to Bill Kelly and Mark Stafford. They were and remain exemplary role models for “thinking like a researcher,” and a number of the insights described in the book emanated from conversations with them. Thank you for that and for your friendship. Although they may not realize it, colleagues at the Urban Institute, Florida State University, and the University of Cincinnati have greatly influenced the content of this book as well. A “researcher sensibility” is alive and well among them. The world is a better place for it.

Thank you most especially to Emily, Eli, and Ashley. They all have an ear for “bunk.” With research, as in life, that is no small part of what one needs when filtering the good, the bad, and the irrelevant!

A FINAL PERSONAL NOTE TO THE READER

We wrote this book to be useful to anyone – researchers, criminal justice policymakers and practitioners, and members of the public. But it is students who likely will find it to be the most useful. Indeed, in writing this book, we thought constantly about the undergraduate and graduate students who we have taught and with whom we work.

Their frustration at seeing how to connect different classes is palpable. One day they take a class on theory. Another day they take one on data, sampling, survey design, or the like. On yet another day they take a statistics class or two, or perhaps classes on qualitative methods or policy evaluation. In the meantime, they take classes on criminology and criminal justice that summarize and discuss large amounts of research. To many of them, it is akin to learning a language by taking a class on vocabulary, another on grammar, still another on culture, and then trying to read, speak, or write in that language. That approach does not work very well in learning any language. And it does not work well in learning to think like a researcher.

This book is meant for you and for anyone else who has struggled to make sense of crime and justice research. It is meant to help you to become “fluent” in research and to see the connections that run through all parts of the research process. It is meant ultimately to advance your own interests in criminology and criminal justice.

Research can be learned by doing. But we believe it also can be learned through a book like this one. It shows how theory, data, and analysis are connected. It shows the science and the art that go into the research process. More importantly, it shows how it is *your* ability to imagine research possibilities that creates the foundation for seeing these connections and developing the ability to conduct, evaluate, and use research.