



IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH A RESEARCH PARTNER

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

WHAT IS A PROJECT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS (PSN) RESEARCH PARTNER?

The PSN strategy requires the United States Attorney's Office (USAO) and its partners to identify the most pressing violent crime problems in the districts and to use intelligence and data to identify causes and drivers of violence so that comprehensive solutions can be developed to reduce violent crime. It is highly recommended that USAOs engage a research partner as they are developing and implementing their violent crime reduction strategies. This will help to provide structure and focus, allowing districts to use limited resources in the most effective and efficient way possible.

WHO IS A RESEARCH PARTNER?

In traditional terms, a research partner is someone who has received formal training in research and evaluation methods and has applied those skills in a specified field (e.g., criminal justice). They tend to have advanced quantitative and qualitative skills as well as significant training in criminological theory. As experts in their fields, research partners tend to be well versed in relevant crime control and prevention literature and well informed of the state of practice in criminal justice. Research partners are most often found in university and college criminology, criminal justice, sociology, public policy, and urban affairs programs. Research partners can also be found in private research or consulting firms, research centers, and state and local agencies.

WHO IS A CRIME ANALYST?

A crime analyst is someone who applies quantitative analysis techniques and statistical methods in support of operational organizations, most frequently law enforcement agencies. Depending on the agency and the analyst, crime analysts may also bring extensive training in criminological theory. That person may have received formal training in those areas, but formal training is not required. They will typically bring knowledge of local crime

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patterns and trends, as well as familiarity with local crime information systems. A typical crime analyst supports an agency by mapping incidents, identifying “hot spots,” and developing descriptive crime reports. Although a crime analyst may not have the background or the organizational flexibility to serve in the PSN research partner role, an analyst can be an excellent resource for violence reduction multipartner teams and for the research partner working with those teams. The qualifications of analysts vary from agency to agency and should be discussed when considering the research partner role.

RESEARCH PARTNER AND CRIME ANALYST: HOW DO THEY MEET THE NEEDS OF THE PSN TEAM?

In most cases, each of these professionals plays a particularly important and necessary role in PSN. A research partner may be able to provide services and resources in addition to what a crime analyst can do to support a violence reduction, multipartner team. These include:

- Research partners work with and in support of the team as a whole, not any one agency, and thus can be an independent and objective voice.
- Research partners may be well known and respected by multiple team partners due to prior engagements in similar efforts/grants.
- Research partners are experienced in working with multiple data sets and are set up to deal with the privacy and confidentiality issues that may arise when combining data.
- Both research partners and crime analysts can conduct quantitative analyses of data, but research partners are more likely specifically trained in qualitative analysis methods in addition to quantitative methods.
- Research partners are trained theorists who can bring a broader perspective to complement the practitioner team.
- Research partners generally have the backing of a higher education community, which includes access to graduate students and other experts as a means of additional resources for the team.
- Research partners are trained evaluators who can assist you in designing measurable interventions and who can actually measure them.

HOW CAN A RESEARCH PARTNER ENHANCE YOUR TEAM?

In general, research partners will enhance the team by providing:

- **Specialized Knowledge and Ability.** The primary advantage of partnering with a researcher is the same that comes with hiring any expert: specialized knowledge and ability. Action research partners will understand how to analyze data, document program operations and processes, measure program outcomes, collect and analyze data to determine program effectiveness, and present those findings in a meaningful way. Program managers and staff members usually do not have comprehensive expertise in all of these areas.
- **Objectivity.** The hallmark of a good research partner is objectivity, that is, the ability to look at information about the program and form unbiased conclusions about whether the program is achieving what it is designed to achieve. In general, most program managers and staff believe in the effectiveness of their programs, and thus there is the potential that they will look at evaluation findings in a biased way—even if this is an unconscious bias. A good research partner will point out both the successes and deficits in the program’s operations and document how or why each happened.

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- **Credibility.** Precisely because research partners can be objective, their conclusions and recommendations tend to carry more weight than those that might be produced by the program managers and staff. This credibility can be important to policymakers and funders and, significantly, to communities in which the program is being implemented to get their buy-in.
- **Perspective.** In part, because they strive to be objective, research partners may come to the program with fresh views about program activities and relationships between program components. In addition, a good research partner brings to the table a different way of thinking about program effectiveness, one grounded in empiricism (understanding program operations and outcomes through the collection and analysis of data, both quantitative and qualitative).

WHAT CAN YOUR RESEARCH PARTNER DO FOR YOU?

Unlike traditional research involving neutral observation, research partners are to be fully engaged in the problem-solving process. A good research partner is part facilitator, part researcher, and part program specialist. A good research partner can help with some or all the following:

- Identify crime and violence issues in a region or in a smaller target area.
- Collect and analyze data to develop a dynamic, real-life, operationally meaningful picture of crime in a determined area. Using gun crime as an example, the research partner could help with analyzing the following for homicides, nonfatal shootings, robberies, and/or aggravated assaults:
 - o historical trends (numbers and rates)
 - o comparison with “similar” cities/regions
 - o information on growth and development patterns in the area
 - o demographic analyses of offenders and victims (age, race, sex)
 - o examination of criminal histories of offenders and victims
 - o relationship between victims and offenders
 - o number of offenders involved in incidents
 - o weapon used in incidents (by origin, make, model, time-to-crime)
 - o when incidents occurred (time of day; day of week; season)
 - o where incidents occurred, and how this relates to where offenders and victims live, such as drug markets, schools, etc.
 - o motive behind incidents (through a review of case files with practitioners; interviews of practitioners, community members, offenders, clergy)
- Suggest strategies or evidence-based practices to address needs presented by the data.
- Establish goals and measurable objectives for all four design elements. See the *Project Safe Neighborhoods Blueprint for Success* found at psntta.org.
- Assist in the development of a logic model: that is, provide a written description of how the activities and components of the strategy relate to each other and to the goals and objectives you are trying to accomplish.

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- Assist in the development of a strategic action plan to serve as a blueprint for action and to determine whether the strategy is meeting its goals and objectives.
- Develop an evaluation design to determine whether the program is having its intended impacts.
- Communicate evaluation findings and data on key indicators early and often to improve the strategy.
- Present findings to community groups, policymakers, and other constituents.
- Assist the team with reporting requirements of the Department of Justice or other funding source.

WHAT SHOULD I DO TO PREPARE TO WORK WITH A RESEARCH PARTNER?

- Convene your PSN team.
- Develop a mission and a focus for your PSN initiative. Your focus can be as small as youth gang violence in two police beats (as in Detroit, Michigan), and it can be as large as firearms-involved domestic violence (as in the District of New Mexico). The focus of the initiative is the team's decision to make; however, we recommend that you consider how far your resources can reasonably extend when considering your focus.
- Conduct a data inventory. Have each agency in the team identify what data they maintain that might be useful to the problem-solving process. Determine what requirements need to be met in order to share the data with a third party. Attempt to remove obstacles to information sharing.
- Educate stakeholders (especially operational agencies) about the role of the research partner in this process to gain their acceptance by all partners.
- Develop a list of questions that the team wants answered about the violence problem. For example: We think that all the guns are coming from one source; is this true? Are most victims of serious violence themselves offenders? What are the gangs in our area, and how do they factor into our violence problem?
- Determine the types of products you want to see from your research partner. If you prefer presentations over brief papers outlining major findings, you should start to articulate this preference now.
- Keep an open mind. Research/practitioner partnerships are not always easy or natural alliances. It will take time to build trust in the partnership.

HOW DO I FIND A POTENTIAL RESEARCH PARTNER?

Resources

- Existing relationships. Do any of the team members have previous or ongoing good experience with a research partner?
- Is there a university or college nearby? Do they have a sociology, criminology, public policy, or urban affairs school? If so, it is worth reaching out to discuss the initiative with the university.
- Check with the American Society of Criminology (www.asc41.com). The members of this professional organization are listed by state. You might consider contacting researchers who live nearby.
- Justice Information Resource Network¹ is connected to a network of directors of the state Statistical Analysis Centers (SACs), which are units or agencies at the state level committed to policy-relevant criminal justice research. More information can be found at: <https://jirn.org/>
- Ask research partners who are currently working with a PSN initiative in another district if they know someone in your area or who could work in your area.

¹ Formerly known as the Justice Research and Statistics Association (JRSA).

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Comparing Research Partners

- You may want to consider or compare more than one research partner even from the same institution. Competition is good. You might consider requesting formal proposals from potential research partners using the requirements in a solicitation such as the *Violent Gang and Gun Crime Reduction Program (Project Safe Neighborhoods)- FY 2023 Project Safe Neighborhoods Formula Grant Program solicitation (ojp.gov)*. Since the “winning” research partner will have to submit a proposal like this to the Department of Justice for funding in any case, this may not be too much to ask, and it may eliminate some researchers who are not interested in investing too much time in the initiative and/or researchers who clearly do not understand the initiative. A caution here is time constraints. If you want to use the solicitation, you will need to give researchers time (2-4 weeks) to write proposals.
- At a minimum, you should: (1) carefully review the research partner’s resume to determine if she/ he has experience serving as a research partner and/or conducting evaluations of programs like yours. Be sure that references include directors of programs that the researcher has worked with in the past and ask those individuals about their experiences with the researcher, including how well the researcher worked collaboratively with the program managers and staff; (2) arrange an interview between the team and potential research partners to determine if this is a person with whom they would be comfortable working. Ask potential research partners to discuss how they might contribute to the team; what experience has prepared them to work on this project; some ideas about what the gun violence problem involves and how it might be further explored; and what type of commitment they are willing to invest in the initiative; and (3) ask for samples of potential research partners’ work, including reports. Review the materials to be sure they are written clearly, without a great deal of jargon, and in a way that would be understandable to you and to those with whom you would like to share the findings.

Questions to consider using in the interview process

- Please demonstrate how you have presented complicated quantitative analyses to practitioners.
- What will be the role of qualitative information (interviews, focus groups, observation) in this project?
- I understand that in some cities, researchers have mapped specific crime issues. Are you familiar with this?
- Would analysis like that be possible, assuming that gang disputes are a problem here? How would you approach this task? What would you need to accomplish it?
- What will be the role of the team in designing the research? What kind of information will you need from us?
- What makes you interested in the project?
- What are a couple of the most significant recent research findings, as they relate to this initiative?
- How much time would you be able to spend onsite?
- In many projects, data analysis is conducted and strategies are developed, but the relationship between the data and strategies is not clear. How will you help us bring data and strategies together?

Questions to ask yourself after each interview:

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- Was the research partner qualified, in terms of training and experience?
- Did they seem to bring an appropriate approach to the project?
- Was she/he interested in the project for the “right” reasons?
- Can we work with this person?
- Did she/he seem to take questions from the group in a positive (non-defensive) way?
- Did the research partner seem to bring his/her own agenda?
- Did the research partner have the answers before doing the analysis?
- How was his/her interaction with the group?
- Did she/he seem to respect the members of the team as partners?

WHAT MAKES A GOOD RESEARCH PARTNER?

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to identify a qualified research partner. Although many researchers are members of professional organizations, such as the American Society of Criminology or the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, membership in these organizations does not imply qualifications for the action research type of skills needed to work with the team.

There are some basic qualifications you should look for when determining how to hire a research partner. What follows are some considerations for selecting a research partner.

- **Formal Education.** Most research partners have formal training in research methods, usually in a social science discipline. Graduate-level training should provide this knowledge; for example, someone with a Ph.D. in criminology should have the research knowledge required to serve as a research partner.
- **Experience.** A qualified research partner must have not only research skills but also specific experience in working with practitioners and programs. Although experience working in a criminal justice/law enforcement setting is not a requirement for a research partner, experience working with criminal justice/law enforcement programs is.
- **Philosophy.** Much has been written about how research and evaluation should be conducted, and different research partners view the process differently. For example, some research partners may consider themselves to be “experts” and view their role as one of an outsider who reviews program materials, interviews managers and staff, and then makes recommendations for “fixing” the program. Others see themselves more as researchers than research partners and may avoid providing feedback to teams until after the evaluation is completed so as not to “contaminate” the evaluation. Some do not consider data and information gleaned through interviews with law enforcement officers, community members, and offenders as “evidence” and thus avoid using these methods to understand violence problems. None of these are particularly productive philosophies for working with PSN teams. Instead, you should be looking for a research partner who believes that the problem-solving process is a collaborative one between the research partner and the team. In this philosophy, team members are all seen as experts. The research partner works closely with them throughout the process of understanding the gun violence problem, designing interventions to deal with the gun violence problems, documenting interventions, developing performance measures, interpreting evaluation findings, and making recommendations for program improvement. The

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goal of such research and evaluation is to improve the program, not to declare the program a success or failure. More formal names for this philosophy include “action research,” “participatory evaluation,” “utilization-focused evaluation,” and “empowerment evaluation.” This can be considered both “research informed practice” and “practice informed research.”

- **Communication Skills.** Research partners must be able to communicate with a wide variety of individuals who have a vested interest in the results of their work. Prosecutors, law enforcement leadership and line officers, community members, clergy representatives, funding agency representatives, legislators, city council or county commission members, and even offenders to whom research partners may be called upon to present their evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Research partners should not only be personable and engaging but they should be able to clearly present findings and conclusions both orally and in written form at a level understandable to the particular audience.

The MSU team is available for consultation on the research partner role in violence reduction strategies.²

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² This document is a modification of guidelines originally developed by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Firearms Enforcement Assistance Team (FEAT) working in collaboration with Michigan State University, the national research partner for Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN).