



SPECIAL ISSUE ON EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY AND PRACTICE

■ INTRODUCTION

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The emergence of the evidence-based movement is arguably one of the most significant developments to occur in criminal and juvenile justice over the past 20 years (Travis, 2012; Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010; and the Howell and Lipsey article in this special issue). In the early 1990s, the term “evidence-based” was largely unknown in the criminal and juvenile justice communities. Looking back, it is difficult to imagine how any of us at that time could have envisioned how the evidence-based movement would affect crime control policymaking, practice, and even research in the coming years. Today, the imprint of the movement is widespread. Crime control policy and program development processes are increasingly being informed by scientific evidence, and many practices in policing, corrections, delinquency prevention, and other areas have been, and continue to be, shaped by evidence generated through research. Incentives and even mandates for evidence-based programming are now frequently used by funding sources, and virtually anyone can now access an unprecedented amount of information about what works to prevent and control crime using online repositories such as CrimeSolutions.gov. Moreover, the demand for trustworthy, research-generated evidence and evidence-based applications is rapidly increasing.

While researchers have played a key role in expanding evidence-based practice, the widespread and accelerating demand for evidence and evidence-based applications has had an impact on the research community as well as on practice. Evaluation and other research designed to identify effective interventions is far more common today than a few decades ago, and research centers aimed at advancing the development and use of research-generated evidence have emerged in

academic and other settings across the country. The tools used by researchers to determine what works also have changed. Systematic reviews and meta-analysis have replaced narrative reviews as the standard techniques for synthesizing evaluation research; randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are increasingly being used in the field and they have been designated by major research funding sources and other organizations as the preferred design for determining an intervention's effectiveness; and new techniques—such as propensity score analysis—are becoming better known and more frequently used to enhance the scientific rigor of quasi-experimental evaluation research.

☒ Defining “Evidence-Based”

The term “evidence-based” has been used in many fields and defined in a variety of ways.¹ In criminal and juvenile justice, the term has generally been used to describe practices and programs that are informed by the results of scientific research and deemed to be effective. While some people prefer the terms research-based or science-based, evidence-based programs and practices rely on sound theory and are considered to be effective based on rigorous scientific evaluation. But the term “evidence-based” also applies to a broader decisionmaking approach. Rather than relying on conviction, conjecture, or conventional wisdom, decisionmakers turn to the best available evidence about what does and does not work when evaluating options and making decisions. Evidence-based decisionmaking is simply the routine and systematic application of the best available knowledge in order to identify and choose the optimal approach in policy, management, and other applied settings (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2007).

While evidence-based programs and practices are desirable because they can help address social problems, their popularity has grown for accountability and efficiency reasons too (Small, Reynolds, O'Connor, & Cooney, 2005). Today, more than ever before, taxpayers and government officials want to know that publicly funded agencies and programs are providing tangible, real-life benefits to people and communities. Evidence-based programs and practices help fit the bill, because given proper targeting and implementation, they can be expected to produce results in a cost-effective way. What's more, agencies can increasingly rely on proven interventions instead of trial and error. From an economic standpoint, evidence-based interventions are effective and efficient, and they help to ensure that limited resources produce a sound return on investment.

¹ This material on defining “evidence-based” is drawn from the author's 2008 publication, *What Works: Effective Recidivism Reduction and Risk Focused Prevention Programs: A Compendium of Evidence-Based Options for Preventing New and Persistent Criminal Behavior*.

Despite the intuitive appeal of using science to guide policy and practice, it would be wrong to assume that crime control and prevention efforts have become largely evidence-based. Granted, there is growing interest in evidence-based ways to address crime problems, and numerous jurisdictions and organizations have made progress implementing evidence-based programs, practices, or policy reforms, but much of what we do in criminal and juvenile justice continues to be based on tradition, ideology, anecdote, or conventional wisdom. Of course, legislators, police chiefs, correctional administrators, and other decisionmakers have to contend with many influences and constraints when making policy decisions, and debates about the role science should play in decisionmaking are legitimate and often beneficial, but it is still far too common to encounter situations in which scientific evidence is ignored or paid little more than lip service.

⊗ Problems to Address

Even where there is genuine interest in evidence-based policymaking or practice, knowledge deficiencies can still be a problem. While significant progress arguably has been made translating and disseminating scientific findings for practical application, many of the interventions that prevent or control crime in the most cost-effective manner are not well known, and misconceptions about what works are common. And while many policymakers and practitioners are eminently knowledgeable about evidence-based concepts and issues, it is not uncommon to encounter situations in which a functional understanding of what it means to be evidence-based is lacking. Researchers have much to learn too. The much-lamented gap between research and practice remains a chronic and intractable problem, and our understanding of what it takes to increase the practical use of research-generated knowledge remains rudimentary. Simply put, we know very little about how to make research a valued, influential and institutional part of policymaking and practice.

The evidence base we can draw from also has limitations. Even though the amount of trustworthy knowledge we have about what works is greater than ever before, gaps in the evidence base continue to exist. Effective interventions have not been identified for every crime problem confronting our communities. Just as importantly, although the situation is improving, there is relatively little science we can draw on to guide the implementation of evidence-based programs and practices, thereby helping to ensure they produce their expected effects. As Fixsen and his colleagues (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005, p. vi) point out, “Over the past decade, the science related to developing and identifying ‘evidence-based practices and programs’ has improved—however the science related to implementing these programs with fidelity and good outcomes for consumers lags far behind.”

Significant variation in both the quantity and quality of the evidence we can access also is a problem. While the evidence base is relatively robust in corrections and delinquency prevention, for example, it is somewhat less so in policing, quite limited in pretrial services, and virtually nonexistent in the area of prosecution. As a result, the evidence that any particular actor or agency can draw on to address a particular crime problem will vary depending on the nature of the crime problem and the role the actor or agency plays in preventing or controlling crime. This unevenness in the evidence base presents significant challenges for a nontrivial number of jurisdictions and organizations, particularly when funding sources mandate the adoption of evidence-based practices or privilege evidence-based initiatives in a competitive funding environment.

☒ Controversies to Resolve

It also would be in error to assume that the evidence-based movement has been embraced unconditionally or universally in the research community. Indeed, some researchers have raised concerns about narrow conceptions of credible evidence and evidence-based practice, and, more broadly, the role and value of the evidence-based movement in particular areas of practice. Sparrow (2011, p. 27), for example, has challenged many of the assumptions underlying the evidence-based movement in policing, as well as the notion that policing can or should be primarily evidence-based. He argues that the contributions social science research can make to operational policing are “particular and limited.” Rather than relying primarily on evidence generated through evaluations—particularly those employing randomized designs—Sparrow sees the need for policing to “embrace a substantially broader range of investigative, analytic, inquiry and intelligence techniques more generally suited to the operational demands of the profession.”

Several researchers have voiced concerns about relying solely on experimental methods for judging program effectiveness.² Smyth and Schorr (2009, pp. 2, 11), for example, argue that RCTs are a “poor fit for judging the impact” of some programs, particularly those characterized by flexibility, adaptation, divergent goals among and long-term engagement with clients, and a systemic orientation. They contend that many of these programs value accountability and are highly effective, but they see a “fundamental mismatch between the task of understanding the workings and impacts of these programs and the prevailing assessment tools and mindsets.”

Tom Schwandt (2005, pp. 97–99), one of the nation’s leading scholars on evaluation and practice, has similarly cautioned against defining evidence-based

² See, for example, Cook, Scriven, Coryn, & Evergreen (2010), Smyth & Schorr (2009), Julnes & Rog (2007), and Reed (2005).

practice too narrowly and, as a result, marginalizing practitioners and practice. He has voiced concerns that evidence-based approaches “are too readily becoming an ideology that aims to instill scientific rationality as authoritative for everyday practice [and] that threatens to eclipse practical knowledge and reasoning.” Schwandt reminds us that practice is a “complex affair” that is more than merely a “site or location for the delivery of scientifically valid solutions.” Knowledge about “what works” is important, but effective practice also requires judgment, and the practitioner must decide how to use scientific knowledge “in combination with his or her understandings of client needs; institutional and personal resources and constraints” and other factors.

Advocates of evidence-based practice have responded to many of these concerns, disputing many of their underlying assumptions. Cynthia Lum, in her article for this special issue and a 2011 article on the recent pushback against evidence-based policing, has countered the notion that evidence-based policing leaves little room for the use of other analytic and inquiry techniques. Proponents of evidence-based policing, she contends, are not suggesting that police operations should be exclusively or even primarily governed by a particular form of scientific evidence; rather, they are interested in “making research and science a part of the [policy and practice] conversation (Lum, 2011, p. 6).” Laub (2011), Weisburd (2011), and others have acknowledged that practitioners have an important role to play in evidence-based practice. Weisburd (2011, p. 1), for example, has written that “Good science is only one part of the evidence-based policy equation. Innovative practitioners and policymakers are equally important to this enterprise.” In discussing the need for a “dynamic interface between research and practice,” Laub (2011, p. 3) has stated, “This is a two-way street: In one direction, practitioners in the field describe challenges they face in their jobs every day; in the other direction, scientists discover new tools and ideas to overcome these challenges and evaluate their impact.” In these perspectives, researcher-practitioner partnerships and the co-production of knowledge are seen as vitally important for the advancement of evidence-based practice.

Responses to concerns about relying on experimental evidence as the sole arbiter of program effectiveness and the basis for attaining evidence-based program status arguably have been more nuanced. While there has been some acknowledgment—often guarded—that relying on experimental evidence might inadvertently marginalize some effective programs,³ and that evaluations designed to identify what works should employ the most rigorous methods *possible*, even

³ For example, in a 2009 report to Congress focused on examination of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy’s Top Tier Evidence initiative, which is designed to help federal programs identify interventions that meet the experimental evidence standard, the Government Accountability Office (2009, p. 31) stated that “Requiring evidence from randomized experiments as sole proof of an intervention’s effectiveness is likely to exclude many potentially effective and worthwhile practices for which random assignment is not practical.”

if they are not experimental,⁴ there also has been a reluctance on the part of many advocates of evidence-based practice from the scientific community to relax the experimental evidence standard as the basis for making *definitive* judgments about the efficacy or effectiveness of an intervention. This reluctance is typically justified on the grounds that RCTs provide a well-defined procedure for creating valid counterfactuals and generating unbiased assessments of treatment effects, whereas, as Boruch (2007, p. 60) states, “Analyses of data from passive surveys or nonrandomized evaluations or quasi-experiments cannot similarly ensure unbiased estimates of the intervention’s relative effect.” Hence, relying on nonrandomized evaluations can inadvertently lead one to conclude that an ineffective program—or even a program that does harm—actually works. Further, while there is widespread acknowledgment that valid causal knowledge has been established with nonexperimental methods and that methods such as regression discontinuity are highly capable of generating unbiased estimates of an intervention’s effect, the experiment is preferable, as Tom Cook (2006, p. 4) states, “over other potentially bias-free methods because it enjoys greater statistical power and its assumptions are more transparent and better understood when compared to other forms of causal research.”

While the controversies briefly discussed above may never be fully resolved, they are stimulating discourse that is strengthening our understanding of what constitutes credible evidence and what it means to be evidence-based. It is within this context—a widespread and accelerating demand for evidence and evidence-based applications, coupled with lingering controversies and problems to resolve if the promise of evidence-based practice is to be fully realized—that this special issue of *Justice Research and Policy* was developed.

📌 Special Issue Overview

This issue contains invited articles on a range of topics relevant to evidence-based policymaking and practice. While the topics covered are highly diverse, all of the articles were developed with a common goal in mind: helping criminal and juvenile justice professionals move policy and practice in a more evidence-based direction. Each article in the special issue presents the reader with findings, recommendations, examples, or other forms of practical guidance that can be used to craft more evidence-based policies or practices in a particular crime control domain. Four of

⁴ For example, writing in response to the recent pushback against evidence-based policing, Lum (2011, p. 7) stated that “Those promoting evidence-based policing often are criticized as only promoting time consuming, expensive RCTs. This is also an incorrect exaggeration. Proponents of evidence-based policing assert that when possible, police evaluations should employ the most rigorous methods to connect the effects of an intervention with measurable outcomes.”

the articles also present and describe a tool or resource professionals can (or shortly will be able to) use for practical purposes, such as program assessment in juvenile justice, capacity building for cost-benefit analysis, and the exchange of knowledge on desistance from crime and its application in community corrections.

As an applied researcher, I have long been an advocate of what John Laub and others today refer to as “translational criminology.” In a nutshell, translational criminology is about improving policy and practice with research (Laub, 2011, pp. 3–4). As a former Statistical Analysis Center⁵ director and State Administrative Agency⁶ research director, I also am keenly aware of the practical orientation of many *Justice Research and Policy* readers. Yet, I am a firm believer in Kurt Lewin’s aphorism, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). Therefore, I am pleased that several of the articles in this special issue also address, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, one or more of the theoretical foundations that define, or conceptual issues that affect, contemporary evidence-based practice. These include how we define evidence-based programs and practices, what type of evidence matters, and whose evidence matters. Discussions of theoretical issues may, at first blush, seem a bit out of place in *Justice Research and Policy*, but it is their nexus with practice, and with problems such as the gap between research and practice and the marginalization of some programs and practitioners, that makes them so important and relevant for this special issue. As guest editor, I sincerely hope that the articles authored by my esteemed colleagues for this special issue will not only provide readers with information and guidance that is useful for everyday practice, but that they also will stimulate discourse and new ways of thinking about the production and application of trustworthy evidence, and, more broadly, what it means to be evidence-based.

☉ Introduction to the Articles

The first article by James Howell and Mark Lipsey describes three different ways evidence-based programs can be defined, with a focus on an approach that is not

⁵ The Justice Research and Statistics Association defines Statistical Analysis Centers (SACs) as units or agencies at the state government level that use information from all components of the criminal justice system to conduct objective analyses of statewide policy issues. There are currently SACs in 53 states and territories.

⁶ The National Criminal Justice Association defines State Administrative Agencies (SAAs) as entities within state and territorial governments responsible for comprehensive criminal justice planning and policy development. In addition, these agencies allocate resources statewide and distribute, monitor, and report on spending under the federal Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant (Byrne JAG) program and, in most cases, other grant programs. As required by federal statute, the SAA is designated by the Governor, or in the case of territories and the District of Columbia, the head of the executive branch of government. In total, there are 56 Edward Byrne JAG SAAs across the 50 states, five territories, and the District of Columbia.

well known but extremely important, particularly for non-brand name programs and the jurisdictions in which they operate. The article presents guidelines derived from meta-analysis that policymakers and practitioners can use to maximize the effectiveness of generic interventions designed to reduce the recidivism of juvenile offenders. It concludes with an overview of the Standard Program Evaluation Protocol (SPEP) and recent SPEP validation research. The SPEP is a practical tool that programs and systems can use to assess interventions for juvenile offenders and help them align more closely with evidence-based practice.

Howell and Lipsey's insights concerning the ways evidence-based programs can be conceptualized are an important contribution to the field. They expand our understanding of what it means to be evidence-based. Moreover, their conception of evidence-based programs and their analytical findings regarding the effectiveness of certain generic interventions for juvenile offenders have potentially profound implications for scores of jurisdictions and homegrown programs across the country. Many of these jurisdictions and programs strive to be evidence-based, but they lack the resources to engage in rigorous evaluation, and shifting to the use of brand-name protocols—such as those appearing on lists of model or exemplary programs already proven to work—is not a viable option. Howell and Lipsey demonstrate that with the right approach, non-brand name programs can be highly effective and considered to be evidence-based. Moreover, they illustrate how meta-analysis can be used to construct practice guidelines that can be used to both assess and improve generic, locally developed programs in terms of their alignment with evidence-based practice.

The second article by Fergus McNeill, Steve Farrall, Claire Lightowler, and Shadd Maruna focuses on evidence-based practice in community corrections and the scientific evidence on desistance from crime. The paper examines the contested purposes of community supervision and the forms of evidence that might best support one of those purposes, the rehabilitation of offenders. In the article, McNeill and his colleagues challenge some of the underlying assumptions of the “what works” model that currently serves as the foundation for many evidence-based practices in corrections, and they make the case for a more explicit integration of the evidence on desistance into everyday probation and parole practice. Drawing on desistance research, they identify seven central themes for practice and discuss their application in community corrections. The article closes with a brief overview of the Discovering Desistance Project, a transatlantic knowledge exchange initiative designed to build knowledge and serve as a resource about the desistance process and how community corrections can support it.

The paper by McNeill and his colleagues is provocative in its commentary on the problems and limitations of the “what works” model in corrections and its perspective on evidence-based practice in probation and parole. Identifying programs and practices that work is important, but, the authors argue, so is understanding and explaining the change processes that evidence-based programs and practices exist to support. The paper also adds to the emerging body of evidence on the key role human relationships and normative mechanisms—rather than coercion and

punishment—play in reducing recidivism and promoting desistance (see, for example, Paparozzi & Gendreau, 2005; Skeem & Manchak, 2008; and Eno Louden, Skeem, Camp, Vidal, & Peterson, 2010). As Skeem and Manchak (2008, p. 241) have stated, “In the midst of debates about the effectiveness of branded programs, we often lose sight of the fact that officers’ orientation toward supervision and relationships with probationers influence outcomes more strongly than the specific program they ostensibly apply.”

The McNeill et al. paper also calls attention to another important issue: Whose evidence, expertise, and experience should shape policy and practice? The authors argue that the voices of correctional practitioners *and* ex-offenders are critical for the development of plans and services that effectively support and promote desistance. The insights they offer on the issue of whose evidence and expertise should matter has important implications for advancing evidence-based practice and addressing concerns about the marginalization of practitioners that extend well beyond community corrections.

The next article by Cynthia Lum, Cody Telep, Christopher Koper and Julie Grieco shifts the discussion from community corrections to policing. It deals with one of the most chronic and intractable problems for the evidence-based movement, the gap between research and practice. The article reviews research on the factors that contribute to the receptivity and use of research by practitioners and presents findings on the receptivity of police officers to research from the authors’ own survey of officers in the Sacramento, California, Police Department. The article also discusses the complexity of evidence-based policing and, in the contexts of both the receptivity survey and the Evidence-Based Policing Matrix, what works in policing. (The Matrix is a research translation tool that reveals generalizations about effective policing strategies.) The article concludes with a series of examples illustrating how research can be integrated into police practices for the express purpose of institutionalization.

The Lum et al. article highlights the value of sound research translation tools and the importance of researcher-practitioner partnerships for the adoption and institutionalization of evidence-based practice. In tackling important questions about receptivity to research and the use of research by practitioners, Lum and her colleagues offer insights about breaking down barriers to research use that are relevant to a wide audience, not just readers interested in policing. One of the more interesting, but perhaps not surprising, findings reported in the article is the apparent importance of “familiarity” for both research receptivity and use. While this finding has clear implications for the packaging and dissemination of research findings, it also indirectly suggests that social networks, which remain largely underutilized, could play an important role in advancing evidence-based decisionmaking and, more broadly, bridging the research-practice gap.⁷ Indeed, Nutley, Walter and

⁷ Using social networks for knowledge dissemination was briefly discussed by Lawrence Sherman in his presentation *Building a Global Tipping Point for Evidence-Based Crime Policy* at the 12th Annual Jerry Lee Crime prevention Symposium, April 2012.

Davies (2007) recently reported that personal networks and face-to-face interactions are particularly important and effective in facilitating the use of research.

Social networks have long existed within professions such as policing and corrections. They also exist across professions and disciplines, particularly at the state and local levels. Planning or policymaking boards, commissions, and other on-going partnerships in which practitioners, policymakers and researchers routinely interact and, over time, forge relationships are prime examples. These networks, and the relationships—both informal and formal—within them, hold great potential for building a more dynamic interface between research and practice.⁸ Yet they have never been mapped in a comprehensive and integrated manner and their information exchange and decisionmaking dynamics have not been adequately studied. Consequently, the roles researchers play in these networks—particularly in translating scientific evidence—remain obscure to many outside the networks, and they are too often absent from national conversations about strategies for enhancing research receptivity and use. A systematic effort to identify these networks, understand their dynamics, and harness their relationships could pay significant dividends for evidence-based policymaking and practice.

The next article in the series, authored by Elizabeth Drake, describes how the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has helped the State of Washington move toward an evidence-based juvenile justice system. The article describes in conceptual terms how meta-analysis and cost-benefit analysis are used by the Institute to identify evidence-based programs. It also presents an overview of how research is applied in a public policy setting in Washington State, highlighting important implementation issues and the positive impact evidence-based programming has had in the state.

In many ways, the Drake article presents a case study in how to be successful with an evidence-based initiative at the state level. While the Institute's cost-benefit work has received national recognition in recent years, the state's success in becoming more evidence-based and the larger process that has been followed to achieve that success warrant similar attention. One lesson that is clear from the Washington experience is that evidence-based reforms take time. Indeed, as Bertram and her colleagues (Bertram, Blase, Shern, Shea, Fixsen, 2011, p. 10) have stated: "Implementation of an evidence-based practice does not happen instantaneously. It is a process that can take two to four years to complete in a provider organization at the local level."⁹

⁸ The phrase "dynamic interface between research and practice" was originally used by John Laub (2011, p. 3) in the report *The National Institute of Justice Response to the Report of the National Research Council: Strengthening the National Institute of Justice*.

⁹ See Fixsen, Blase, Timbers, & Wolf, 2001; Hicks, Larson, Nelson, Olds, & Johnson, 2008; and Randolph et al., 2002, for supporting research.

The article by Elizabeth Drake also is important because it highlights the role and importance of economic evaluation—particularly cost-benefit analysis—in identifying evidence-based programs. As Sherman (2010) has pointed out, most initiatives to identify what works focus solely on program effects. Cost-effectiveness or cost-benefit ratios are rarely computed and taken into consideration. But as Drake notes, even if a program is effective at producing a desired outcome, it may not be a good investment if the benefits of the program do not exceed the costs. Cost-benefit analysis can help decisionmakers identify crime control and prevention practices that produce results with a positive return on investment. Moreover, it provides the basis for comparing many different programs, even those with widely disparate outcome objectives.

The final article, by Patrick Tolan, Tammi Walker, and N. Dickon Reppucci, differs from the other pieces in the special issue in its orientation and fundamental approach. Tolan and his colleagues use a legal and developmental psychology framework to examine the fairness and effectiveness of the federal Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA) as it applies to adolescents. They find a significant mismatch between prevailing registration and notification laws and policies for juveniles and the scientific evidence concerning adolescent development.

The article by Tolan and his colleagues reviews the history and current state of federal sex offender legislation, describing how registration and notification policies are typically applied to juveniles. Drawing on advances in the understanding of adolescent development from both developmental criminology and neurobiology, the authors then explain the mismatch between current laws and policies and our best empirical understanding of the key elements of adolescent behavior, decisionmaking, and intent formation. Cognitive differences between adolescents and adults, adolescent capacity for self-management and regulation, susceptibility to peer pressure, neurobiological and neurofunctional differences between adolescents and adults, and normative adolescent sexuality are all addressed. The article concludes with recommendations for grounding juvenile sex offender laws in a developmental understanding of adolescent behavior, thereby making them more evidence-based.

The Tolan et al. article is particularly timely given its subject matter and the registration and community notification requirements for juveniles that SORNA recently placed on states, territories, the District of Columbia and federally recognized Indian tribes that elect to function as registration jurisdictions.

The evidence regarding adolescent development from neuroscience and developmental criminology, however, has policy implications that extend far beyond the issue of juvenile sex offenders. The shift in policy towards harsher consequences for many types of juvenile offenders and the handling of more juveniles in “adult-like” fashion has largely occurred without regard to this important body of knowledge. Greater consideration of the evidence from developmental criminology and brain science in the formulation of juvenile justice policy would likely benefit both public safety and the fair administration of justice.

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☒ Acknowledgments

This special issue of Justice Research and Policy would not have been possible without the contributions of many individuals. I first would like to offer my gratitude to all the aforementioned authors. I am extremely grateful for their scholarship, their willingness to contribute to the special issue, and for everything they did to make this special issue a reality. They produced a series of articles that are relevant to a wide audience of criminal and juvenile justice professionals, whether they are policymakers, practitioners or researchers.

I also extend my thanks to the peer reviewers for this special issue. Their comments and suggestions were instrumental in helping the authors produce even stronger work. I want to acknowledge and thank Stan Orchowsky, Director of Research for the Justice Research and Statistics Association, for setting this project in motion. The idea of a special issue of Justice Research and Policy focused on evidence-based policy and practice originated with him. A thank you goes to Judith Sullivan-Phillips for contributing her layout and graphic design skills to this project. Finally, I owe a special debt of thanks to Nancy Michel, Director of Publications for the Justice Research and Statistics Association. This publication could not have been produced without her technical skills, management expertise, and tireless support.

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