

The U.S. Bureau of Prisons Office of Research and Evaluation -Attempting to Link Research and Practice

One of the major challenges facing correctional researchers is to meet conflicting demands. On the one hand, correctional managers require immediate feedback and evaluation of operations and programs.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that good evaluative research is time-consuming.

Since the late 1950s when the federal prison system created a branch specifically to perform research, federal corrections researchers have striven to meet these two competing goals, learning how to serve the needs of correctional managers without compromising the quality of research.

This article describes the evolution of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE), its current mandate and role and its present research activities. From Start to Present
The federal prison system created a research office in 1959, following a landmark evaluative study of federal corrections sponsored by the Ford Foundation and conducted by Daniel Glaser, then of the University of Illinois.

In 1964, the findings were published in a book entitled *The Effectiveness of a Prison and Parole System*. The book's foreword, by former U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, indicates the interest in this "new" type of evaluation effort:

"[The project] represents a major step forward in American corrections - the application of the analytical techniques of social science to the study of one of the largest and most advanced correctional systems in the world."

While the federal prison system had maintained statistics on its inmate population, the Glaser study prompted the reorganization of the statistics unit to an expanded Research and Statistics Branch.

The broadening role of research within the federal prison system coincided with the enthusiastic embracing of rehabilitation as a major goal of corrections.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, the Bureau of Prisons was in the vanguard of correctional agencies experimenting with rehabilitation programs, and the Office of Research was an integral part of this effort. At that time, the ORE primarily evaluated rehabilitative programs to demonstrate their success in changing the lives of inmates.

It was a time of optimism and hope that new treatment and training could have a positive impact on inmates' lives, and that research would help discover the most effective rehabilitative techniques. Studies evaluated various educational and vocational training programs, work and study release, halfway houses, unit management, individual and group counselling, and drug and alcohol programs. Total institutions such as the high-security operation at Alcatraz and the program for juveniles and young adults at Morgantown, West Virginia, were also examined.

While other projects such as population projections were initiated as well, the primary focus was on

program evaluation.

During much of this time, the Office of Research's strategy was to maintain a core central office operation, while also positioning researchers in various key institutions to study directly what was happening in them. There was even serious talk of establishing a researcher position at every BOP facility, but this never materialized.

During the mid to late 1980s, the Office of Research shifted toward a central office operation. Central office recalled researchers in the field, and this remains the style of operations today. The Office of Research and Evaluation conducts most of its work from its base in Washington, D.C., except for a few field research sites. Research is still conducted at the BOP's 5 highest security institution in Marion, Illinois, at Butner, in North Carolina, an institution which houses many inmates in need of mental health services, and at several sites that are pilot testing a drug treatment program. ORE Today - Mission and Projects The number of research staff has grown considerably since the Office's early years, and today about 35 analysts and support staff work for the ORE.

The type of research projects is changing as well. In a recent report to the Director of the Bureau of Prisons, the ORE described its mission as providing "information relevant to current and future questions in the field of corrections through social science research."

According to the report, the ORE's primary activities include conducting evaluative and basic research studies, developing and maintaining information systems, producing and distributing reports, responding to information requests, and providing technical assistance. Evaluative Research Projects The ORE's evaluative research agenda contains several major projects: a multiyear drug treatment evaluation (TRIAD), an evaluation of the BOP's shock incarceration ("boot camp") program, a study of the effectiveness of electronically monitored home confinement, and a study of the relationship between institutional work experience and recidivism.

The TRIAD project, partly funded by a \$2.7-million grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, is following inmates with substance abuse problems through their treatment, into aftercare, and then for a follow-up period after their release. The research focuses on the participation of inmates in programs in eight unit-based drug abuse programs plus comparisons with out-patient drug abuse programs, other types of programs and the general inmate population.

A major goal is to identify the circumstances and avenues by which change is initiated as well as factors related to motivation for change, self-efficacy and coping skills. It is hoped that this research will highlight methods to increase an individual's motivation to change, enhance the effectiveness of current programs and support development of innovative approaches.

The Intensive Confinement Center (ICC) in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, the BOP's shock incarceration program, is a minimum-security facility designed to house 192 male offenders. Since November 1990, the ICC has offered a specialized program that provides a workable balance between a military boot camp and the traditional values of the BOP. Inmates meeting the participation criteria are placed in the ICC program for up to six months.

Among other components, the program consists of a due-process system of discipline, a strict daily regimen of physical training, military drill and ceremony, work assignments, adult education, vocational training, life-coping skills, and a positive personal attitude and self-esteem program.

The ICC program also includes a community component whereby after release, each inmate's probation officer is asked to complete forms on the individual's adjustment to community supervision. The ORE is studying the program to test whether ICC participants are more or less likely than non-participants to be re-arrested or to commit technical violations of their postrelease supervision. Information on program costs will also be collected and compared with the costs of more traditional correctional approaches.

Another major evaluative study is examining the feasibility of confining offenders in their homes and monitoring their whereabouts electronically. In January of 1988, the BOP, the U.S. Parole Commission and the Federal Probation System initiated a pilot program (the Community Control Project) to examine this issue. The ORE's evaluation will investigate the recidivism, drug use and employment patterns of participants released via the Community Control Project as compared to offenders released via a halfway house.

The Post-Release Employment Project evaluates the effect of industrial work experience and vocational training on postrelease success, defined as lowered recidivism rates. Data were collected from 1983 through 1987 on more than 7,000 inmates. Preliminary findings indicate that inmates participating in these programs were more likely to be employed, earn more money and avoid re-arrest than comparable inmates who did not participate. Basic Research For planning purposes, Bureau managers must be able to anticipate inmate population trends, particularly now, during this period of unprecedented inmate population growth. Thus the ORE continues to work on an integrated, prison-population projection prototype.

The work develops and integrates three interrelated components:

- data from other federal justice agencies on trends in arrests, convictions and sentences for federal offenders;
- adjustments based on the impact of the Federal Sentencing Guidelines; and
- BOP data on past annual admission and release cohorts.

While work progresses on this integrated prototype, the ORE is using a simplified version of the third component to make one-year population projections, and preliminary versions of the first and second components to make projections over a five-year period.

Another project of considerable importance to BOP managers is the new security designation or custody classification system, which entered the developmental stages in December 1989. The new system, which changed the BOP's classification categories and strategy, was implemented in February 1991, and the ORE played an important role in assessing the validity of the classification instrument. This included monitoring the implementation of the system and the change in the population for six months after the new policy was instituted.

A third example of continuing basic research is the ORE's examination of rehabilitative treatment studies. It is hoped that this effort will enable ORE analysts to advise correctional managers on ways to improve their programs. Developing and Maintaining Information Systems One good example of ORE's efforts in the area of information systems is the Key Indicators/Strategic Support System (KI/SSS). KI/SSS grew from the need of BOP administrators to be able to integrate and access, in one system, the vast amount of existing automated data from a variety of Bureau operations.

Historically, administrators either had to make specific requests to those who could access the necessary data sources, and wait for the results, or make do with the periodic publication of statistical summary reports. The KI/SSS system was developed to promote data independence for administrators and greater timeliness in the availability of information for decision making.

Key Indicators is currently available to managers on microcomputers at 90 Bureau locations. The system helps managers identify significant trends regarding inmates, staff, financial management and institutional operations. It is intended to form the backbone of the Bureau's internal management and oversight structures and will be integrated with virtually every function in the agency.

While development of Key Indicators demanded considerable time and effort on the part of analysts and programmers, the system has reduced the time research staff must devote to answering routine requests for information on BOP operations.

One key indicator in KI/SSS -and a sort of mini-information system in itself - is the information gathered by the annual Prison Social Climate Survey of a representative sample of Bureau staff. The survey covers four substantive areas: personal safety and security, quality of life, work environment and personal well-being.

First administered in 1988, the survey yields information for managers about employee perceptions of their jobs, their workplace and the BOP as an organization. Results are available via Key Indicators usually within two months after the surveys are received by the ORE. The survey's 5 measures are a central feature of KI/SSS and provide subjective assessments of prison climates to complement the objective measures available in the system. Information Dissemination and Technical Assistance The ORE recognizes the importance of bridging the gap between corrections research and practice, and ensures that the results of its research reach those who can benefit from it, both within and outside the BOP. Through articles in in-house publications, such as the BOP's *Federal Prisons Journal* and the ORE's *Research Forum*, and certain outside periodicals, such as *Federal Probation*, the ORE communicates the results of its work to staff throughout the Bureau.

By publishing articles in such recognized academic journals as the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* and the *Annual Review of Crime and Justice*, the ORE is able to reach an even broader audience.

The ORE also provides technical assistance to state and local governments and correctional systems and, in some cases, to other nations. For example, the ORE assisted the Correctional Service of Canada in the

development of its own key indicators system, the Offender Population Profile System. The ORE has also advised local and state agencies on such issues as population projections and inmate classification.

Conclusion While different BOP administrators have had varying expectations of the Office of Research and Evaluation, the Office currently has the support of the highest levels of BOP administrators. These administrators believe in making informed decisions based on fact, and they understand the role of research in such efforts. During this period of declining revenues and fiscal restraints, these administrators are calling upon the ORE for decision-making support. In addition, since a large part of BOP operations depends on effective information management, it is no surprise that many ORE staff move on to other managerial positions within the agency, bringing with them their appreciation of, and ability to work with, research.