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SCIENCE IS BACK. NO, REALLY!

DOJ promises that, henceforth, research will drive crime control policy



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Last Monday a throng of academics, practitioners and grantees (and this blogger) assembled in Arlington, Virginia for the [2009 Conference](#) of the National Institute of Justice. It was obvious within moments that DOJ had a special message to put across. Kristina Rose, NIJ's acting director had hardly taken up the mike when she launched into an ebullient portrayal of a rejuvenated, researcher-friendly, scientifically-oriented organization anxious to develop evidence-based strategies to combat crime, drugs and terrorism.

The hotel's immense ballroom felt like a revival tent. At long last, science is here to stay!

Ms. Rose then turned over the podium to her boss, Laurie Robinson, acting head of the Office of Justice programs, the umbrella agency of which NIJ is a part. While Ms. Rose, a key NIJ official during the Bush years looked on, Ms. Robinson sharply rebuked the preceding Administration for snubbing research. Declaring that "science will once again be respected at the Department of Justice," she said that extensive safeguards had been put in place to prevent political meddling. Hours later the same assurances were put forth in a luncheon address by her boss, Attorney General Eric Holder.

Allegations that Bush and his cronies were hostile to science aren't exactly new. Yet when the new kids on the block wind up sounding like Elmer Gantry one wonders whether they're merely slapping lipstick on the same old pig. That's not an idle concern. Although the AG and his underlings seemed sincere, it hasn't been that long since the [National Academy of Sciences](#) pointed out that a host of forensic "disciplines" touted under both Republican and Democratic administrations lacked a scientific basis. NIJ's brazen, ultimately [unsuccessful attempt](#) to suppress the study

helps explain why the [NAS suggested](#) that an independent organization be created to oversee forensics, as “advancing *science* in the forensic science enterprise is not likely to be achieved within the confines of DOJ.”

Writing in a [recent issue](#) of *The Criminologist*, a former president of the American Society of Criminology voiced serious doubts about placing DOJ in charge of criminal justice research. His concern, that political appointees might be tempted to twist conclusions to fit policy (or, one might add, ideology) isn't the only drawback. Confounding complexities, a lack of basic knowledge about the causes and prevention of crime and a paucity of valid metrics can make it well-nigh impossible to determine whether newfangled interventions offer unique advantages. DOJ, as a law enforcement agency, expects its components to demonstrate success in the fight against crime. As the conference wrapped up one well-regarded researcher (and frequent grantee) privately complained that NIJ's eagerness to showcase solutions is a recipe for exaggeration.

There were other issues.

- Little or nothing was said about preventing police misconduct and excessive force.
- Not unexpectedly, the silence about gun *control* (as opposed to gun *violence*) was deafening.
- A few participants expressed distress about the overarching emphasis on DNA, which they saw as a money pit that can starve the development of other deserving technologies. For example, the effectiveness of ballistic vests has hardly improved in the last two decades, yet basic research in this area has been essentially abandoned to private industry.

PoliceIssues will be commenting on specific aspects of the proceedings in the coming weeks. To contribute your thoughts -- and we hope that you will -- please click on “Feedback.”

Stay tuned!