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TRANSLATIONAL? THAT'S RIGHT, *TRANSLATIONAL*

A new paradigm seeks to bridge the gap between theory and practice

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Translational? Um, what's that?

It's criminology's new direction, that's what. In a recent speech NIJ's new Director, John Laub, on leave from his position as Distinguished Professor of Criminology at the University of Maryland, said that he first learned of the tongue-twister through his daughter, a physician. It turns out that "translational research" (root: "translate") is a scientific approach that reaches across disciplines to devise, test and *expeditiously* implement solutions to pressing problems.

Wait a minute: isn't that supposedly the purpose of applied research? Well, according to no less an authority than [Wikipedia](#) there *is* a difference. Applied research is mostly concerned with incremental gains. Translational research, on the other hand, is the nimble cousin of basic research, able to accomplish paradigmatic shifts but far more swiftly.

Translational research has become popular in medicine. That makes sense: when lives are at stake it's important to move quickly from theory to practice. Dr. Laub feels the same urgency about crime and justice. Hence the theme of this year's [National Institute of Justice Conference](#), "Translational Criminology: Shaping Policy and Practice With Research."

For an example of a translational approach we turn to the "[National Police Research Platform](#)," an NIJ-funded initiative that seeks to measure police effectiveness. Housed at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the project is in its third year, with twenty-eight agencies enrolled. At a presentation on June 20 its director, Dr. Dennis Rosenbaum, emphasized that the intention is to eventually create a nationally representative sample of three-hundred departments of various size.

To date the Platform has issued ten reports in areas including officer stress, supervision, training, technology and integrity. All data has been gathered through online surveys of sworn personnel, civilian employees and ordinary citizens. It is anticipated that in time other sources of information will be incorporated as well. There are also plans to collect data longitudinally and to test new strategies with randomized trials.

For now, the Platform has concentrated on providing information rather than implementing change. At the June 20 session Dr. Gary Cordner, Professor of Criminal Justice at Kutztown University said that [prompt feedback](#) lets agencies self-assess in a timely fashion, compare themselves to overall norms and take such measures as they deem necessary. As an example he mentioned [a survey about first-line supervision](#). One of its findings was that 62 percent of supervisors, the largest proportion, placed "a lot" of emphasis on keeping officers out of trouble, while only 19 percent felt that way about arrest and citation productivity. Responses seemed fairly consistent across agencies. That, according to Dr. Cordner,

isn't always the case. In [another survey](#), officers in smaller agencies thought that discipline was much more fairly administered than those in large agencies.

Well, that seems interesting. So what else is going on? Check out [CrimeSolutions.gov](#). Introduced at the 2011 conference, NIJ's newest stab at translational research reports on the effectiveness of selected criminal justice programs in corrections, courts, drug abuse, juvenile justice and law enforcement. [Using a highly structured process](#) NIJ analysts review existing, published evaluations and at the end assign one of three grades: effective, promising, and no effect.

To date CrimeSolutions [has rated 22 policing programs](#). Seven were awarded the highest grade and fourteen received the intermediate score. Only one was deemed to lack a significant benefit.

Surveying officers, `a la the Platform and rating criminal justice programs, `a la Crime Solutions is all well and good. But a truly "translational" approach would go far beyond collecting opinions and performing secondhand reviews. After all, translational research is supposed to use basic science to correct critical shortcomings, and not in turtle years. We're talking something like the race to the moon, a concerted effort that in a few years accomplished what might have otherwise taken centuries.

Yes, NIJ has a measly budget. Still, if Dr. Laub is set on going "translational" he might consider taking on a couple of critical issues, then provide sufficient resources to see researchers and practitioners through the entire process. One that comes to mind is the highly consequential matter of ballistic vests, whose wearability and protective characteristics have hardly advanced in decades while the lethality of firearms that cops face has skyrocketed. (For related posts, click [here](#) and [here](#).)

What do you say, Dr. Laub? Can NIJ do like NASA and bring together scientists and engineers from government and industry to tackle this urgent need, "translationally"?

Well, that's enough of coining new terms. Watch for more about the 2011 NIJ Conference in forthcoming weeks. And welcome to the fifth year of Police Issues!