Key Ideas for the Research-Practitioner Partnership

At the heart of the Byrne Criminal Justice Innovation model are partnerships between researchers, police officers, staff at community organizations, and other neighborhood leaders working in high-crime neighborhoods. While straightforward in theory, these partnerships are in no way simple in practice.

Current and past BCJI researchers have given insights and recommendations on how to build a strong and effective researcher-practitioner partnership. These ideas are suggestions, not requirements, but they may be useful as a site chooses a research partner, as researchers and other partners establish their working relationship, and throughout planning and implementation.

Choosing a Research Partner
Consider engaging a research team with different strengths: qualitative and quantitative research experience, for example, or a range of disciplines such as criminal justice, business/economics, social work, or geography. A background in action-based research is helpful, as well.

More Than Planning in the Planning Phase
The planning phase for BCJI can be used to build strong communication avenues, establish responsibilities, and outline accountability. One research partner framed the time as a “convening process,” where researchers focused on building relationships and engaging with the community in addition to measuring outcomes.

Setting Clear Roles and Responsibilities
Assign responsibility in a collaborative way among the BCJI partners for tasks such as data collection, information distribution, and conflict management. We suggest writing an objective, role-based summation of responsibilities that moves the focus from individuals to organizations. This can be particularly beneficial when there is staff turnover at the many different agencies involved, as often happens over time. MOU's can help articulate clarity.

Fostering an Expansive Community Relationship
Trust between the research partners and community partners is important. Aim to be clear about the expertise and knowledge the researchers can provide, but avoid the expectation that the research partner

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should “call the shots.” When that’s the case, the researchers can feel as though the overall success of the project is on their shoulders, and community members can feel that there is a disconnect between their needs and the project’s goals.

Planning for Clear Communications
It can be difficult to attract residents to community gatherings that are solely dedicated to sharing data or other research. Consider piggybacking onto regularly scheduled, well-attended community events. When presenting, avoid research-focused jargon. It can be confusing to community partners, and in some cases it has been perceived as demeaning.

Remaining Flexible
Both community and research partners emphasize the need for flexibility throughout the BCJI planning and implementation phases. Roles and responsibilities often organically emerge at the start, falling into place more because of an individual’s knowledge, skill, or proximity than because of title. In many cases, the type of research changes over time from a quantitative outcome evaluation to almost entirely qualitative process evaluation, and so researchers either must rely on those who have these skills or learn them.

Connect the Researcher with a Wider Support
For research partners in academic institutions, aim to establish a beneficial relationship between the university and BCJI. Possibilities include a unique opportunity for graduate and undergraduate students to participate and/or new relationships with the target community partners.

Resources
There are a number of great resources that discuss the research-practitioner relationship in depth. Here are a few options to learn more.

George Mason University’s Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy (CEBCP)
http://gmuconsortium.org/

Crime and Justice Research Alliance Expert Directory
http://crimeandjusticeresearchalliance.org/experts/

Project Safe Neighborhoods: Working with a Research Partner FAQ

BJA’s Center for Research Partnerships and Program Evaluation (CRPPE)
https://www.bja.gov/programs/crppe/index.html