



Using Policy to Advance Social Justice for Justice-Involved Youth

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The many ways in which research may be used by policymakers is complex. Research can be used to understand legislation after it has passed, but before it is implemented. Research may also be used by policymakers in the policy formulation stage to evaluate or study policy issues and inform future legislative action.



Figure 1 Photograph by Photo by EKaterina Bolovsova: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/brass-colored-balance-scale-on-a-lawyer-s-table-6077961/>

“This study not only illustrates an association between research language and bill progression in the legislative process, it also reveals various policy frameworks for leveraging prevention science. We also consider future opportunities for prevention scientists to inform research-based policies. Specifically, research could be used more often to elucidate the conceptual underpinnings of specific strategies that address the root causes of delinquency and juvenile crime. Similarly, scholars could inform the use of high-quality research processes in legislation such as program evaluations that involve both rigorous research designs and methodologies. This could help to ensure that programs and policies achieve their intended impact and inform ways of improving practices.”

Highlights

We can scale up prevention science through policy frameworks to improve lives.

Policies can be used to improve social justice through more effective and preventative solutions for justice-involved youth.

Legislation involving justice-involved youth that uses research evidence to inform policy development frameworks could bring prevention science to scale. Specifically, legislation could highlight the conceptual root causes of delinquency and juvenile crime so that programs can target key pathways for preventing crime. Legislation could also encourage more process evaluations that monitor program quality and improve practices over time. We sought to build on this work by further examining legislation related to justice-involved youth, a population of interest for expanding evidence-based programs that can prevent crime and improve long-term wellbeing.

Methods

This study follows one previously written about on communitypsychology.org in which authors investigated policy frameworks related to trauma in human trafficking. This study expands on earlier findings by investigating research may be used in legislation. In-depth bill coding illustrated the ways that research has been used in legislation to define problems, reinforce effective practice, generate knowledge through research and evaluation, and disseminate findings. We also used in-depth content analysis of a selection of bills to understand how research language was used in bill text. Predictive analyses examined whether the 1,326 U.S. congressional bills combining research language were more likely to progress in the legislative process.

Results

- The number of juvenile justice bills increased over time, but proportionally the amount of research language did not appear to increase or decrease in recent decades.
- Bills that used more research keywords and phrases, particularly phrases that were more technical or indicated research rigor, were more likely to progress out of committee and become enacted.
- Clarifying the vague use of evidence (e.g., “early intervention”) and conceptual root causes reflects a growth opportunity for bridging prevention science and policy.
- Legislation can use research processes such as program evaluation to either determine if a program is (in)effective or help to improve the quality of programs over time.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Public policy change uses research for action. We highlight ways that policymakers may use research evidence to inform legislation and how the use of research evidence can advance their policy priorities by improving the likelihood that their bill progresses out of committee and becomes enacted. Findings also provide advocates with information that can guide meetings and partnerships with policymakers around how to bring evidence to bear for crime prevention.

What Does This Mean For?

Practice: Recognizing that practitioners are also eager to have policies support effective practice, practitioners could use these findings to have conversations with policymakers about how they can use research evidence to improve legislation relevant to practitioners and the populations they serve. Better understanding how research findings and scientific processes impact policymaking will increase the likelihood that our policies are based on sound evidence.

Similar Settings: Our work sits at the intersection of research and policy. We focus on facilitating connections and partnerships between these two audiences. Such policy frameworks have the potential to move us from abstract, conceptual conversations about the impact of research on policy, toward more concrete pathways for applying research evidence in the legislative process.

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