

## WHY CRIMINOLOGY IS IRRELEVANT

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Charles Manski's timely article reflects what I perceive as a growing feeling of depression among criminologists relative to their influence in shaping criminal justice policy. Despite the annual publication of hundreds of peer-reviewed articles and textbooks proudly displayed at our annual conventions, policy makers are paying little if any attention to us. When Congress or state legislatures debate new crime bill legislation or the effectiveness of past actions, their first question is not, "What do the criminologists think?" I would venture that one would be hard pressed to cite another discipline that has been so ignored for such a long time. Manski's specific lament that criminology has been unable to evaluate the relative effects of various law enforcement strategies on illegal drug consumption use is another example of how impotent criminology is in shaping and improving criminal justice policy.

I say this, in part, due to my own experiences in making a career on sponsored or applied research. I have succeeded in terms of acquiring a large number of grants over a 30-year career, some of which were expected to have some impact on criminal justice policy. This work has led to regular appearances before a variety of legislative committees, professional organizations, numerous "blue ribbon commissions" and "task forces," and occasional TV and radio talk shows where I am able to showcase my research. Similar to Manski, I have had my turn in the National Research Council barrel where we grappled with the elusive topic of the impact of sentencing reform. Early on in this work, I had naively expected my executive summaries, charts, and cross tabs to result in some kind of correctional regime change. But over the years I learned, as my good friend and partner in crime John Irwin often warned me, such efforts amounted to nothing more than spitting in the wind.

This is not to say that I have not personally enjoyed nor benefited from criminology. Indeed, I believe that I have had a very stimulating and worthwhile experience. But in terms of having any effect on criminal justice policy, there is little evidence that any criminologist's career has made much of a difference. Why this is so is the subject of this reaction essay.

## LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

The heart of the problem is that criminologists have very little good "science" to offer policy makers. Unlike other scientific disciplines, there is scant evidence that criminology is making any major advances in our understanding of the effects of public policy on individual or societal behavior. This dismal state of affairs is due to a decline in the quality of our research. We are now in the business of producing a massive body of shoddy and superficial studies. Rather than calling for more research funds, we should acknowledge that much of the public money that has been allocated for research has been misspent.

Manski calls this a "lack of credibility," and I do not disagree with that term. In his article, he points out an oft repeated scenario where criminologists are asked to determine which criminal justice approach would be most effective in curbing illegal drug use or consumption. His article notes that two mainstream and well-regarded think tanks were able to reach completely different conclusions on the merits of drug treatment versus enforcement on reducing illegal drug consumption. But what is most striking is not that they reached different conclusions but that both firms employed research designs that were so faulty that they were incapable of answering the question policy makers wanted answered.

Within my narrow public policy domain of incarceration, it is hard to imagine a more dramatic policy shift than the extraordinary increase in imprisonment over the past 30 years. Yet even today there are so-called "credible" studies that reach diametrically opposite conclusions on whether increasing the nation's prison population by over a million persons in less than three decades has been a good or bad policy.

This overall lack of credibility associated with criminology can be traced in four core deficiencies within the criminological enterprise:

### 1. THE DECLINE OF SCIENTIFIC METHODS

First and foremost, criminologists have badly strayed from the canons of traditional research methods that are essential for building a body of knowledge. Put more directly, most of studies being produced by criminologists are so deeply flawed that they are essentially useless. Most of our publications more closely resemble journalism than science. One only attends the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology to witness first hand the paucity of sound research being presented at the various panels and even the more prestigious plenary sessions.

The most striking evidence of bad science is our own review of our studies. The advent of meta-analysis, where criminologists review published studies on a particular topic, shows that most of published studies do not

meet even minimal evaluation standards and must be discarded.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with Robert Martinson's and his colleagues' review of rehabilitative studies and the more recent University of Maryland's meta-analysis, the consistent finding is that most studies are without scientific merit.

The major weakness in our policy studies is an apparent unwillingness to use experimental designs with the random assignment of subjects conducted in multiple sites by independent researchers. Instead, criminologists have increasingly favored quasi-experimental designs of poorly implemented policies or simulations of proposed policy that rely on untested assumptions, faulty data, and employ questionable mathematical models. Qualitative methods, which are extremely helpful in making sense of quantitative-based findings, are rarely, if ever required. The end result is the repeated recommendation, which is apparently taught in graduate school programs across the nation, that what is needed is more funding that will produce more mediocre and inclusive studies.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. UNBRIDLED SPECULATION

Manski refers to absence of what he calls randomized clinical trials (RCTs), which are used in other domains of public policy. But he quickly concludes that such designs cannot be applied in areas such as law enforcement because one cannot randomly assign subjects to differing levels of enforcement strategies. Assuming that few opportunities for controlled experiments exist, I would argue that such a situation should lead responsible criminologists to either not attempt the evaluation or acknowledge that the proposed quasi-experimental design will produce highly speculative results. Unfortunately, the absence of knowledge has not deterred criminologists from making irresponsible and highly misleading conclusions.

Some recent examples have been in the arena of career criminal research, where criminologists, based on questionable research methods, provided the scientific justification for more frequent and longer prison terms. Although one may legitimately quarrel on the methods used in these studies, there is no doubt that these studies failed to prove that a fivefold increase in the nation's prison population was the best policy for controlling crime. More importantly, the accelerated use of imprisonment has impacted millions of families and children whose parents are now

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1. See Sherman et al., 1998.

2. Another paper could be written on the limits of the traditional experimental design in terms of understanding the causes of crime and how best to control it. There is a rich but often ignored sociological tradition that sees deviance and the efforts to control it from a phenomenological perspective. Rather than crime and deviance leading to social control, one can also argue the opposite—that social control and treatment can lead to crime. See Lemert, 1967.

imprisoned. So this is much more than just an intellectual debate.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, drug treatment researchers have greatly exaggerated claims that drug treatment within prisons work when in fact there have been no experimental tests of such programs. Rather, the scientific landscape is littered with quasi-experimental designs that conveniently exclude subjects who fail to complete the treatment and conclude that those who stay in treatment have low failure rates. These studies, often conducted by drug treatment advocates, have led to wild claims about the need to expand the availability of treatment and in some ways justify incarceration for treatment purposes.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. RESEARCHER BIAS AND FRAUD

Although we are trained to be objective, we bring a considerable amount of ideological baggage to our trade. This ideology no doubt influences the subjects we choose to study, the formulation of our hypotheses, research methods, and methods of analysis and “findings.” I do not feel that this baggage can ever be eliminated, but it certainly should be acknowledged and restrained.

It is not by accident that the white male-dominated field of criminologists has yet to seriously examine why crime is predominately a “male problem.” I have calculated that if the males behaved like females, violent crime rates would drop by two-thirds and the 2 million people in the prison and jail population would not exceed 200,000. The associated costs of a \$112 billion dollar criminal justice system would shrink to less than \$20 billion, thus freeing up enormous resources that could be allocated to our education, health care, transportation, tax cuts, or whatever your favorite nation-building project might be. Surely the potential savings to victims and our society in general would have justified the creation of at least one national blue ribbon commission on the gender problem.

The current state of our science allows a criminologist to select a wide array of research methods that can produce very different results even when the same data are being used. Surely any science that is capable of this feat on a regular basis must be viewed with great suspicion.

It is also probable that some level of scientific fraud is also occurring.<sup>5</sup> This is a topic no one in the criminological community wants to address even though we know it must exist. It occurs because there is no credible deterrence to such behavior because there is no organized effort to detect and punish such deceptive behavior. Only on extremely rare occasions is it required that a third-party team of researchers perform a reanalysis of

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3. See Austin, 2002.

4. See Austin, 1998.

5. For a review of how widespread scientific fraud, see Crossen, 1994.

the data to certify the results. It is noteworthy that when such re-analysis is performed, discrepancies typically arise. Yet there is no effort among criminologists and its professional organizations to systematically search for and punish those who commit such fraud.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. THE HEAVY HAND OF FUNDERS

The funding stream for research also serves to discredit our research. The selection of which public policies to be evaluated, the research methods to be used, and ultimately the researcher's conclusions are heavily influenced by the amount and source of research funds. Within the United States, the federal government has a virtual monopoly on research. And over the years, a small but highly influential circle of criminologists have exerted a disproportionate influence on what is funded and who gets to do it.

Every few years, there is a pronounced shift in those who set the criminological research agenda and the level of funding set aside for such purposes. To date, the directors of the federal agencies are political appointees who have no social science background. This constant change in direction and leadership politicizes the public policy debate and negates the potential for any long-term sustained research effort on a particular topic. Most experimental studies require 3–5 years to complete. Given that most political appointees' tenures are well below that time frame, it is no accident that they are uninterested in long-term studies that exceed their own scientific careers.

### THE NEED TO GET BACK TO BASICS

The credibility problems we face, I fear, are more severe than Manski notes. Until we clean up our scientific house, we will continue to be, and should be, irrelevant. As a scientific community, we have badly strayed from what should be our core research activities. The reforms that are needed can be summarized as follows:

1. **Increased Reliance on Experimental Designs:** Rather than experimental studies being the exception to the rule, criminology needs to significantly expand the use of experimental designs. Graduate-level curriculum should stress the use of such designs, and

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6. The only major example of deception I have seen in my career was the re-analysis of Abt Associates study of how prison capacity influenced prison populations. In this example, the statistical computations were found to be inaccurate. See Blumstein et al., 1989. An example of where re-analysis found that the original researchers' findings were overstated was the re-analysis of Rand's selective incapacitation recommendations. See Visher, 1986.

funding agencies should reward applicants that adhere to a research standard.

2. **Diverse funding:** The current federal monopoly on research funding needs to change. This is only likely to occur when the private sector and foundations in particular see the need to privately fund major evaluations of criminal justice public policy initiatives. Although private funding will not remove bias, it will counter the bias inherent in any federal research program.
3. **Re-Analysis and Replication Standards:** Studies that have not undergone a re-analysis of the data by an independent researcher or have not been replicated in another jurisdiction, also by an independent evaluator, should be labeled as speculative and not advocated by the researcher for implementation.
4. **Professional Regulation and Oversight:** Our professional membership organizations have an important role in encouraging research that meets the highest standards, rooting out scientific misbehavior whenever it appears and sanctioning those who engage in such tactics. Although this may result in fewer trips to annual conferences, it will serve to make our profession more relevant.

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