



# Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships

## Lessons Learned from an Evaluation of Aggression Management Programs for Youth

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*January 2020*

When researchers conceptualize their research with practitioners, their projects are more likely to meaningfully shape policy and practice than projects they design alone. The researcher-practitioner partnership model formally combines two perspectives and skill sets to inform comprehensive, multidimensional research (Hess and Mullen 1995). Using this model, the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) and the Urban Institute began collaborating in 2015 to evaluate aggression management programs for youth in a Virginia correctional facility who were at medium and high risk of recidivating. The evaluation developed in response to a solicitation from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), which funds partnerships that implement rigorous research and evaluations, inform policies, and impact practices on the ground. Through the evaluation, DJJ practitioners and Urban researchers gained valuable insight about the challenges researcher-practitioner partnerships present and what makes them successful. This brief offers a case study of the Urban-DJJ evaluation of aggression management programs, a discussion about challenges, and lessons Urban's research team learned.

## Researcher-Practitioner Partnerships

Organizational theory describes three main forms of researcher-practitioner cooperation: data extraction agreements, clinical partnerships, and co-learning agreements (Wagner 1997). The most

traditional of these is data extraction agreements, through which researchers arrange to gather primary or administrative data from practitioner agencies or organizations. In clinical partnerships, researchers and practitioners build on the data extraction model by making the organization or its operations a research focus. Finally, co-learning agreements are intended to reduce asymmetries between researchers and practitioners by treating both as equal partners seeking to learn from one another.

Ideally, researcher-practitioner partnerships would follow the co-learning agreements model because it maximizes each group's contributions. However, because researchers and practitioners understand policy issues and approach evaluations differently, this model can present unique challenges.

Collaboration between researchers and criminal justice practitioners is often inhibited by (1) the substantial time required to build a relationship and manage administrative/logistical requirements for research; (2) legal and ethical issues unique to research in the criminal justice system; (3) agency policies, regulations, and requirements that can restrict research activities; and (4) researchers' and practitioners' varying and sometimes conflicting needs (Sullivan, McPartland, and Fisher 2013). The criminal justice literature also highlights four common characteristics of successful researcher-practitioner partnerships: (1) the correctional organization has valid, relevant, and reliable data; (2) researchers and practitioners develop a feedback loop by communicating openly, clearly, and frequently; (3) each group is aware of and receptive to the other's goals and needs; and (4) the partnership leads to sustainable long-term relationships (Ranson et al. 2017).

## Case Study

This section briefly describes the Urban-DJJ partnership and how the evaluation was conceived, designed, and implemented.

### The Partnership

Like other successful researcher-practitioner partners, Urban and DJJ had a working relationship from past projects that set a strong foundation for further collaboration. This relationship benefited the evaluation because it streamlined the process of identifying relevant research questions and acquiring administrative support and approval for the research.

For the evaluation, DJJ assembled a working group of DJJ researchers, clinical staff, residential supervisors, and DJJ management with substantive experience in Virginia's youth corrections system. This group met regularly and supported the Urban team's research efforts in an advisory capacity. To conduct the research, Urban assembled a team with knowledge of juvenile justice issues and methodological experience in program evaluation. This team developed a research plan with DJJ and led the project's evaluation components.

## Developing a Research Plan

The idea to evaluate Virginia's youth aggression management programs emerged from questions DJJ was interested in pursuing. As such, DJJ practitioners maintained substantial buy-in and commitment throughout the evaluation.

The Urban team used a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to compare outcomes for youth in two aggression management programs: an existing program, Aggression Replacement Training (ART), and a new pilot program offering dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). ART is a cognitive behavioral intervention intended to reduce aggression and violence by focusing on social skills, anger control training, and moral reasoning. Dialectical behavior therapy is a modified cognitive behavioral intervention that introduces elements of distress tolerance, acceptance, and mindfulness largely derived from meditative practice.<sup>1</sup> Urban and DJJ were interested in evaluating how each program affected recidivism, institutional misconduct, and aggression levels. A key takeaway from this early-stage collaboration is that **researchers and practitioners are more likely to buy in and commit to a project when they are invested in the research question and approach.**

## Implementation

Youth were randomly assigned to the treatment (DBT) or control (ART) group. Department of Juvenile Justice staff surveyed these youths to assess their attitudes and aggression levels before and after program engagement. In addition to survey data, Urban used administrative data on program participation, institutional infractions, and subsequent offenses to analyze the two programs' effectiveness.

Between the evaluation's design and implementation stages, several changes within Virginia's juvenile justice system required the research team to modify its approach. First, the number of youths subject to placement in DJJ residential facilities steadily fell. Second, an administrative change cut youths' average length of stay in residential facilities by half, shortening their window for completing treatment. Third, shortly after the project began, DJJ implemented a new approach to service delivery (the "community model") in its secure facilities. Based on the Missouri model of youth rehabilitation, the community model aims to minimize disruption for youth and facilitate a seamless continuum of care by transforming residential facilities' housing units into communities that provide for their own needs (Mendel 2010). These structural changes required DJJ to reassess how to deliver ART and DBT and to work with Urban to modify randomization processes. With these changes in place, Urban concluded the RCT portion of the evaluation in 2016 with a cohort of approximately 100 youths.

The unanticipated reductions in the flow of youth through the DJJ system forced Urban to modify the original evaluation design. The research team proposed using a quasi-experimental design to assess the two aggression management programs' effectiveness. While evaluating ART and DBT, Urban identified additional research questions relevant to DJJ's priorities, including questions about how the community model would affect the continuum of care and what legal (e.g., charges) and extralegal (e.g., demographic characteristics) factors influence decisions during each phase of DJJ operations (e.g.,

intake, housing and treatment placement, institutional sanctions). The Urban-DJJ partnership incorporated these analyses using RCT data, survey data, and administrative data.

## Challenges

Throughout this evaluation, we also encountered several challenges related to our research design and implementation.

### Research Design on the Ground

Researchers working directly with criminal justice agencies to implement or evaluate programs are likely to face difficulties on the ground. An agency's policies, capacity, and resources may inhibit researchers from strictly adhering to a research plan, particularly when that plan involves intensive research designs, such as RCTs. Although many researchers promote the RCT as the most methodologically rigorous approach to evaluating interventions, some have noted difficulties using RCTs in the behavioral and social sciences. Criminology in particular has had relatively few successful RCTs because of ethical, legal, and practical challenges (Farrington and Welsh 2005). Researchers often struggle to get permission and cooperation from practitioners, carry out successful randomization, and ensure sufficient sample sizes. Differential attrition and variation between treatments assigned and treatments delivered can also present problems for analyzing RCT data.

The Urban-DJJ team experienced some of these challenges and had difficulty in achieving a high level of compliance with randomization protocols. The number of youths admitted to the facility was significantly lower than anticipated, and the waiting list for aggression management treatment that the research team had factored into the design dissipated as youths were assigned to programs faster than they were added to the list. Moreover, in cases where random assignment could result in a poor service fit or delay treatment for a youth, DJJ did not follow through with the random assignment. This particular challenge was not a product of haphazardness or miscommunication; rather, it arose because DJJ prioritized youth welfare over the research agenda, as it should. This challenge was not necessarily a weakness of the study—one would expect and hope that a juvenile justice agency would prioritize their residents' success and well-being. However, these practical considerations did require Urban and DJJ to adapt the research design.

### Agency Policy and Priority Shifts

Besides the challenges inherent in conducting an RCT with justice-involved youths, the research team also faced unexpected changes in DJJ policies and priorities. Several months after the randomization process began, DJJ shifted to a community model of care. Under this model, each youth was assigned to a unit (their community) that served as a hub for all programs and services. This limited staff members' ability to assign youth to programs on a rotating basis as these services were now provided to the unit as a group. These structural changes complicated the research design and caused DJJ's research priorities to shift: the agency became interested in the implications of adopting a community model and

whether interrupting service delivery while transitioning to the community model impacted youth outcomes.

Producing evidence and analysis quickly enough to inform recommendations for these new policies was a challenge for the research team. Urban had to be flexible and adapt the research agenda to be responsive to DJJ's shifting policies and priorities.

## Communication Strategies

As with most partnerships, communication between DJJ and Urban was key for maintaining a close working relationship, particularly because of the evaluation's moving parts. When the groups did not communicate frequently or clearly enough, progress was delayed or impeded. The Urban and DJJ teams handled some evaluation components separately, and staff often spent in-person meetings recapping earlier conversations because of inconsistent interim communication. The teams could have used these meetings more effectively by communicating more regularly about decisions between meetings. For example, Urban developed a survey protocol for DJJ clinical staff to measure changes in aggression among youth. However, the teams' line of communication regarding this procedure was not continuous; some DJJ staff did not fully understand the protocol and exercised discretion when necessary, and data were recorded inconsistently. The Urban team resolved this by communicating expectations about data collection more clearly and checking in more frequently.

One of the difficulties the Urban-DJJ team anticipated involved communication between people with different degrees of involvement in the project. Urban and DJJ generally succeeded in involving a range of staff in the in-person meetings. However, the project sometimes faced roadblocks when staff were not present for conversations relevant to their roles. The Urban-DJJ team spent additional time ensuring everyone was familiar with (and shared an understanding of) project activities before proceeding with important decisions. It was crucial that at least one representative from groups involved in each project component—including researchers, clinical staff, and DJJ leadership—be present at key meetings.

Ultimately, **effective and collaborative relationships are maintained through open and frequent communication. Such communication ensures projects are executed efficiently and with fidelity.**

## Strengths

Despite the challenges outlined above, the Urban-DJJ collaboration had several key strengths that helped the evaluation succeed. The following sections detail those strengths.

### Commitment and Involvement

Researchers' and practitioners' consistent commitment was central to this project's success. That DJJ practitioners designed and cared about the research question contributed to DJJ's commitment. In contrast to traditional research models where researchers approach practitioners with research

questions, impose their priorities, and make decisions unilaterally, researcher-practitioner partnerships recognize both groups as equal stakeholders. This is a unique benefit of such partnerships: each step—from developing the research question to fine-tuning the methodology—is collaborative. When researchers respect and are responsive to practitioners' needs and goals, they can secure practitioner buy-in and cultivate a meaningful working relationship.

Involving a range of DJJ staff also helped the partnership succeed. ART and DBT clinical staff, in-house research staff, and agency leadership attended in-person meetings and participated in information-sharing and decisionmaking. Each group had a unique and important perspective, and the Urban research team fully understood DJJ's structure, operations, and priorities because it heard these practitioners' voices. This comprehensive picture of DJJ better equipped Urban to recommend research approaches and critically evaluate the aggression management programs.

Finally, practitioner collaboration was critical to understanding and accurately interpreting data and research findings. For example, Urban found that youths in the treatment group (i.e., DBT) had higher rates of institutional infractions than youths in the control group (i.e., ART), which DJJ had not anticipated. However, having learned how DJJ clinicians and staff administered the DBT program, Urban understood that this likely reflected differences in staff members' interactions with youth in each program more than the youths' behavior. This illustrates the importance of situating findings in a research setting's specific context, which practitioners can provide.

Through this co-learning approach to collaboration, the Urban team learned that **although researchers' and practitioners' differing approaches can cause challenges, they can also make partnerships successful when each group is open to learning from the other.**

## Flexibility in Response to Challenges

Challenges are expected during research, particularly when factors outside researchers' control—such as changes to agency structures or policies—impact the project. A project's success depends largely on researchers' ability to respond to such challenges.

For example, though DJJ's shift to the community model, fluctuating numbers of youths entering the system, and practical obstacles to the randomization protocol complicated Urban's RCT design, the team was flexible enough to develop a quasi-experimental approach to the research questions and propose additional analyses. Modifying the research plan was always iterative: Urban asked DJJ practitioners what questions they most wanted to answer, developed a new research question and approach, presented that plan to DJJ for feedback, and then executed the analyses.

Similarly, DJJ staff demonstrated flexibility incorporating data collection procedures into their day-to-day operations. Urban's researchers initially planned to collect survey data themselves, but this would have required non-DJJ staff to interact with the youth, which could have raised institutional review board concerns and logistical issues. To avoid complications, DJJ staff volunteered to routinely survey youths at the beginning and end of programming and share the survey data with Urban. This

arrangement minimized data collection issues, and Urban's research team greatly appreciated DJJ practitioners' willingness to assume extra work for the project.

Though researchers may aim to adhere to a particular research plan, they should be adaptable to their practitioner partners' practical considerations. And when practitioners are open to modifying their practices or protocols, researchers can conduct more rigorous research. Both groups should enter researcher-practitioner partnerships willing to change and compromise, which can produce outcomes that benefit everyone involved.

Ultimately, this evaluation's challenges taught us that **researchers and practitioners should be willing to respond and adapt to each other's goals and methods, because practical limitations and challenges are bound to occur and require compromise.**

## Expanding the Partnership Beyond the Project

The Urban-DJJ collaboration extended beyond project activities. This broader collaboration helped researchers and practitioners build rapport, secure buy-in from both groups, and strengthen the partnership. For example, Urban and DJJ copresented at several conferences, sharing evaluation findings and insights with audiences of academics and juvenile justice stakeholders. The research team presented interim findings from the DBT impact evaluation, and the practitioner team provided important substantive context about service provision in Virginia's juvenile justice system. Whether they had backgrounds in research, clinical services, or management, DJJ and Urban staff all took a critical and analytic approach to the project. This common ground allowed conference panel members from both groups to contribute and feel valued. Copresenting at conferences also allowed the Urban-DJJ team to demonstrate and promote the researcher-practitioner partnership model to an audience of researchers and practitioners.

## Lessons Learned

Through this project, Urban and DJJ developed a successful working relationship that provided researchers and practitioners an avenue to share research ideas and approaches, conduct meaningful program evaluations and research, and discuss practical implications for DJJ and the criminal justice field. The following are key lessons learned about what makes researcher-practitioner partnerships successful:

- Ensuring researchers and practitioners are interested in the research question and approach is key to securing buy-in and commitment from both groups.
- Researchers and practitioners approach problems differently, and these differences can produce challenges and successes.
- Researchers and practitioners should be adaptable to the other's goals and methods, because practical limitations and challenges are bound to occur and require compromise.

Ultimately, researchers and practitioners must communicate openly and frequently to maintain an effective and collaborative relationship and to complete research projects efficiently and with fidelity.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> “Dialectical Behavior Therapy,” *Psychology Today*, accessed November 18, 2019, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/therapy-types/dialectical-behavior-therapy>.

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# Acknowledgments

This brief was supported by award no. 2014-IJ-CX-0002, awarded by the US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed in this brief are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Department of Justice or to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at [urban.org/fundingprinciples](http://urban.org/fundingprinciples).

We would like to thank the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice for their partnership on this project. In particular, we would like to thank Mark Murphy, Jessica Schneider, Robin Binford-Weaver, Jared Miller, Maureen Mayer, Angela Josie, and Emily DuBois for their commitment and invaluable contributions to the project.



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