

Identifying and Working With a Research Partner

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

1. Who is a research partner?

A research partner is someone who has received formal training in research and evaluation methods and has applied those skills in criminal justice settings. They tend to have advanced quantitative and qualitative skills as well as significant training in criminological theory. As experts in their fields, research partners tend to be well versed in relevant crime control and prevention literature and also tend to be aware of the state-of-practice in criminal justice. Research partners are most frequently found in university and college criminology, criminal justice, sociology, public policy, and urban affairs programs. Research partners can also be found in private research or consulting firms, research centers, and in state and local agencies.

2. Who is a crime analyst?

A crime analyst is someone who may (or may not) have received formal training in quantitative analysis techniques and statistical methods and applies those skills in support of operational organizations, most frequently police departments. In general, crime analysts have no training in criminological theory but are frequently deeply rooted in practice. A typical crime analyst supports his/her operational agency by mapping incidents, identifying “hot spots”, and developing descriptive crime reports. Crime analysts rarely analyze data from outside their employing agency. A crime analyst can be an excellent resource for Smart Suite task forces and for the research partner but may not have background or the organizational flexibility to serve in the research partner role.

3. Research partner or crime analyst: Who will better meet the needs of the task force?

In most cases, research partners are better suited to support the Smart Suite task forces than crime analysts for the following reasons:

- Research partners work with and in support of the Smart Suite task force as a whole, not any one of the agencies, and thus can be an independent and objective voice in the task force;
- Research partners are often well known and respected community members;
- Research partners are experienced in working with multiple data sets and are set-up to deal with the privacy and confidentiality issues combining data may raise;
- Both research partners and crime analysts can conduct quantitative analyses of data; but research partners (unlike most crime analysts) are trained in qualitative analysis methods in addition to quantitative methods;
- Research partners are trained theorists, who can bring a broader perspective to compliment the practitioner team;
- Research partners generally have the backing of a university community, which includes access to graduate students and other experts;
- Research partners are trained evaluators, who can assist you in designing measurable interventions, and actually measuring them;

4. How can a research partner enhance your Smart Suite task force?

Generally speaking, research partners will enhance the Smart Suite task force by providing:



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- *Specialized Knowledge and Ability.* The primary advantage of partnering with a researcher is the same that comes with hiring any expert – specialized knowledge and ability. Research partners understand how to analyze data, document program operations and processes, how to measure program outcomes, and how to collect and analyze data to determine program effectiveness. Program managers and staff members usually do not have expertise in these areas.
- *Objectivity.* The hallmark of good research partner is objectivity; that is, the ability to look at information about the program and form unbiased conclusions about whether the program is achieving what it wants to achieve. Most program managers and staff believe in the effectiveness of their programs or they would not be working in them. Thus there is the potential that they will look at evaluation findings in a biased way (even if this is an unconscious bias). A good research partner will point out both the positives and negatives in the program's operations.
- *Credibility.* Precisely because research partners are more objective, their conclusions and recommendations tend to carry more weight than those that might be produced by the program managers and staff. This credibility may be important to policymakers and continuation funders.
- *Perspective.* In part because they are objective, research partners may come to the program with fresh views about program activities and relationships between program components. In addition, a good research partner brings to the table a different way of thinking about program effectiveness, one grounded in empiricism (understanding program operations and outcomes through the collection and analysis of data, both quantitative and qualitative).

5. What can your research partner do for you?

Unlike traditional research involving neutral observation, Smart Suites expect research partners to be fully engaged in the problem-solving process. A good research partner is part facilitator, part researcher, and part program specialist. A good research partner can help you with some or all of the following:

- Identify target gun violence problem;
- Establish goals and measurable objectives;
- Collect and analyze data to develop a dynamic, real-life, operationally meaningful picture of gun crime in the district (or target area), including analyzing the following for homicides, non-fatal shootings, robberies, and/or aggravated assaults:
 - ✓ historical trends (numbers and rates);
 - ✓ comparison with “similar” cities/regions;
 - ✓ information on the growth and development patterns in the area;
 - ✓ demographic analysis of offenders and victims (age, race, sex);
 - ✓ examination of criminal history of offenders and victims;
 - ✓ relationship between victims and offenders;
 - ✓ number of offenders involved in incident;
 - ✓ weapon used in incident (by origin, make, model, time-to-crime);



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- ✓ when incident occurred (time of day; day of week; season);
- ✓ where incidents occurred; how this relates to where offenders and victims live; drug markets;
- ✓ schools; etc.;
- ✓ motive behind incidents (review case files with practitioners; interview practitioners; community members, offenders, clergy);

- Present findings to community groups, policymakers, and other constituents;
- Identify relevant crime control and prevention theories, as well as best practices;
- Assist Smart Suite task force design strategies that take advantage of the opportunities presented by the data;
- Develop a logic model: that is, provide a written description of how the activities and components of the strategy relate to each other and to the goals and objectives you are trying to accomplish;
- Develop measures to determine whether the strategy is meeting its goals and objectives;
- Develop an evaluation design to determine whether the program is having its intended impacts;
- Communicate evaluation findings and data on key indicators early and often to improve the strategy;
- Assist Smart Suite task forces with reporting requirements of the Department of Justice.

6. What should I do in order to prepare to work with a research partner or crime analyst?

- Convene your Smart Suite task force;
- Develop a mission and a focus for your initiative (e.g., your focus can be as small as youth gang violence in two police beats in Detroit, Michigan; to as large as firearms-involved domestic violence in the District of New Mexico). The focus of the initiative is the Smart Suite task force's decision to make, however, we recommend that you consider how far your resources can reasonably extend when considering your focus;
- Conduct a data inventory. Have each agency in the Smart Suite task force identify what data they maintain that might be useful to the problem-solving process; determine what requirements need to be met in order to share the data with a third party; attempt to remove obstacles to information sharing;
- Educate stakeholders (especially operational agencies) about the role of the research partner in this process;
- Develop a list of questions that the Smart Suite task force wants answered about the gun violence problem (e.g. We think that all of the guns are coming from Georgia, is this true? Are most victims of serious violence themselves offenders? What are gangs and how do they factor into our violence problem?)
- Determine what types of products you want to see from your research partner. If you prefer presentations over brief papers outlining major findings, you should start to articulate this preference now;
- Keep an open mind. Research/practitioner partnerships are not always easy or natural alliances. It will take time to build trust in the partnership;



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7. How do I identify a potential research partner?

Identifying possible research partners

- Existing relationships. Do any of the Smart Suite task force members have previous or on-going good experience with a research partner?
- Relationship with university. Is there a university or college nearby? Do they have a sociology, criminology, public policy, or urban affairs school? If so, it's worth reaching out to discuss the initiative with the university.
- Check with the American Society of Criminology (www.asc41.com). The members of this professional organization are sorted by state. You might consider contacting researchers who live nearby.
- George Mason University has an eConsortium for University Centers and Researchers for Partnership with Justice Practitioners (<http://gmuconsortium.org/>).

Evaluating options

- Hopefully you have more than one possible research partner for the Smart Suite task force to consider.
- Competition is good. Attached is a solicitation for research partners that you might consider using to request formal proposals from potential research partners. Since the "winning" research partner will have to submit a proposal like this to the Department of Justice for funding in any case, this may not be too much to ask, and it may eliminate some researchers who are not interested in investing too much time in the initiative and/or researchers who clearly do not understand the initiative. A caution here is time constraints. If you want to use the solicitation, you'll need to give researchers time (2-4 weeks) to write proposals;
- At a minimum, you should: (1) carefully review the research partner's resume to determine if she/he has experience serving as a research partner and/or conducting evaluations of programs similar to yours. Be sure that references include directors of programs that the researcher has worked with in the past, and ask those individuals about their experiences with the researcher, including how well the researcher worked collaboratively with the program managers and staff; (2) arrange an interview between the Smart Suite task force and potential research partners to determine if this is a person with whom you would be comfortable working. Ask potential partners to discuss: how they might contribute to the Smart Suite task force; what experience has prepared them to work on this project; some ideas about what the gun violence problem involves and how it might be further explored; and what type of commitment they are willing to invest in the initiative; and (3) ask for samples of potential research partner's work, including reports. Review the materials to be sure they are written clearly, without a great deal of jargon, and in a way that would be understandable to you and to those with whom you would like to share the findings.

8. What makes a good research partner?



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Unfortunately, there is no easy way to identify a qualified research partner. Although many researchers are members of professional organizations, such as the American Society of Criminology or the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, membership in these organizations does not imply qualifications.

There are some basic qualifications you can look for when determining how to hire a research partner. What follows are some considerations for selecting a research partner.

- *Formal Education.* Most research partners have formal training in research methods, usually in a social science discipline. Graduate-level training should provide this knowledge; for example, someone with a Ph.D. in criminology should have the research knowledge required to serve as a research partner.
- *Experience.* A qualified research partner must not only have research skills, but must also have specific experience in working with practitioners and programs. While experience working in a criminal justice/law enforcement setting is not a requirement for a research partner, experience working with criminal justice/law enforcement programs is.
- *Philosophy.* Much has been written about how research and evaluation should be conducted, and different research partners view the process differently. For example, some research partner may consider themselves to be an “experts” and view their role as one of an outsider who reviews program materials, interviews managers and staff, and then makes recommendations for “fixing” the program. Others see themselves more as researchers than research partners and may avoid providing feedback to Smart Suite task forces until after the evaluation is completed so as not to “contaminate” the evaluation. Some do not consider data and information gleaned through interviews with law enforcement officers, community members, and offenders as “evidence” and thus avoids using these methods to understand violence problems. None of these are particularly productive philosophies for working with Smart Suite task forces. Instead, you should be looking for a research partner who believes that the problem-solving process is a collaborative one between the research partner and the Smart Suite task force. In this philosophy, Smart Suite task force members are all seen as experts and research partner works closely with them throughout the process of understanding the gun violence problem, designing interventions to deal with the gun violence problems, documenting interventions, developing performance measures, interpreting evaluation findings, and making recommendations for program improvement. The goal of such research and evaluation is to improve the program, not to declare the program a success or failure. More formal names for this philosophy include “action research”, “participatory evaluation,” “utilization-focused evaluation,” and “empowerment evaluation.”
- *Communication Skills.* Research partners must be able to communicate with a wide variety of individuals who have a vested interest in the results of their work. Prosecutors, law enforcement leadership and line officers, community members, clergy representatives, funding agency representatives, legislators, city council members, and even offenders to whom research partners may be called upon to present their evaluation findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Research partners should not only be personable and engaging, but should be able to clearly present findings and conclusions both orally and in written form.



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Some basic questions to consider using in the interview process:

- Please demonstrate how you have presented complicated quantitative analyses to practitioners.
- What will be the role of qualitative information (interviews, focus groups, observation) in this project?
- I understand that in some cities, researchers have “mapped gang disputes”. Are you familiar with this?
- Would analysis like that be possible here, assuming that gang disputes are a problem here? How would you approach this task?
- What will be the role of the Smart Suite task force in designing the research? What kind of information will you need from us?
- What makes you interested in the project?
- What are a couple of the most significant recent research findings, as they relate to this initiative?
- How much time would you be able to spend on-site?
- In many projects, data analysis is conducted and strategies are developed but it is not clear there is a relationship between data and strategies. How will you help us bring data and strategies together?
- Some questions to ask yourself after each interview:
 - Was the research partner qualified, in terms of training and experience?
 - Did she/he seem to bring an appropriate approach to the project?
 - Was she/he interested in the project for the “right” reasons?
 - Can we work with this person?
 - Did she/he seem to take questions from the group in a positive (non-defensive) way?
 - Did the research partner seem to bring his/her own agenda?
 - Did the research partner have the answers before doing the analysis?
 - How was his/her interaction with the group?
 - Did she/he seem to respect the members of the Smart Suite task force as partners?

The MSU team is available for consultation on the research partner role in violence reduction strategies.¹

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¹ This document is a modification of guidelines originally developed by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Firearms Enforcement Assistance Team (FEAT) working in collaboration with Michigan State University, the national research partner for Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN).

