Home Office research: March event opens dialogue on research for policy

On 15 March of this year a special event was held at the LSE as part of the annual Southern Regional Group/Mannheim Centre seminar series, organised jointly with the Home Office RDS National Offender Management Service (NOMS) group. Intended to open discussions with the Research and Statistics Directorate with a view to improving working relationships between the Home Office and British criminologists, it brought together a team from the NOMS group (Chloe Chitty, Robert Street, Duncan Stewart and Rosalyn Xavier) and three independent discussants (Loraine Gelsthorpe and Alison Liebling, Cambridge, and Mike Hough, Kings College London), with Tim Newburn (LSE) chairing the event.

Rules of evidence: doing and using research for criminal justice policy, take one

Chloe Chitty, Robert Street, Duncan Stewart and Rosalyn Xavier (Home Office RDS NOMS team)

In the following article, the Home Office RDS NOMS team set out their agenda and observations on the discussion.

Quality matters and evidence matters. These are the two basic tenets behind what the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate (RDS) is trying to achieve when we do and use research for criminal justice policy.

Why do they matter? We need robust evidence to enable policy makers and Ministers to make effective decisions and robust evidence is underpinned by quality research, analysis and advice. Evidence-based policy making and delivery is relatively well embedded as a concept within criminal justice policy but it is not 'a given'. While quality is something that we can all sign up to, it is a contested concept and it competes with other pressures, including time and money.

The epithet for quality in criminal justice policy research has therefore rightly become 'fit for purpose'. But even if we can agree on 'fit for purpose', what does this mean? The key is the purpose. The Home Office uses evidence to do many things, including inform Ministers, policy makers and the public, to aid effective decision making in specific areas and to assess the effects of particular policies. Our research is applied and it is, by definition, designed to answer policy questions. It is therefore essential that the question dictates the research design used: we should apply the best available design and methods to answer the question and in so doing, we should strive to improve our knowledge, standards and ability (including proactively breaking down barriers where they exist) to conducting and commissioning the best available design. This is what drives RDS' interest in using the best available design to answer the question, whether it's qualitative research or a randomised

control trial, or a combination of designs and methods to answer a combination of questions.

But it's not sufficient to limit the debate about research quality to researchers. There is a great deal of evidence to choose from when making decisions; as policy researchers, we have a

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responsibility to help decision makers to understand the quality of evidence available to them and what it says. So, it is important for us not only to define quality for our own work, but also to translate that into something that policy makers and Ministers can apply themselves. This means disciplining ourselves to identify what is good quality and what is good enough quality for the purpose (of making decisions). To do this, we have to categorise and stratify evidence and in so doing, we need to debate what is the best design for each type of question.

RDS is trying to do this, for example, in its discussion of evaluation designs in Harper and Chitty (2005). In doing so, RDS is joining a well-established debate that already exists in criminal policy research (e.g. Farrington et al., 2002; Sherman, 2003) and across the wider Whitehall research community (e.g. Spencer et al., 2003).

The BSC/LSE seminar in March 2006 took this discussion further and generated a very constructive debate amongst criminal justice policy researchers about what we mean by quality. We were delighted to present the research and analysis programme we are currently undertaking for the National Offender Management Service in the Home Office. The discussion highlighted the need to improve the way that the Home Office RDS and academic colleagues work together, such as improving our procurement of research by greater pre-tender and post-tender discussion (though avoiding possible contravention of intellectual property rights); the need for universities to tender against Full Economic Costs; the importance of qualitative research; and the need to build greater links between the Home Office, the BSC and ESRC. The event was also important in debunking the myth that the Home Office is just interested in randomised control trials: it is not; the key point is that the research question should determine the design, not the other way round. This was a highly enjoyable event and it was the 'First Take' in this debate. The second will be at the BSC conference in July and we hope you can make it.

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Reflections on the RDS NOMS agenda: the three discussants each set out their reflections on the presentation

Mike Hough, ICPR, King's College London

I had a walk-on role in this seminar, providing one of three academic responses to the Home Office RDS presentation made by Chloe Chitty, Robert Street, Duncan Stewart and Rosalyn Xavier. Here I offer my reflections on the evening.

There was much to be welcomed in the RDS presentation – not least the fact that it actually happened at all. There is a clear need for Home Office research departments and academic researchers to mend some fences. I hope that the evening represented the start of a more open dialogue. Certainly the Society is an obvious body to take such a dialogue forward.

The RDS presentation summarised work across RDS, but with a focus on the work being done within NOMS. Points that struck me were:

- A strategic decision by RDS/ NOMS to invest in fewer (but better) studies;
- Taking responsibility for the quality of research across the correctional services;
- A growing acceptance of policy customers defining policy questions;
- A commitment to a plurality of research methods, with RCTs as only one of many techniques.

The point about RCTs was especially welcome. It showed a growing recognition of the practical limitations of RCTs, and of the value of a more eclectic approach to theory testing and theory building. It probably reflects the facts that RDS has been unable to mount a significant and productive programme of RCTs, and that their policy customers have actually found some qualitative and descriptive studies of great value.

RDS/NOMS will have to be careful about the role that they are assuming of quality control 'across the piece'. Some independently-funded work is now submitted to the Project Quality Assurance Board (PQAB). This is perfectly reasonable, if it simply limits the burden of research falling on the prison and probation services. It is perfectly unreasonable, however, if it serves to insulate and protect NOMS from the spotlight of independent research.

The RDS presentation was important not only for what it said, but for what it didn't say. Whilst the seminar was ostensibly about research methods, there was a small herd of elephants in the room. There was no recognition by RDS of the strained relations that exist between the Home Office and those research centres that involve themselves in policy research. Nor was much said about the majority of academic criminologists for whom engagement with the Home Office is pretty unthinkable. The distrust that has developed between RDS staff and academic researchers is partly about differences in research philosophy, but it is fuelled by the corrosive effects of competitive tendering and the lack of openness about publication.

It is high time for some creative discussion between RDS and academia, to help us find better ways of doing business together, and ways of doing better research together. This will require a bit of give and take all round. A healthy criminology needs to be both engaged with, and independent of, criminal policy.

Alison Liebling, University of Cambridge

I welcome this dialogue, and the reflectiveness this seminar represents within RDS about the purpose of research. The programme set out is very offender-focused, however. For example, the question, 'is there a link between the needs of female offenders and criminality?' This seems a fair question to ask in an era of low imprisonment rates for women. But other urgent questions include, how do poor women become disproportionately imprisoned? Why did the woman who self-harmed in a hostel on her license get recalled to prison? How do women end up in abusive and

destructive life situations, and what could be done to keep them alive and in the community? We know we have the highest imprisonment rate in Western Europe. A little critical criminology, or basic sociology, wouldn't go amiss. In a recent evaluation of a suicide prevention strategy in high risk prisons, we observed a good, evidence-based policy, implemented carefully. It had some moderate success. But in a context of the over-use of imprisonment, it was distressing to watch prison staff battling to make it work, when a 10 per cent reduction in the population and throughput of local prisons would have made it work so much better. The single most important conclusion of our study was that local prisons are at breaking point. Our research sponsors (Safer Custody Group), were inevitably focused on the internal policy, not the external context. If we want to improve the value of research there needs to be some attempt to link projects together in a cumulative way. Policies are not always consistent with each other. The move towards better integration of practice, and towards greater emphasis on literature reviews in specific areas, should be supplemented by paying attention to better integration of the implications of research.

If it is important to improve our research base, then there are some procedural matters in relation to access and ethics which need improving and if possible streamlining. There is still, in my view, an enormous gap between the widespread enthusiasm of coal face personnel in criminal justice settings for a research presence, and the time consuming and idiosyncratic processes students and experienced researchers have to go through to get a research project started. Some proposals are refused because they don't fit the fashionable psychological model – or requests are made, for example, to 'see the questions beforehand' in ethnographic studies in which the point of the study is that questions arise from the field. The key to an improved research base is lengthy exposure to the worlds we are interested in. There is an increasing emphasis on approaches to analysis, but none of this pays off unless we have ways of accessing high quality data. Short cuts don't pay off. Sometimes, prolonged observation is the only way to unravel 'what is going on' in the minds of offenders, and criminal justice personnel. As Barbara Wootton argued in 'Social Science and Social Pathology', 'the best techniques are still at the mercy of the raw material to which they are applied' (1959:312).

In our world of contracts and outcomes, I want to make a plea for flexibility. As Norman Denzin says in 'The Research Act' (1989), 'The sociological imagination demands variability in the research process. The process by which [research] is done should not be made too rigorous; an open mind is required'. Sometimes, things happen that mean a change of direction is justified. I have often been reminded that the most valuable research I undertook, from a policy point of view, was the one project I did that had no apparent policy-relevance. This is worth bearing in mind as we continue our discussions.

Loraine Gelsthorpe, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge

I similarly had a walk-on role in this seminar, providing the third academic response to the Home Office RDS presentation. I welcomed the presentation and discussion as an attempt to discuss and clarify not only the direction and context of Home Office RDS research, but methodological preferences and standards as those within currently perceive them. There have been previous attempts to promote dialogue, of course, some more effective than others, and some more public than others. Home Office RDS support for and involvement in a BSC Methods Training workshop a couple of years ago, for example, was hugely appreciated. I am well aware that a number of us engaged in Home Office research have also had personal opportunity to discuss methodological matters – especially when we have perceived the goalposts to have moved and we have been criticised for not delivering the type of study and methodology that, as far as we have been concerned, were not in the original research specifications or built into the research designs in the first place. What has been of particular concern here perhaps, is that the Home Office research specifications have been drawn so tightly that it has been difficult to shape research in a way that received criminological wisdom would suggest is advisable, but then researchers have been found wanting for not addressing the design limitations which they had pointed out all along.

I found the Home Office research team's presentation helpful in three particular ways.

1. In offering at least some reassurance that their notion of a 'gold standard' of Randomized Control Trials is more flexible than we have previously been led to believe. It has certainly been a worry that research might become 'methods-led' rather than 'problem-led' (using the best methods available to suit the problem or question being addressed). In this sense then, it seems that the recent devaluing of qualitative approaches might be reversed.

2. It follows that the Home Office research team's avowed commitment to mixed methods is important, philosophically as well as practically, as criminological research might remain a social science (problem-based, contextually contingent, etc.)

3. The establishment of a Project Quality Approval Board which was mentioned as a mechanism for monitoring research standards is to be welcomed if it screens out poor quality research, but only if it avoids a bureaucratic approval system for local independent research and is not used to limit such independent research

Broadly, then, I welcomed the very thoughtful input from the Home Office team led by Chloe Chitty, it was useful to learn about the range of research that the Home Office has in mind and to be reminded of some of the constraints on researchers within. Certainly I hope that this sort of open discussion can continue. Somewhere along the line we need to address the growing suspicion that there is increasing reluctance to publish work that makes uncomfortable reading for politicians and policy-makers of any one political persuasion. We also need to address the ways in which Home Office rules on competitive tendering and so on militate against co-operative and creative multi-disciplinary and multi-site research. There are many who no longer wish to work with the Home Office (burned fingers and all that), but within the BSC there are some who would hope to work with the Home Office (and policy makers) in a more creative and productive way free from the shadow of political preferences.

Doing research for policy: personal reflections on some challenges for the criminological academy

Gordon Hughes (Cardiff University and BSC EC member) provides a final word as an interested member of the audience.

This special session may represent a watershed moment in the long and seemingly increasingly strained conversation between academic criminologists and the Home Office. The interest in this debate was evident in the exceptional turn out of members for the seminar. The seminar built on earlier discussion and debate stimulated by the Society on methods of research and the policy role of criminology (see, for example, BSC Newsletter no. 57, 2005) as well as the much publicised concerns of academics regarding the uses of research by government in the UK in the recent Criminal Justice Matters journal (The Uses of Research, 2006) and previously at our annual national conferences. The focus of the seminar was specifically on the how the NOMS group in the Home Office saw both its role and that of contracted external researchers in the policy process. However, my focus here is not on the specifics of developments in NOMS which others in this feature are more capable of addressing in an informed manner. Rather I wish to focus on the general challenges and opportunities for mutual learning and intellectual stocktaking for both academic criminologists and government researchers/policy advisers that are emerging from this debate. I write this reflecting on my role as active

researcher, teacher and trainer of criminological inquiry and occasional government consultant in the field of community safety and local crime control.

Much of what follows begins and ends with concerns associated with the not so hidden 'gold standard' of the Maryland scale and the Campbell Collaboration group's advocacy of Randomised Controlled Trials, systematic reviews, meta-analyses as well as the claims of experimental criminology most ardently popularised by Larry Sherman as a senior representative of the Campbell and Stockholm groups (Sherman, 2005). I got a sense on the night that this issue of potential methodological hierarchy and the related threat to methodological variety in criminological research was what got people out of their homes to hear the debate between the Home Office NOMS team and the three criminological discussants. There are of course many serious issues which we need to continue to discuss about the relative merits of quantitative research methods. It is clear that the numbers carry much weight for ministers and policy makers. Indeed a publicly oriented criminology would be missing a vitally important role for itself as a social scientific discipline if it did not engage in what has been known historically as 'political arithmetic' (Lauder et.al, 2004).

In one sense then the contemporary 'crisis' associated with criminology not being listened to by policy makers may be due in part to our collective failure as teachers and trainers of our social science students to deliver research skills across the range of modes of data analysis, and hands-on capacity to pursue methodologically rigorous evidence gathering as well as theoretically rich argument. The debate on the 'experimental turn' in policy criminology thus opens up a challenge as to how we who are employed as teachers and trainers of the next generation of criminologists equip graduates with the skills base to evaluate and undertake multi-method social scientific research which is both methodologically and theoretically rich.

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Another challenge of a more personal nature to me is the need to engage knowledgeably with the evidence, techniques and original studies associated with the experimental research in my specialist research field. What is the methodological rigour of RCTs in crime prevention and community safety? In turn it is overdue for many of us to re-examine the evidential base of the 'systematic reviews' and 'meta-analyses' in our specialist areas and to hold these to account publicly, via, for example, the BSC's own publication outlets. As noted in the questions at this seminar, it is high time criminologists take back systematic reviews with ourselves as the experts.

The final challenge this event helped crystallise for me was the need for a public debate around recapturing both the 'social' and, as crucially if more contentiously, the 'science' in criminology as a social science discipline. Tim Newburn concluded the event by noting that there was evidence of real disagreements and space for misunderstanding and of talking past each other. Perhaps such an event and the mutual commitment for more public debates to follow will lessen that risk to the mutual benefit of both sides.

Taking the discussion forward

With everyone involved in the event keen to continue the conversation and bring others in, there are plans to hold a follow-on event at the annual conference in Glasgow (5 to 7 July). This will be held as a roundtable session with all welcome, and we look forward to a discussion as stimulating as that at the March event.

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