

## Article 1

# Research Should Help Us Both Find and Implement What Works



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The hallmark of excellence in any field is that we should understand what works, and should be able to differentiate what works from what doesn't. This applies in fields as varied as medicine or education, in social policy more generally, in business and even in politics. It certainly also applies in criminal justice, where public safety is the ultimate aim and where prisons and correctional agencies should therefore exercise their duty to adopt the most recent and most promising research-informed practices in the field. The alternative is that correctional agencies will often waste resources and lose their credibility over time in doing what doesn't work. Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that there are often practical, political, financial and social-cultural considerations that may impede successful implementation of good practice. But a correctional agency with a tradition of respect for research evidence can try to avoid these obstacles and pitfalls. Correctional administrators and policy makers will always welcome new evidence that can enhance their effectiveness, or even evidence that simply points to what they are already doing well but could do even better.

Effectiveness in corrections is enhanced when there is integration and continuity of approaches that ultimately improves the quality of service delivery to offenders and the degree of public safety corrections can provide through a consistent focus on rehabilitative efforts, and not just through the punishing and warehousing of individuals. Modern correctional agencies need to assess the merits of an increasing number of potential innovations (e.g., adopting new technology or new prison design), or changes in existing practice (e.g., assessment, case management, intervention, or other service-delivery frameworks). There are critical decisions to be made in terms of whether new policy

or practice can improve performance ... is there strong enough evidence to support the change in the context of other agency priorities and approaches, would the new approach be feasible to implement, how much can it be expected to improve performance, where has it been tried successfully, and are there alternatives or options ... etc.? These are all basic research questions that can keep an agency doing what works best in their particular circumstances. Unfortunately, without research to serve as a guidepost, many attempts at change in corrections can end being based on guesswork, true in the end more 'on paper' than in practice, or even more often, fragmented or superficial without having much meaningful impact.

A recent focus on Implementation Science in the broader field of human services points clearly to 'what works' in implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). Following a systematic approach that remains grounded in research, from beginning to follow-through post-implementation, can assist both in deciding upon and successfully adopting evidence-informed change in corrections.

Implementation success requires attending purposefully to organizational and leadership drivers of change, but also important are some key principles supported by research:

- Implementation should always be planned, executed, monitored and evaluated carefully.
- Addressing practical challenges and impediments at an early stage is more likely to lead to success at a later stage.
- Adequate time and resourcing should be allocated to support implementation. Rushing through implementation or attempting to do 'too much' with insufficient resourcing (human and/or financial) is more likely to lead to failure.
- Implementation is more likely to succeed if it progresses through a set of sequential stages.

*Exploration and Adoption* – where agencies should develop some level of in-house capacity for assessing the available research evidence, systematically examining options, looking at the 'fit' with existing policies or practices, determining feasibility, and actively seek to share knowledge with and/or request technical assistance from other correctional agencies, local universities, the non-government sector, expert consultants and professional associations;

**Preparation** – which includes encouraging buy-in from staff and managers/supervisors, engaging external partners where necessary, creating new operating policies and procedures, arranging for a range of organizational supports ... etc.;

**Initial Implementation** – including ensuring that all of the necessary organizational supports are in place to manage and problem-solve as implementation unfolds, staff have been provided appropriate levels of training to enhance their skills, post-training coaching is available, efficient monitoring processes are introduced ... etc.;

**Full Operation** – where staff are feeling competent, further development is encouraged, and the new program or practice is introduced system-wide and fully integrated with agency practice;

**Sustainability** – where there is a continued focus on peer-supported learning, management attends to measures of fidelity of implementation and efforts are made to secure funding for future years;

**Innovation** – where research monitoring and evaluation may suggest some improvement or innovation that could enhance effectiveness – and where the process is then re-sequenced beginning with preparation.

There is an abundant and ever-growing amount of research evidence to support change in practice in corrections. But correctional services have to ‘mind the gap’ they face in going from research to practice. There are many issues in the field of corrections that remain unresolved and deserve more research attention (Ward et al., 2022). Challenges are faced routinely, for example, in the scaling up and/or targeting of programs, in striking a good balance between program integrity and local adaptation, in measuring implementation quality, in garnering broad-based support from front-line staff, and in working towards program sustainability... etc.

Correctional services around the world have marched steadily towards greater acceptance of evidence-informed practice in the last several decades. Most advanced jurisdictions would claim that they are at least trying to implement good practice. But the jurisdictions who have perhaps been most successful in achieving and sustaining results are those that have remained grounded in research, remaining alert and nimble so as take full advantage of new developments as they arise. The formula to follow is to go from good research to new practice that brings sustained impact.

## *Insights*

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Modern correctional agencies need to assess the merits of an increasing number of potential innovations and possible changes to policy, procedures or practice to improve performance. **Research** is the indispensable guidepost to ensure decisions are not based on guesswork.

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Implementation of evidence-informed change in correctional practice is more likely to succeed if it is carefully monitored and supported by a **research** informed sequence of steps.

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Correctional agencies who will be most successful in achieving and sustaining results are those who remain grounded in **research** so as take full advantage of new developments as they arise. The formula to follow is to go from good research to new practice that brings sustained impact.

## *References*

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Ward, T. et al. (2022) Urgent issues and prospects in correctional rehabilitation practice and research. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, Volume 27, Issue 2, September 2022, Pages 103-128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12211>