

vast majority of published criminology remains analytic and nonexperimental. While criminology was attracting funding and students during the period of rising crime of the 1960s to 1990s, criminologists put most of their efforts into the basic science of crime patterns and theories of criminality. Studies of the natural life course of crime among cohorts of males became the central focus of the field, as measured by citation patterns (Wolfgang, Figlio, and Thornberry 1978). Despite standing concerns that criminology would be “captured” by governments to become a tool for developing repressive policies, the evidence suggests that the greatest (or largest) generation of criminologists in history captured the field away from policymakers.

The renaissance in experimental criminology therefore addressed very intense debates over many key issues in crime and justice, providing the first unbiased empirical guidance available to inform those debates. That much made criminology increasingly useful, at least potentially. Usefulness alone, of course, does not guarantee that the information will be *used*. Police agencies today do make extensive use of the research on concentrating patrols in crime hot spots, yet they have few repeat offender units, despite two successful tests of the “invention.” Correctional agencies make increasing use of the “what works” literature in the United States and United Kingdom, yet prison populations are still fed by people returned to prison on the unevaluated policy of incarcerating “technical” violators of the conditions of their release (who have not committed new crimes). Good evidence alone is not enough to change policy in any context. Yet absent good evidence, there is a far greater danger that bad policies will win out. Analytic criminology—well or badly done—poses fewer risks for society than badly done experimental criminology. It is not clear that another descriptive test of differential association theory will have any effect on policy making, unless it is embedded in a program evaluation. But misleading or biased evidence from poor-quality research designs—or even unreplicated experiments—may well cause the adoption of policies that ultimately prove harmful.

This danger is, in turn, reduced by the lack of influence criminology usually has on policy making or operational decisions. That, in turn, is linked to the absence of clear conclusions about the vast majority of criminal justice policies and decisions. Until experimental criminology can develop a more comprehensive basis of evidence for guiding

operations, practitioners are unlikely to develop the habit of checking the literature before making a decision. The possibility of improving the quality of both primary evidence and systematic reviews offers hope for a future in which criminology itself may entail less risk of causing harm.

This is by no means a suggestion that analytic criminology be abandoned; the strength of experimental criminology may depend heavily on the continued advancement of basic (analytic) criminology. Yet the full partnership between the two has yet to be realized. Analytic social science still dominates field experiments by 100 to 1 or better in criminology, just as in any other field of research on human behavior. Future success of the field may depend upon a growing public image based on experimental results, just as advances in treatment attract funding for basic science in medicine.



Conclusion

Theoretical criminology will hold center stage for many years to come. But as Farrington (2000) has argued, the advancement of theory may depend on better experimental evidence. And that, in turn, may depend on a revival in the federal funding that has recently dropped to its lowest level in four decades. Such a revival may well depend on exciting public interest in the practical value of research, as perhaps only experiments can do.

“Show and tell” is hard to do while it is happening. Yet it is not impossible. Whether anyone ever sees a crime prevention program delivered, it is at least possible to embed an experimental design into every long-term analytic study of crime in the life course. As Joan McCord (2003) said in her final words to the American Society of Criminology, the era of purely observational criminology should come to an end. Given what we now know about the basic life-course patterns, McCord suggested, “all longitudinal studies should now have experiments embedded within them.”

Doing what McCord proposed would become an experiment *in* social science as well as *of* social science. That experiment is already under way, in a larger sense. Criminology is rapidly becoming more multi-method, as well as multi-level and multi-theoretical. Criminology may soon resemble medicine more than economics, with analysts closely integrated with clinical researchers to