CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH IN PRACTICE: AN APPLIED GUIDE FOR FUTURE PRACTITIONERS



Denise Borchert
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Criminal Justice Research in Practice
An Applied Guide for Future Practitioners

Denise Borchert

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2026

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About This Resource

About the Resource

Criminal Justice Research in Practice: An Applied Guide for Future Practitioners is a practice-oriented learning resource designed to help emerging criminal justice practitioners understand and apply evidence-based principles in their future careers. Developed specifically for technical college students, this resource introduces fundamental concepts in accessible language and connects them directly to decision-making in criminal justice settings. By translating complex ideas into practical tools and applications, this resource aims to build students' confidence in interpreting research and encourage evidence-informed approaches that can meaningfully improve policy and practice across the criminal justice field.

About the Author

The author, Denise Borchert, is an instructor and department chair of the Criminal Justice program at Western Technical College in La Crosse, WI. She has over 20 years of criminal justice experience working in both juvenile and adult corrections. Throughout her career, she has been involved in the implementation and evaluation of evidence-based practices and has provided training and support to practitioners applying these approaches in real-world settings. Her experience combines correctional practice, program improvement, and a commitment to helping criminal justice professionals use research-informed strategies to enhance their effectiveness.

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1: WHY RESEARCH MATTERS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

As you begin your career in criminal justice, you will gain a great deal of knowledge from your interactions with victims, offenders, colleagues, and communities. Those experiences will be valuable and will help shape your professional judgment. At the same time, it is important to recognize that what you see or experience firsthand does not always reflect what works most effectively across different agencies, communities, or populations. You may encounter an officer who strongly believes a particular policing strategy is effective because it worked in their experience, or a practitioner who is convinced a program reduces recidivism based on the individuals they have worked with. A single success story can be encouraging, and public opinion can be influential, but neither provides enough evidence to determine whether an approach consistently produces positive results. As a future criminal justice professional, you will be expected to make decisions that affect the lives of others. The strongest decisions are made when professional experience is combined with high-quality research and evidence. This approach allows you to look beyond individual cases and determine what has been shown to work across many people, places, and situations.

So, how do we move beyond personal experiences, success stories, and opinions to determine what actually works? The answer is research.

1.1: What is Research?

1.2: Why Does Scientific Knowledge Matter?

1.3: Why is Criminal Justice Research Important to Criminal Justice Practitioners?

1.4: How Does Criminal Justice Research Turn into Actual Policies, Programs, and Practices in the Field?

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1.1: What is Research?

Research is something people do every day, often without realizing it. When you compare prices before buying a new laptop, read reviews before choosing a restaurant, or examine an employer's website before applying for a job, you are gathering information to make a better decision. You might ask questions, look for reliable sources, compare different viewpoints, and decide which information is most trustworthy. In everyday life, this process is often called "research." While these activities involve searching for and using information, they are usually informal and may not follow a structured process.

An essential part of the criminal justice system's function and goals is understanding why people commit crimes and how to deal with them. You have likely learned about the different possible answers to this in your criminology class. We will be using some of that criminological theory background later in this text. Before we get there, we are first going to jump back further into your high school science classes. As you may recall, science is a process that helps us answer questions by carefully observing what happens, collecting information, and using evidence to reach conclusions.[1] Scientific knowledge is what we learn when researchers systematically collect and test evidence to better understand behaviors, events, and patterns in the world around us.[2]

When I say high school science classes, you may think of biology or chemistry. Those classes fall under natural science because they involve naturally occurring phenomena.[3] In criminal justice, we often focus on the social sciences. Social science is the study of the individual and collective behaviors of people or collections of people. Social sciences can be classified into disciplines such as psychology (the science of human behavior), sociology (the science of social groups), and economics (the science of firms, markets, and economies).[4] In addition to your criminal justice classes, you may have taken other social science classes, such as sociology or psychology, for your criminal justice degree. This is because criminal justice is an interdisciplinary field influenced by the overlap of different social sciences.[4]

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1. Chen, V.T., León-Pérez, G., Honnold, J.; and Aytar, V. (2024). *The craft of sociological research: Principles and methods of collecting, analyzing, and presenting social science data*. Virtual Library of Virginia. https://viva.pressbooks.pub/sociology-research-methods/. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.(opens in new window)
2. Williams, M., & Allen, M. (2022). *Research methods for criminal justice students*. Weber State University. https://uen.pressbooks.pub/researchmethodscriminaljusticestudents/. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
3. Bhattacherjee, A. (2012). *Social science research: Principles, methods, and practices*. University of South Florida. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/oa_textbooks/3. Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License.
4. (Williams & Allen, 2022).

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1.2: Why Does Scientific Knowledge Matter?

When researchers observe something in an orderly, methodical, and deliberate manner following an organized plan or system, they attempt to explain social facts, occurrences, and events.[1] In one of your first criminal justice classes, you likely looked at crime rates using a common crime reporting system. The same statistics you use can be used by researchers to examine why some areas experience more violent crime than other areas. Criminal justice researchers seek to understand not only what is happening, but also why it is happening and what can be done to improve outcomes.

Scientific knowledge is not always perfect, and researchers do not always have all the answers.[2] Sometimes, there may be more than one reasonable explanation for why something happens. Researchers develop theories to help explain patterns, behaviors, and events they observe in the world. Some theories explain a phenomenon very well, while others may not fit the evidence as closely. As researchers collect new information and use better research methods, their understanding can improve. Because of this, scientific knowledge and theories can change over time as new evidence becomes available.

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1. (Williams & Allen, 2022).
2. (Williams & Allen, 2022).

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1.3: Why is Criminal Justice Research Important to Criminal Justice Practitioners?

Many students who enter a criminal justice program do not plan to become researchers, and that is completely understandable. Most are preparing for careers directly in law enforcement, the courts, or corrections. However, research plays a vital role in how the criminal justice system operates and improves.

Throughout your career in the criminal justice field, you will regularly encounter information, statistics, reports, and claims about crime, policing, courts, corrections, and public safety. As you enter and work in this field, you will hear many stories about what works and what does not work. An officer may describe a patrol strategy that seemed effective in one neighborhood. A correctional officer may believe a particular intervention helps reduce misconduct. A victim advocate may have seen a service make a meaningful difference in the life of a victim.

These experiences are valuable, and criminal justice professionals should learn from them. However, a single experience does not necessarily tell us whether something consistently works across many people, communities, or situations. Sometimes a strategy appears successful because of unique circumstances. Other times, people remember unusual or memorable events more than ordinary ones.

Effective criminal justice professionals do not simply accept these claims at face value. They ask important questions: What evidence supports the claim? How was the information collected? Are there limitations to the findings? Can the results reasonably be applied to the situation at hand? These may be the same types of questions you ask when you are looking at restaurant reviews trying to decide where to eat!

Unlike choosing a restaurant, decisions in this field can affect individual rights, community trust, public safety, and, in many cases, a practitioner's ability to go home safely after a shift. Whenever possible, those decisions should be guided by credible evidence rather than assumptions, anecdotes, or tradition alone. This resource is intended to help you understand how research influences criminal justice policy, programs, training, and everyday practice. Research helps agencies evaluate whether programs are achieving their intended goals, identify unintended consequences, and improve services to the communities they serve. It can provide insight into crime patterns, victim experiences, officer wellness, correctional interventions, and many other aspects of the justice system. Understanding how research is used can help practitioners better understand why certain practices exist and how they might be improved.

The ability to find, evaluate, interpret, and use information effectively is an essential skill for modern criminal justice professionals. Decisions about policies, training, equipment, intervention programs, hiring practices, community partnerships, and responses to crime are often influenced by research findings. Research helps criminal justice practitioners evaluate whether that information is trustworthy and whether it should influence decisions or policies. Throughout this course, you will learn how to read and interpret research, ask critical questions about evidence, and apply research findings responsibly in real-world settings. The goal is to become an evidence-informed practitioner. An evidence-informed practitioner is someone who can use reliable information to make better, fairer, and more effective decisions. By understanding how research works and how knowledge is created, you will be better prepared to serve communities, solve problems, and contribute to a more effective criminal justice system.

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1.4: How Does Criminal Justice Research Turn into Actual Policies, Programs, and Practices in the Field?

Let's start at the beginning.... This is probably not your first criminal justice course. Before exploring research methods and how research can inform professional practice, it is important to have a basic understanding of the criminal justice system, its major components, and how those components work together. The knowledge you gained in earlier courses about law enforcement, the courts, corrections, and the broader justice process provides the foundation for the concepts you will encounter in this course. What you may not have realized is that many of the practices, policies, and procedures you studied were influenced by research. How can we go about finding answers that are not based on someone's opinion, but on evidence that we can all agree on?[1] Research findings can help us navigate issues like this. Decisions about patrol strategies, prosecutorial discretion, juvenile diversion programs, and countless other aspects of criminal justice are often based on evidence gathered through research and evaluation. In many ways, your previous criminal justice courses introduced you to the results of research. This course takes the next step by helping you understand where that information comes from, how it is produced, how to evaluate its quality, and how to use it responsibly to improve criminal justice practice.

When you are working in the field, you will likely contribute to research efforts by collecting data, participating in evaluations, or helping to implement evidence-based programs. Some students may discover an interest in research and pursue advanced education or research-focused careers. For most practitioners, however, the more important goal is learning to think like an evidence-informed professional.

By the end of this course, you should be better prepared to navigate a profession that increasingly relies on data, evidence, and accountability. You will not be expected to know how to conduct research, but you will be expected to become a thoughtful consumer of research. Understanding how to evaluate and use evidence is an important part of professional competence and can help you make better-informed decisions throughout your criminal justice career.

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1. Spielman, R.M., Jenkins, W.J., & Lovett, M.D. (2020). *Psychology 2e*. OpenStax. https://openstax.org/details/books/psychology-2e. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

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2: THE BASICS OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

Learning Objectives

- Explain how research helps criminal justice professionals make informed decisions.
- Describe how the scientific research process creates knowledge.
- Differentiate between inductive and deductive reasoning.
- Identify whether a study is exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, or applied research.
- Recognize the difference between studying a specific case and studying broader patterns.
- Differentiate between qualitative and quantitative research.
- Identify the research approach used in a criminal justice study.
- Explain the strengths and limitations of different research approaches.
- Ask questions about how research findings were developed.
- Use basic research concepts to become a more critical consumer of criminal justice information.

In criminal justice, professionals make decisions every day that can affect individuals, communities, and the justice system as a whole. Whether deciding how to respond to a crime problem, evaluating the effectiveness of a program, or interpreting information in a report, criminal justice practitioners need more than opinions or assumptions. They need the ability to find, understand, question, and use reliable information. It means learning how to think critically about information, recognize quality evidence, and apply research findings responsibly in real-world situations. This chapter introduces the foundations of criminal justice research and the skills needed to become an evidence-informed practitioner. You will learn how social scientists use the scientific research process to study human behavior and social issues, the differences between inductive and deductive reasoning, the major goals of research, and the ways researchers seek to understand both individual cases and broader patterns. The chapter concludes with an introduction to qualitative and quantitative research methods, providing a foundation for understanding how knowledge is developed and used in the criminal justice field. By learning these basic concepts, you will begin building the skills needed to evaluate information critically and make more effective decisions throughout your criminal justice career.

2.1: The Scientific Research Model

2.2: Inductive vs. Deductive Research

2.3: Types of Research- Exploration, Description, Explanation and Applied Research

2.4: Inductive vs. Deductive Research Revisited

2.5: Idiographic or Nomothetic?

2.6: Qualitative or Quantitative?

2.7: Conclusion

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2.1: The Scientific Research Model

Scientific research is a critical tool for successfully navigating our complex world.[1] Without it, we would be forced to rely solely on intuition, other people's authority, and blind luck. While many of us feel confident in our ability to decipher and interact with the world around us, history is filled with examples of how wrong we can be when we fail to recognize the need for evidence to support claims. At various times in history, we would have been certain that the sun revolved around a flat earth, that the earth's continents did not move, and that mental illness was caused by possession. Through systematic scientific research, we can reduce the influence of assumptions and personal beliefs and develop a more evidence-based understanding of ourselves and our world.

The previous chapter described that scientific knowledge is learned through a scientific method. So, what exactly does that mean? Scientific knowledge is empirical: It is grounded in objective, tangible evidence that can be observed time and time again, regardless of who is observing.[2] Research is a never-ending cycle.[3] Researchers ask questions, investigate answers, and integrate their findings into the existing knowledge (or what is already known about the subject). Then researchers use the new findings to bring up more questions, and the cycle begins again. The goal of scientific research is not to find THE answer, but rather the scientific research process seeks to provide new insights into ongoing questions and conversations about a particular topic.

In the criminal justice field, understanding the scientific process is important because professionals constantly face complex problems that do not have simple, permanent solutions. Research rarely finds one answer that ends all debate. Instead, it will continue to evolve and ask questions. The more information that becomes available, the better criminal justice practitioners can improve policies, programs, and practices. Think of it like evidence from a crime scene. As new evidence is discovered, an investigator will change their approach to the case. The criminal investigation might uncover evidence to support that the suspect did not commit the crime. Research evidence may uncover support that a change to a treatment program may increase the number of offenders who do not use drugs within the first year.

The circular model of the research process below provides a broad overview of the scientific research process.



Figure 2.1.1: The Scientific Research Process (Reproduced from Williams & Allen, 2022, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.)

This ongoing cycle of research and discovery is what helps criminal justice professionals become evidence-informed practitioners. Whether deciding how to address a crime problem, evaluate a treatment program, or implement a new policy, professionals should recognize that knowledge evolves over time. Research provides valuable insights that can guide decision-making, but it rarely provides a single, definitive answer. Instead, it helps practitioners make more informed, fair, and effective decisions while remaining open to new evidence and new ways of thinking about criminal justice problems.

1. (Spielman et al., 2020).

2. (Spielman et al., 2020).
3. Section adapted from Williams & Allen (2022).

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2.2: Inductive vs. Deductive Research

Before learning about the different types of criminal justice research, it is helpful to understand that researchers can approach a study in different ways. Some researchers begin by observing what is happening and then develop explanations based on the patterns they find. Others begin with a theory, idea, or prediction and then collect evidence to test whether it is supported. Scientific research takes one of two forms: Inductive or deductive.[1] In an **inductive research approach**, researchers start by observing what is happening in the real world and collecting information. Instead of beginning with a specific theory or prediction, the researcher looks for patterns, trends, or common themes in the data and uses those observations to develop broader explanations or theories. In simple terms, inductive research moves from specific observations to general conclusions. For example, imagine a student notices that several classmates who regularly attend class, participate in discussions, and visit the tutoring center seem to earn higher grades. After observing this pattern across many students, the student concludes that active engagement in class and use of academic support services may contribute to academic success. The conclusion was developed from the observations rather than tested from a preexisting theory.

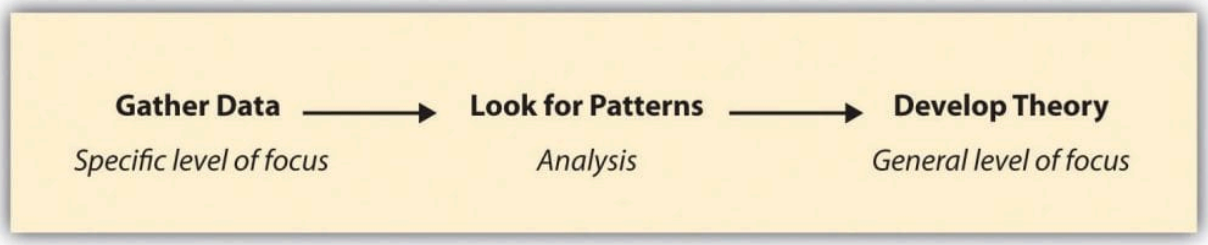


Figure 2.2.1: Inductive research approach (Reproduced from DeCarlo, 2018, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

For example, in the criminal justice field, police departments in several Midwestern cities may notice that many drunk driving arrests occur between 2:00 a.m. and 3:30 a.m., shortly after bars close. After collecting and reviewing data from numerous police reports, researchers might observe that arrests are concentrated near entertainment or bar districts and occur most often on weekend nights. Based on these patterns, they may conclude that bar closing times and the location of drinking establishments are factors associated with increased impaired driving. In this example, the explanation develops from the observations, making it an example of inductive research.

In a deductive research approach, researchers reverse the steps described above for inductive research.[2] A **deductive research approach** starts with a theory, idea, or prediction and then uses real-world data and evidence to determine whether it is supported.[3] In other words, researchers begin with what they think might be true and then collect information to test it. Imagine a researcher begins with the idea that students who attend class regularly earn higher grades than students who frequently miss class. To test this prediction, the researcher collects attendance records and final grades from a large group of students. The researcher then analyzes the data to determine whether students with higher attendance rates actually earn better grades. In this example, the researcher starts with a prediction and uses data to test it, making it an example of deductive research.

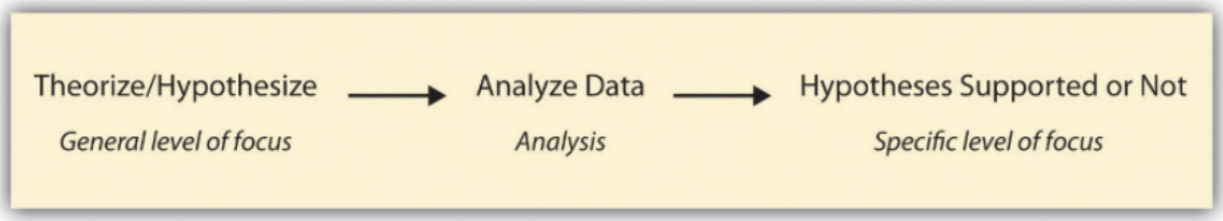


Figure 2.2.2: Deductive research approach (Reproduced from DeCarlo, 2018, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

A criminal justice-related example may begin with a researcher predicting that drunk driving arrests increase shortly after bars close because more impaired drivers are on the road at that time. To test this idea, they collect data on drunk-driving arrests, bar closing times, and incident locations in several Midwestern cities. After analyzing the data, they determine whether arrests are more common in the hours immediately after bar closing. The researchers started with a specific prediction and then gathered evidence to test it. This is an example of deductive research.

As a future criminal justice professional, understanding the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning can help you become a more informed consumer of research. Inductive reasoning begins with observations and looks for patterns that can lead to new ideas or explanations, while deductive reasoning starts with a theory or prediction and tests whether the evidence supports it. Both approaches play an important role in criminal justice research and practice. Inductive reasoning helps researchers develop new ways of understanding crime and justice issues, while deductive reasoning helps determine whether those ideas hold up when tested. By understanding both approaches, practitioners can better evaluate research findings, recognize how conclusions were reached, and make decisions that are based on evidence rather than assumptions or personal opinions.

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1. (Williams & Allen, 2022).
2. DeCarlo, M. (2018). *Scientific inquiry in social work*. Open Social Work Education. https://viva.pressbooks.pub/scientificinquiryinsocialwork/. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
3. (Williams & Allen, 2022).

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2.3: Types of Research- Exploration, Description, Explanation and Applied Research

At the beginning of a research project, the researcher needs to decide what type of research to conduct.[1] Each type of research has a different purpose, so how researchers design their research project is determined by this part of the decision. Researchers first must decide what they want to accomplish by conducting their research.[2] Do they hope to gain a deep understanding of whatever phenomenon they are studying? Or would they rather have a broad but shallower understanding? Do they want policymakers and practitioners using their research findings to shape the criminal justice system? The answers to these questions help researchers to decide whether to design their studies as exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory.

Exploratory Research

Exploratory research is used when researchers know little about a topic or when a problem has not been studied in depth.[3] The purpose of exploratory research is to learn more about a phenomenon, understand its scope or size, identify possible causes or patterns, and develop initial ideas that can be studied further. Researchers may also use exploratory research to determine whether a larger, more detailed study is practical and worthwhile. For example, a criminal justice researcher might conduct exploratory research to better understand a new type of cybercrime or to learn why a particular community is experiencing increased concerns about public safety. The findings can help researchers identify important questions and guide future research efforts.

For criminal justice professionals, there are times when a topic, issue, or problem is not well understood. In criminal justice practice, exploratory research can help professionals better understand emerging issues, challenge assumptions, and identify important questions before making decisions or developing policies. Understanding this type of research helps evidence-informed practitioners remain curious, open-minded, and willing to seek quality information when facing unfamiliar problems.

Exploratory research is done when there is little information on a topic. It does not make sense for a researcher to do more exploratory research on a topic researchers already know a lot about.[4] For example, the question “What are common interventions for parents who neglect their children?” would not make much sense as a research question. You could look at journal articles and textbooks to see what interventions are commonly used with this population. Exploratory questions are best suited to topics that have not been studied.

You can often identify exploratory research by asking:

1. **Did the researcher try to learn more about a topic that is not yet well understood?** *Exploratory research is often conducted when little information exists about a problem, behavior or phenomenon OR something significant has changed within a known problem, behavior, or phenomenon and that results in the topic not being well understood.*
2. **Did the study focus on generating ideas, identifying patterns, or finding out what questions should be studied next?** *The goal is to explore the issue rather than test a specific idea or prediction.*
3. **Was the researcher trying to determine whether a larger or more extensive study should be conducted?** *Exploratory research seeks to determine whether further studies are needed and feasible.*

Descriptive Research

When it is determined that a topic would be beneficial to study further, research progresses to descriptive research. **Descriptive research** focuses on carefully observing, measuring, and documenting a phenomenon, behavior, or situation as accurately as possible.[5] The goal is to define or describe a particular phenomenon by answering questions such as who, what, when, where, and how often something occurs. Rather than explaining why something happens, descriptive research provides a clear and detailed picture of what is taking place. Because descriptive research follows the scientific method, the information is collected in a systematic and consistent way, making it more reliable than casual observations or personal opinions. Descriptive research often focuses on questions related to “what, where, and when.”[6]

Based on this, you can often identify descriptive research by asking:

1. **Did the researcher try to describe what was happening?** *Focus on providing an accurate picture of a phenomenon, behavior, group or situation. The researcher answered questions about what is happening, the number of times it happens, or who exactly is involved, but not necessarily why it is occurring.*
2. **Did the researcher try to determine where something is occurring?** *Descriptive research often examines the location or distribution of the phenomenon.*
3. **Did the researcher try to determine when something occurred?** *Descriptive research may look at patterns over time.*

In criminal justice, descriptive research might be used to document crime trends in a community, describe the characteristics of people in a jail population, or examine the types of calls received by a police department. For example, a researcher may collect and analyze data to determine the number of vehicle thefts reported in a city over the past five years, the locations where they occurred, and the times of day they were most common. These findings help criminal justice professionals better understand an issue and provide a foundation for future research aimed at explaining why those patterns exist.

Explanatory Research

While descriptive research examines the “what, where, and when” of a phenomenon, explanatory research seeks to answer the “why” and “how” types of questions.[7] **Explanatory research** seeks explanations of observed phenomena, problems, or behaviors.[8] For criminal justice professionals, it is important to understand not only *what* is happening, but also *why* it is happening. Explanatory research focuses on identifying the causes and effects of a phenomenon. In other words, this type of research tries to "connect the dots" by examining how different factors are related and whether one factor may influence another. For example, an explanatory study might explore whether participation in a treatment program reduces repeat offending, or whether certain policing strategies affect crime rates in a community. By investigating possible cause-and-effect relationships, explanatory research helps criminal justice professionals move beyond assumptions and make decisions based on evidence. Understanding explanatory research can help practitioners critically evaluate claims, interpret research findings, and apply evidence more responsibly to improve fairness, effectiveness, and outcomes in criminal justice practice.

Based on this, you can often identify explanatory research by asking:

1. **Is this study trying to explain why something happens or what causes a particular outcome?** *If the answer is yes, the study is likely explanatory research.*
2. **Could the findings help criminal justice professionals understand what factors contribute to an outcome?** *Explanatory research seeks to identify the factors that may influence an outcome and helps criminal justice professionals better understand why certain results occur. This information can support more informed decisions about policies, programs, and practices.*

Applied Research

As you learn about criminal justice research, it is helpful to think of exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research as ways of building knowledge about a problem. Exploratory research helps researchers learn about topics that are not yet well understood. Descriptive research helps explain what is happening by describing people, events, behaviors, or conditions. Explanatory research goes a step further by examining why something happens and identifying factors that may contribute to specific outcomes.

For future criminal justice professionals, however, the goal is not simply to understand criminal justice problems. It is also to use that knowledge to make better decisions and improve practice in the field. Criminal justice agencies regularly implement programs, policies, training initiatives, and intervention strategies with the hope of improving outcomes. This raises an important question: **How do we know whether these efforts are actually working?** This is where the fourth type of research we will be discussing becomes important. Applied research is designed to produce information that helps professionals make decisions, solve problems, and determine whether existing policies and programs are working effectively.[9] Applied research is often broken into two categories: problem analysis and evaluation.

Analysis Research

Analysis research is exactly what the name suggests. It is research that provides a general analysis of more specific problems and criminal justice policies.[10] **Problem analysis research** focuses on understanding a specific problem or policy and providing information to support decision-making. Where explanatory research seeks to explain why something happens, problem analysis research focuses on identifying what the problem looks like, what options are available, and which response might work best.

It entails a review of other similar policies/programs, perhaps at different points in time or in different jurisdictions. It is very future-oriented, as it attempts to answer "what if" questions to determine the utility of some solution that has not yet been implemented.[11] Problem analysis research is often used by agency leaders, trainers, and policymakers who need information to guide decisions.

Based on this, you can often identify explanatory research by asking:

1. **What does the problem look like, and what can be done about it?**

Evaluation Research

Problem analysis research helps make informed decisions that research supports, but that does not guarantee the program, policy, or intervention will work. It is important for criminal justice professionals to evaluate whether what was implemented is actually doing what the decision-maker intended. Evaluation research is conducted to assess the effects of specific programs or policies.[12] Evaluative research examines the effectiveness of a program, policy, strategy, or intervention to determine whether it is achieving its intended goals. For example, did the newly implemented diversion program actually reduce recidivism, or did a new body-worn camera policy and practice improve officer accountability? Evaluation research is especially important in evidence-informed practice because it helps agencies determine whether they should continue, modify, expand, or discontinue a program, policy, or practice. Because criminal justice professionals are often expected to use resources wisely and support evidence-informed practices, understanding evaluative research is an important part of becoming a thoughtful and effective practitioner.

Based on this, you can often identify explanatory research by asking:

1. **Is the study examining whether a program, policy, or practice worked?** *The study may include measuring the results or outcomes of an intervention.*
2. **Does the study compare outcomes before or after an intervention was implemented?** *This could include a program, people who participated, or other means of comparing results before the intervention (policy, procedure, practice, program) was implemented and after.*
3. **Did the researcher try to find out if something should be continued, changed, expanded, or discontinued?**

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1. (DeCarlo, 2018).
2. (Williams & Allen, 2022).
3. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
4. (DeCarlo, 2018).
5. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
6. (Williams & Allen, 2022).
7. (Williams & Allen, 2022).
8. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
9. Maxfield, M. G., Babbie, E. R., & Schuck, A. M. (2025). *Research methods for criminal justice and criminology* (9th ed.). Cengage.
10. (Maxfield & Babbie, 2025)
11. (Hassan et al., 2025)
12. (DeCarlo, 2018)

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2.4: Inductive vs. Deductive Research Revisited

Now that you have learned about the different types of research, it is helpful to return to the concepts of inductive and deductive reasoning. Remember that inductive and deductive reasoning are not types of research, but rather research approaches. Inductive and deductive approaches to research may seem quite different, but they can actually work very well together.[1] The type of research being conducted often influences whether a researcher is using an inductive approach, a deductive approach, or a combination of both. In some cases, researchers will plan for their study to include multiple components, one inductive and the other deductive. In other cases, a researcher might begin a study with the plan to only conduct research using an inductive or deductive approach, but then discovers along the way that the other approach is needed to help illuminate findings.

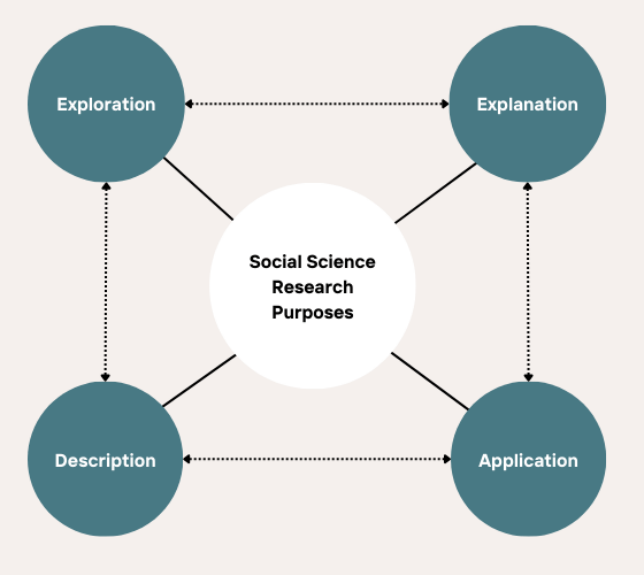


Figure 2.4.1: The Four Purposes of Social Science Research. (Reproduced from Hassan et al., 2025, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

For example, a researcher may begin a study by testing the prediction that students who spend more time studying will earn higher grades. This is a deductive approach because the researcher starts with a prediction and collects data to test it. However, after analyzing the results, the researcher may discover that some students who study for many hours still perform poorly. To better understand this finding, the researcher interviews those students and learns that factors such as test anxiety, family responsibilities, or lack of sleep affect their performance. This part of the study is inductive because the researcher develops explanations from the information gathered from participants. A second criminal justice-related example: a researcher studying impaired driving may begin by interviewing individuals convicted of impaired driving to learn why they chose to drive after drinking. During the interviews, many participants report that they believed they were sober enough to drive. From these responses, the researcher develops a prediction that people who underestimate their level of impairment are more likely to drive while impaired. The researcher then surveys a larger group of drivers to test if this is correct. The interviews represent an inductive approach because patterns emerge from the data, while the survey represents a deductive approach because the researcher tests a specific prediction.

As you read research studies, think about both the type of research and the approach used to conduct it. Is the researcher exploring a new issue and developing ideas from observations? If so, they may be using an inductive approach. Are they testing a theory or prediction? If so, they may be using a deductive approach. Understanding how research types and research approaches work together will help you better evaluate research findings, understand how conclusions were reached, and become a more effective evidence-informed criminal justice practitioner.

1. (DeCarlo, 2018).

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2.5: Idiographic or Nomothetic?

Once a researcher decides whether they are going to conduct exploratory, descriptive, or applied research, they will need to determine whether they want their research to be idiographic or nomothetic.[1] As a future criminal justice professional, you are not expected to conduct most research studies yourself, but you will be expected to read research and use it to make informed decisions. Understanding the difference between idiographic and nomothetic explanations can help you better evaluate research findings and determine how they apply to real-world criminal justice situations.

An **idiographic explanation** focuses on developing a deep understanding of a specific person, event, agency, program, community, or situation.[2] Rather than looking for broad patterns, idiographic research examines many factors that may have contributed to a particular outcome. For example, imagine you did poorly on a test. There could be many reasons for that outcome: you forgot about the test, arrived late because of a flat tire, became anxious during the exam, had to work late the night before and could not study, or faced some other personal circumstance. An idiographic explanation would examine all these factors to develop a detailed understanding of why *that particular outcome* occurred for *that particular person in this particular situation*. The explanation may be accurate and provide important insights, but it may not apply to other students who perform poorly on a test.

The same idea applies in criminal justice research. An idiographic study might examine why one correctional facility experienced a significant reduction in inmate fights or why a particular community policing initiative was successful in a specific city. Researchers would look closely at the unique circumstances, people, policies, and environmental factors involved. Although the findings may not be broadly applicable to other agencies or communities, idiographic research can provide valuable insight into the complexities of a specific case and help practitioners better understand how and why an outcome occurred.

A **nomothetic explanation** takes a different approach. Instead of focusing on one specific person or situation, it looks for patterns and relationships that apply across many people or cases.[3] For example, imagine a college that wanted to understand why some students earn higher grades than others. Rather than studying one student's experience in detail, researchers might examine hundreds of students and look for common factors associated with academic success. They might find that students who attend class regularly, spend more time studying, and use tutoring services tend to earn higher grades. This type of explanation does not tell us everything about any one student, but it helps identify patterns that are common among many students.

The same approach is often used in criminal justice research. For example, a study might examine factors associated with recidivism among thousands of offenders or identify shared characteristics of successful rehabilitation programs. Researchers may discover that factors such as stable employment, substance abuse treatment, and strong community support are associated with lower rates of reoffending. While a nomothetic explanation may provide less detail about any single offender, agency, or program, it helps identify broader patterns that can inform criminal justice policies, programs, and practices. Since criminal justice professionals often make decisions that affect large groups of people, nomothetic research can be especially valuable for supporting evidence-informed decision-making.

When reading research, it is important to recognize whether the study is taking an idiographic or nomothetic approach. This can help you understand how broadly the findings can be applied. An idiographic study may provide deep insight into a specific situation but may not represent other agencies or communities. A nomothetic study may offer findings that apply to larger populations, but it may not capture the unique circumstances of a particular case. Evidence-informed criminal justice professionals understand the strengths and limitations of both approaches and consider them when applying research findings to practice.

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1. Blackstone, A. (2012). *Principles of sociological inquiry – qualitative and quantitative methods*. Saylor Academy. https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_...tative-methods. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License.
2. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
3. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).

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2.6: Qualitative or Quantitative?

As you have learned in this chapter, criminal justice researchers use the scientific research model to systematically study crime, justice system processes, and human behavior. Researchers begin by identifying a problem or question, gathering information, collecting data, analyzing findings, and drawing conclusions based on evidence. Throughout this process, researchers may use either inductive or deductive reasoning and pursue different goals. In addition, some studies use an idiographic approach, while others use a nomothetic approach.

One of the next questions we start to think about is: when a researcher determines what their goals are, how do they decide how to conduct the research? The choice of research method is closely connected to a study's purpose and approach. As a future criminal justice practitioner, two research concepts you will encounter repeatedly throughout this course and throughout your career are qualitative research and quantitative research. You do not need to master these concepts yet, but it is important to begin recognizing them because they are fundamental to understanding and evaluating research evidence. Both quantitative and qualitative research result in data. Very simply, data is a collection of raw, unorganized facts, numbers, or observations. **Quantitative research** results in data that can be represented and condensed into numbers.[1] This approach is often associated with descriptive, explanatory, and nomothetic research because it helps researchers examine what is happening across larger groups of people. However, neither method is limited to a particular research goal. **Qualitative research** is a method of data collection that yields non-numeric results. This means that, instead of numbers, the data consists of words and pictures. Researchers often collect qualitative data through interviews, observations, focus groups, or documents. This approach can provide rich, detailed information about specific people, groups, or situations and is often useful in exploratory research and idiographic explanations. Researchers select the method, or combination of methods, that best answers their research question. As you move through this course, you will see qualitative and quantitative research discussed repeatedly as we examine how knowledge is developed, how evidence is evaluated, and how research can inform criminal justice policy and practice. Becoming familiar with these concepts now will help you better understand the research process and prepare you to make informed, evidence-based decisions in the field.

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1. (Chen et al., 2024).

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2.7: Conclusion

This chapter introduced several foundational concepts that will help you become a more informed consumer of criminal justice research. You learned that research is a systematic process for developing knowledge, that researchers may use inductive or deductive approaches, and that studies can be conducted for different purposes, including exploration, description, explanation, and applied decision-making. You were also introduced to idiographic and nomothetic explanations and the broad distinction between qualitative and quantitative research methods. Together, these concepts provide a framework for understanding how criminal justice knowledge is developed and how researchers attempt to answer questions about crime, justice, policy, and practice.

It is important to remember that this chapter provides only an introduction to these topics. Each of the concepts presented here represents an area of study that researchers, practitioners, and students can spend years exploring in greater depth. The material included in this chapter was intentionally selected because it is especially relevant to future criminal justice practitioners who will be expected to read research, evaluate evidence, and use information to support professional decision-making. Rather than focusing on the technical details of conducting research studies, this chapter emphasizes the concepts that will help you understand how research is produced, what its findings mean, and how it can be applied responsibly in real-world criminal justice settings.

As you continue through this course, the focus will shift from understanding the basic language and structure of research to developing the practical skills needed to locate, read, interpret, and use criminal justice research. Knowing whether a study is exploratory or explanatory is useful, but evidence-informed practitioners must also be able to assess the credibility of the information, understand what the findings mean, and recognize the strengths and limitations of the evidence presented. In the next section, you will begin learning how to find quality criminal justice research, read research studies more effectively, and use research evidence to support fair, effective, and informed criminal justice practice.

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3: FINDING, READING, AND USING CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why credible information is important for criminal justice decision-making.
- Identify different types of criminal justice information sources and their strengths and limitations.
- Recognize the difference between scholarly and non-scholarly sources.
- Explain the purpose of peer review and why it is important when evaluating evidence.
- Find relevant criminal justice research using databases, Google Scholar, and reference lists.
- Use effective search strategies to locate credible sources on a criminal justice topic.
- Read research articles strategically to identify key findings and evidence.
- Identify the major parts of a research article and explain their purpose.
- Evaluate the credibility, quality, and relevance of information sources.
- Recognize common warning signs of unreliable or misleading information.
- Compare information from multiple sources before drawing conclusions.
- Apply information literacy skills to assess criminal justice claims and evidence.
- Ask critical questions about the quality and trustworthiness of research findings.
- Use research evidence to support fair, effective, and ethical criminal justice decisions.
- Demonstrate the habits of an evidence-informed practitioner by locating, evaluating, and using credible information responsibly.

Criminal justice professionals use information to make decisions every day. However, not all sources provide the same quality or type of evidence. Information can come from news reports, social media, professional publications, government reports, or research studies, and some sources are more reliable than others.

Scholarly research is generally considered more trustworthy than unreviewed information because it is conducted using systematic methods and evidence. Even so, no source is perfect, and research should be read thoughtfully and critically.

Learning how to find, read, and use credible research is an important part of becoming an evidence-informed criminal justice professional. These skills can help support fairer, more effective, and better-informed decisions in criminal justice settings.

3.1: How to Find Sources of Information

3.2: Building Effective Searches

3.3: Skimming and Reading Research Articles Strategically

3.4: Examining References

3.5: Evaluating Scholarly Sources

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3.1: How to Find Sources of Information

Whom do we trust?

More than ever before, we have an incredible amount of information at our fingertips, and a simple internet search on any given research topic might result in a number of contradictory studies.[1] In these cases, we are witnessing the scientific community going through the process of reaching a consensus, and it could be quite some time before a consensus emerges. In the meantime, we should strive to think critically about the information we encounter by exercising a degree of healthy skepticism. When someone makes a claim, we should examine the claim from a number of different perspectives: what is the expertise of the person making the claim? This is especially important when we consider how much information in advertising campaigns and on the internet claims to be based on “scientific evidence” when, in actuality, it is a belief or perspective of just a few individuals trying to sell a product or draw attention to their perspectives.

We should be informed consumers of the information made available to us because decisions based on this information have significant consequences.[2] One such consequence can be seen in politics and public policy. Imagine that you have been elected as the governor of your state. One of your responsibilities is to manage the state budget and determine how to best spend your constituents’ tax dollars. As the new governor, you need to decide whether to continue funding early intervention programs. If you are committed to being a good steward of taxpayer money, you would want to look at research. Which programs are most effective? What characteristics of these programs make them effective? Which programs promote the best outcomes? After examining the research, you would be best equipped to decide which programs to fund.

While this is a bigger example, it is very relatable to criminal justice professions. A police agency or correctional facility also operates with taxpayer-funded budgets, and research informs decisions about safety, effectiveness, and fairness. Research can help practitioners identify strategies that reduce injuries to officers, correctional staff, and community members. For example, studies can evaluate de-escalation techniques, crisis intervention approaches, or officer safety practices to determine what works best in different situations. When criminal justice professionals use evidence-based practices, they are better equipped to respond to incidents in ways that protect themselves and others.

Research also plays an important role in protecting constitutional rights. Criminal justice professionals regularly make decisions that affect people's freedoms, privacy, and due process rights. Research can help agencies evaluate whether their policies and practices are being applied fairly and consistently. It can also identify unintended consequences, such as practices that disproportionately affect certain groups or increase the risk of wrongful arrests or convictions. By using research to guide decision-making, practitioners can better balance public safety goals with their responsibility to uphold the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. In this way, research is not just a tool for improving outcomes; it is also a tool for promoting professionalism, accountability, and public trust.

In the end, research is what makes the difference between facts and opinions.[3] **Facts** are observable realities, and **opinions** are personal judgments, conclusions, or attitudes that may or may not be accurate. In the scientific community, facts can be established only using evidence collected through empirical research. This distinction is important for criminal justice practitioners because many decisions in the field are based on information, policies, and procedures that have real consequences for safety and justice. Imagine asking a field training officer, supervisor, or instructor why a particular practice is used. Which answer would give you more confidence? "I do not really know. That is the way we have always done it," or "We implemented this practice after attending training based on research that showed it improved outcomes by providing a structured approach for situations like this. Since implementing the practice, we have seen a significant reduction in the behavior we were trying to prevent." Most people would have greater confidence in the second answer because it is supported by evidence rather than tradition or personal opinion. This does not mean that experience is unimportant. Experienced practitioners have valuable knowledge, but research helps determine whether a practice is actually producing the intended results. By combining professional experience with research evidence, criminal justice professionals can make more informed decisions that improve safety, effectiveness, and fairness.

Types of Sources[4]

When learning about a criminal justice topic, you will encounter many different types of sources. Each type serves a different

purpose, and understanding these differences can help you find and use information more effectively.

In general, you should focus on peer-reviewed sources whenever possible. Peer-reviewed articles have been evaluated by experts in the field before publication. These experts review what the author wrote and provide feedback to the author. Authors are often required to revise their work before it is accepted for publication. This review process helps improve the quality of research, although it does not guarantee that a study is perfect. Peer-reviewed sources undergo greater scrutiny than most other sources, so they are often considered more trustworthy for making evidence-informed decisions.

Most scholarly research is published in academic journals, which are publications that contain articles written by researchers and experts in a particular field. Some journals cover a wide range of topics within a discipline, while others focus on a specific area. In criminal justice, for example, some journals publish research on many topics, while others focus on areas such as policing, corrections, juvenile justice, or victimology.

Journal articles are written primarily for other scholars and professionals. Because of this, they often include references to previous studies, use discipline-specific terminology, and explain how the research connects to what is already known about a topic. These references allow readers to examine the evidence for themselves and follow the development of ideas within the field.

Because peer-reviewed journal articles are carefully evaluated before publication, they are a primary source of evidence used by researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. When you are looking for scholarly information about a criminal justice issue, peer-reviewed journal articles are often the best place to start. If you are unsure whether a journal is peer-reviewed, check the journal's website, use your library's database filters, or ask a librarian for assistance.

You should also focus on sources that are directly related to criminal justice. However, some topics overlap with other fields, such as psychology, sociology, public health, or social work. In those cases, research from related disciplines can provide valuable information and help you better understand complex issues.

Scholarly Sources

As you search for sources, you will encounter several common types of scholarly publications.

Empirical Studies

Empirical studies report the findings of a research study. Researchers collect or analyze data and use that information to answer a specific question. For example, an empirical study might examine whether body-worn cameras affect citizen complaints, whether a treatment program reduces recidivism, or whether a policing strategy changes crime rates.

Empirical studies are often the foundation of evidence-informed practice because they provide direct evidence about a topic.

You can often identify the type of article by looking at its structure.

Empirical studies usually contain sections such as Methods, Results, or Findings because the authors are reporting data they collected or analyzed.

Review Articles

Review articles summarize and discuss what researchers have learned from many studies on a topic. Instead of collecting new data, the author reviews existing research and identifies major findings, patterns, and areas where researchers disagree.

Review articles are often a good starting point when learning about a new topic because they provide an overview of the available evidence.

Systematic Reviews

A systematic review is a specialized type of review article that follows a structured process to locate, evaluate, and summarize research studies. Systematic reviews are designed to reduce bias and provide a clear picture of what the available evidence shows about a specific question.

For example, a systematic review might examine whether a particular correctional intervention reduces recidivism across multiple studies.

Meta-Analyses

A meta-analysis combines the results of many studies using statistical methods. Rather than looking at the findings of a single study, a meta-analysis examines the overall pattern across multiple studies.

Since they draw from a large body of research, meta-analyses can provide a stronger understanding of what the evidence suggests about a topic. They are often considered among the most useful sources for evidence-informed decision-making.

Although review articles and meta-analyses are useful starting points, they should not be treated as the final word on a topic. They reflect the author's interpretation of the available evidence, and researchers may disagree about what the evidence means. For this reason, it is important to read critically and compare information from multiple sources.

Theoretical Articles

Theoretical articles focus on explaining concepts, ideas, or theories rather than reporting new research findings. These articles help researchers and practitioners understand why certain behaviors, patterns, or outcomes may occur.

While theoretical articles may not provide direct evidence, they can help explain how researchers interpret and understand criminal justice issues.

Review articles, systematic reviews, and theoretical articles often do not include methods and results sections in the same way. Instead, they focus on summarizing, evaluating, or explaining existing research.

Other Scholarly Sources[5]

While peer-reviewed journal articles are usually the best source of scholarly information, you may encounter other types of sources during your research.

Academic books are another important source of scholarly information. Some books focus on a single topic in depth and are written by one or more experts. These books are often published by university presses and are typically reviewed by other scholars before publication. Since they allow authors more space to explore a topic, academic books can provide detailed background, history, and analysis that may not fit into a journal article.

You may also find **edited books**, which contain chapters written by different authors on a related topic. These chapters can provide useful information, but the review process is often less rigorous than that used for peer-reviewed journal articles.

Other sources, such as **textbooks, academic encyclopedias, government reports, and research reports from professional organizations**, can be useful when you are first learning about a topic. These sources often provide summaries, definitions, statistics, and background information that can help you understand a criminal justice issue. However, they are generally best used as starting points that lead you to more detailed scholarly research.

Other Types of Sources

You may also encounter **gray literature**, which includes reports, policy briefs, and research published by government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and think tanks. Some of these sources contain valuable information, especially official statistics and reports. However, they are not usually peer-reviewed and may reflect the mission or perspective of the organization that produced them. As a result, they should be evaluated carefully.

Other materials, such as newspaper opinion pieces, blogs, conference presentations, dissertations, and theses, can sometimes provide useful insights or point you toward additional sources. However, because they often have not gone through the same peer-review process as journal articles, they should generally not be relied on as your primary source of evidence.

Sources Citing Other Sources

When reviewing scholarly information, it can also be helpful to look at how often a source has been cited by other researchers. Frequently cited articles and books are often influential within a field and may help you identify important studies on a topic. However, citation counts alone do not determine quality, so they should be considered alongside other factors such as relevance, credibility, and research quality.

As a general rule, start with **peer-reviewed journal articles**, use **academic books** when you need more depth and context, and use other sources to expand your understanding and locate additional research.

Understanding the different types of scholarly sources can help you become a more effective consumer of research. Rather than relying on a single study, evidence-informed practitioners look at multiple sources and consider the broader body of evidence when making decisions.

Finding Scholarly Sources of Information[6]

When you need information about a criminal justice topic, the goal is not to become a researcher. The goal, instead, is to find trustworthy research that can help you better understand an issue and make informed decisions. Finding useful scholarly sources typically involves four basic steps:

1. Finding the right database
2. Using effective search terms
3. Skimming articles to see whether they are relevant
4. Reviewing references to find additional sources

Most libraries and schools provide access to online databases that contain scholarly journal articles, government reports, and other academic sources. These databases make it possible to find high-quality information without searching through shelves of books. The databases available to you will vary from one library to another because access depends on which resources an institution pays to provide. For that reason, the specific databases and search tools you use may differ from the ones used by students at other colleges or libraries. If you need help finding or using databases, your library and learning support services are valuable resources. Librarians can help you identify appropriate databases, develop effective search strategies, and locate relevant sources.

Another useful tool is Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/), a search engine designed specifically for academic sources. Google Scholar searches across many disciplines and can help you locate journal articles, books, reports, and other scholarly materials. Unlike some databases that require you to use specific search formats, Google Scholar is designed to understand everyday language, making it a good starting point when you are exploring a topic.

As you search for information, pay attention to the sources that researchers cite in their reference lists. These references can lead you to additional studies and help you develop a broader understanding of the topic. By starting with strong scholarly sources and following related references, you can find reliable information that supports evidence-informed criminal justice practice.

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1. (Spielman et al., 2020).
2. (Spielman et al., 2020).
3. (Spielman et al., 2020).
4. Section reused from Chen et al. (2024).
5. Adapted from Chen et al. (2024).
6. Adapted from Chen et al. (2024).

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3.2: Building Effective Searches

One of the biggest challenges when searching for scholarly sources is that a search can return hundreds or even thousands of results. The good news is that you do not need to read everything you find. Instead, your goal is to locate a small number of relevant, high-quality sources that help you understand a topic. As you read those sources, you can use their reference lists to find additional research.

The words you enter into a database or search engine are called search terms or keywords. Choosing effective keywords can help you find useful sources more quickly. In Google Scholar, you can often type a question or phrase in everyday language and receive relevant results. Many other databases work best when you enter a few important keywords rather than a complete sentence.

For example, if you want information about the relationship between social media and cybercrime, a Google Scholar search might be:

“How does social media influence cybercrime?”

In many databases, a more effective search would be:

“Social media cybercrime online offending”

As you learn more about a topic, you may discover additional terms used by researchers. Including these terms in future searches can help you find more relevant articles. Do not worry if you do not know the professional terminology at first. Start with the words you already know and refine your searches as you learn more.

Earlier, we discussed the value of starting with review articles. Review articles summarize the findings from many studies on a topic and can help you quickly understand what researchers have learned. When searching for sources, consider adding terms such as review article, literature review, state of the art, or research agenda to your search. Google Scholar also allows users to filter results to show review articles when that option is available.

You can also search for systematic reviews and meta-analyses by including those terms in your search. These sources bring together evidence from multiple studies and are often excellent starting points for understanding a criminal justice issue. These sources can help you identify what the broader body of research says about a particular topic.

The following strategies can help make your searches more effective:

- **Search recent research**. Criminal justice policies, practices, and crime trends can change over time. Starting with more recent sources can help you understand the current state of knowledge on a topic.
- **Use specific keywords.** Broad terms often produce too many results. More specific terms usually lead to sources that are more closely related to your topic.
- **Search within titles, abstracts, or subjects when possible.** Many databases allow you to limit your search to specific parts of an article. Because the title and abstract summarize the article's main focus, searching these fields often produces more relevant results.
- **Look for key journals and authors.** As you search, you may notice the same journals or researchers appearing repeatedly. This is often a sign that they are important contributors to that area of criminal justice research. Reviewing their work can help you better understand the topic.
- **Ask a librarian for help.** Librarians are experts at finding information. They can help you identify useful databases, improve your search terms, and locate sources that you might not find on your own.

Effective searching is a skill that improves with practice. If your first search does not produce useful results, try different keywords, narrower topics, or newer sources. Small changes in your search terms can make a big difference in the quality of the information you find.

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3.3: Skimming and Reading Research Articles Strategically

Skimming and Reading Research Articles Strategically[1]

Criminal justice professionals often need to review research, reports, and other sources of information, but they do not need to read every article word for word. Instead, it is helpful to read strategically by identifying the information that is most relevant to the question, issue, or decision at hand.

When you find an article that appears relevant, begin by skimming it. Skimming is a quick review that helps you determine whether the article is worth reading more closely. The best place to start is the abstract, which is a short summary at the beginning of most scholarly articles. The abstract usually explains the purpose of the study, the topic being examined, the major findings, and why the research matters. Reading the abstract can help you quickly decide whether the article is relevant to your needs.

If the article appears useful, spend a few minutes reviewing the title, introduction, conclusion, section headings, and any tables or figures. This will give you a general understanding of the article's main points without requiring you to read every detail.

As you read, focus on a few key questions:

- **What issue or question is the study addressing?**
- **What did the researchers find?**
- **What evidence supports those findings?**
- **How might the findings apply to criminal justice practice?**

Pay attention to important keywords and concepts, as these can help you locate additional research on the same topic. If the article is not relevant, move on to another source. If it is useful, save a copy so you can return to it later.

It is also important to stay organized. If you are reviewing several sources on the same topic, save articles in folders organized by subject and keep brief notes about each source. Record the main findings, key ideas, and reasons the source may be useful. Good organization will make it easier to find information later and recognize patterns across multiple sources.

When reading longer sources, such as academic books, start with the table of contents, introduction, conclusion, chapter summaries, or book reviews to identify the sections most relevant to your topic.

The goal of strategic reading is not to memorize every detail. Instead, the goal is to understand the main findings, evaluate the quality of the evidence, and determine how the information can help inform criminal justice decisions and practice. Skimming and strategic reading are important information literacy skills that allow you to efficiently identify and use the most relevant and credible research.

> ***Parts of a Research Article***
>
> As a criminal justice professional, you do not need to evaluate research the same way a researcher does. However, you should be able to read a study critically and decide whether its findings are trustworthy and useful for practice. You may not recognize or be able to explain all of these parts yet, but as we move through this course, you will be provided with more information to help you with each section.
>
> The following questions can help you evaluate a research article from beginning to end.
>
> **Title**
>
> What is the study about? The title should give you a general idea of the topic, issue, program, population, or problem being examined.
>
> **Author(s)**

Who conducted the study? What are the authors' qualifications, areas of expertise, or professional affiliations? Knowing who conducted the research can help you assess the credibility of the source. Look for author biographies included with the study or links to the author's professional webpage.

Abstract

What are the main findings of the study? How was the research conducted? The abstract provides a brief summary of the study and can help you quickly decide whether the article is relevant to your interests.

Introduction

What problem or issue is the study trying to address? Why do the authors believe the topic is important? Consider how the authors define and explain the problem.

Literature Review

What does previous research say about the topic? Does the study build on existing knowledge, or does it challenge earlier findings? A strong literature review shows how the study fits into the broader body of research.

Methods

How was the study conducted? Consider questions such as:

- Who participated in the study?
- Where was the information collected?
- How was the information gathered?
- Does the sample appear appropriate for the question being studied? Understanding the methods can help you determine how much confidence to place in the findings.

Results or Findings

What did the researchers discover? Are the conclusions supported by the evidence presented in the study? Look for findings that are clearly explained and supported with data.

Discussion and Conclusion

What do the researchers believe their findings mean? Do they explain how the results could affect policy, practice, or future research? Do they discuss any limitations that might affect how the findings should be interpreted?

Funding and Potential Conflicts of Interest

Who funded the study? Did the authors disclose any potential conflicts of interest? Understanding who supported the research can provide important context and help you identify possible sources of bias. This section may not be separate but will likely be included in quality research. Showing transparency provides credibility for the study and the author.

Focus on What Matters for Practice

When reading research, your goal is not to become an expert in research methods. Instead, focus on understanding three key questions:

1. **What did the researchers find?**
2. **How strong is the evidence?**
3. **How useful are these findings for criminal justice practice?**

By asking these questions, you can become a more informed consumer of research and make better evidence-informed decisions in criminal justice settings.

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3.4: Examining References

One of the best ways to find additional scholarly sources is to look at the reference list of an article you have already found useful.[1] Researchers build on the work of other researchers, so the sources they cite are often related to the same topic.

As you read articles, pay attention to the studies that appear repeatedly in different reference lists. If the same source is cited by many authors, it may be an important study in that area of research. Reading these frequently cited sources can help you better understand the topic and the evidence behind it.

You can also use references to discover new articles. For example, if you find a useful article about risk assessments for first-time offenders, its reference list may lead you to earlier studies on the same subject. This process of using references to locate related sources is sometimes called citation searching.

Many databases and Google Scholar also allow you to see who has cited a particular article. In Google Scholar, the "Cited by" link shows newer articles that have referenced the source you are viewing. This can help you find more recent research and see how ideas and findings have developed over time.

Using both reference lists and citation tools can help you identify key studies, locate additional sources, and gain a broader understanding of what researchers have learned about a criminal justice topic. Rather than relying on a single article, following these connections helps you build a more complete picture of the available evidence.

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3.5: Evaluating Scholarly Sources

Finding information is only the first step. Criminal justice professionals also need to decide whether that information is trustworthy, relevant, and useful. Decisions made in policing, corrections, courts, victim services, and other criminal justice settings can affect individuals, agencies, and communities. Using poor-quality information can lead to ineffective or unfair decisions.

Questions to Ask When Evaluating Information[1]

When reviewing research or other sources of information, consider the following questions:

- **Who is providing the information?**
  Consider the author's background, experience, and expertise. Is the information coming from researchers, a government agency, a professional organization, or an unknown source? People with education, training, and experience in a topic are generally more likely to provide reliable information.
- **Where was the information published?**
  Information published in peer-reviewed academic journals is generally considered more trustworthy than information published on websites, blogs, social media, or opinion pages. Government reports and publications from reputable organizations can also be useful sources of information.
- **Does the source appear fair and objective?**
  Consider whether the source presents evidence in a balanced way. Does it acknowledge different viewpoints and limitations, or does it seem focused on promoting a specific agenda? Understanding potential bias can help you evaluate the information more critically.
- **Is the information current?**
  Criminal justice policies, laws, technologies, and practices change over time. While older sources may still be important, professionals should also consider recent research and current information.
- **What evidence supports the claims?**
  Ask yourself what information the author uses to support their conclusions. Are claims supported by research, data, and documented evidence, or are they based mainly on opinions and personal experiences? Stronger evidence generally leads to more reliable conclusions.
- **Do other sources reach similar conclusions?**
  A single study or report rarely provides all the answers. Look for patterns across multiple sources. When several high-quality studies reach similar conclusions, confidence in those findings increases.
- **Is the information relevant to the decision or problem you are facing?**
  Even high-quality information may not be useful if it does not apply to your situation. Consider whether the source addresses the specific issue, population, program, or practice you are trying to understand.

Identifying Red Flags When Evaluating Information

As discussed above, not all information is equally reliable. Some common "red flags" that may indicate information is not trustworthy include:

- **No sources cited**: Reliable information is supported by evidence from credible sources. If an article or post makes claims without identifying where the information came from, it is difficult to verify its accuracy.
- **Unsupported claims**: Be cautious when an author makes strong statements but provides no facts, data, research findings, or examples to support them. Claims should be backed by evidence, not just opinion.
- **Emotional or sensational language**: Information designed to make readers angry, fearful, or outraged may prioritize persuasion over accuracy. Trustworthy sources generally present facts in a professional and objective manner.
- **One-sided arguments**: Issues in criminal justice are often complex. Sources that ignore opposing viewpoints or fail to acknowledge alternative explanations may present a biased picture of the issue.
- **Extraordinary claims without evidence**: The more surprising or dramatic a claim is, the stronger the evidence should be. Claims that seem too good, too bad, or too unbelievable to be true should be carefully scrutinized.
- **Cherry-picked information**: Some sources selectively present only the evidence that supports their position while ignoring evidence that contradicts it. Reliable sources consider the full body of available evidence, even when some findings do not

support their conclusions.
- **Lack of author credentials**: Consider who created the information. Authors with relevant education, training, experience, or professional expertise are generally more credible than anonymous or unqualified sources.
- **Outdated information**: Criminal justice policies, laws, crime trends, and research findings can change over time. Always check whether the information is current and still relevant.

Developing the habit of critically evaluating information is an essential skill for criminal justice professionals. Making decisions based on reliable evidence helps ensure fairness, accuracy, and ethical practice in both academic work and professional settings.

Evidence-informed criminal justice professionals do not accept information at face value. They ask questions, consider the quality of the evidence, and compare information from multiple sources before drawing conclusions. By carefully evaluating information, professionals can make decisions that are more informed, effective, and fair.

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4: THEORY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain how theory helps researchers study crime and criminal justice issues.
- Describe the relationship between paradigms, theories, hypotheses, and research.
- Recognize how theories influence the questions researchers ask and the evidence they collect.
- Differentiate between a paradigm, a theory, and a hypothesis.
- Explain how research is used to test and refine theories.
- Recognize that research findings are often guided by theoretical perspectives.
- Identify the role theory plays in understanding criminal justice problems and proposed solutions.
- Explain why understanding theory can help practitioners become more informed consumers of research.
- Recognize common criminological theories that may appear in criminal justice research and professional literature.
- Identify the theoretical perspective being used in a research study when it is explicitly described.
- Ask critical questions about the assumptions and explanations underlying criminal justice research.
- Use theory as a tool for interpreting research findings rather than accepting claims at face value.
- Evaluate how theory and evidence work together to explain criminal justice issues.
- Apply theoretical and research-based thinking to better understand criminal justice policies, programs, and practices.
- Demonstrate the habits of an evidence-informed practitioner by considering both theory and evidence when evaluating criminal justice information.

For many students, this will not be the first time you have encountered the concept of theory. In previous criminology or sociology courses, you may have studied theories that attempt to explain crime, delinquency, victimization, or criminal justice system behavior. For example, you may have learned about social learning theory, strain theory, social control theory, routine activities theory, conflict theory, or other explanations of crime and social behavior.

In those courses, the focus was often on understanding what the theories say and how they explain criminal behavior or criminal justice outcomes. In this course, we will revisit theory from a different perspective. Rather than focusing solely on the content of specific theories, we will examine how theory is applied in the research process and how research findings ultimately inform criminal justice practice.

This distinction is important. Criminal justice professionals are not expected to memorize theories simply for the sake of academic knowledge. Instead, theory provides a framework, or a way of organizing ideas, that helps researchers ask questions, collect evidence, interpret findings, and develop explanations for what they observe. Research then helps determine whether those explanations are supported by evidence.

As future criminal justice practitioners, you will likely spend much more time using research than creating new theories. However, understanding the connection between theory and research can help you become a more informed consumer of information. This connection is especially important for evidence-informed practice. Evidence-informed practitioners do not rely solely on personal experience, tradition, or intuition when making decisions. Instead, they consider available research evidence, evaluate its quality, and apply it thoughtfully within the realities of their professional environment. When you read a research study, evaluate a new policy, or consider a proposed intervention, it is helpful to understand the ideas and assumptions that guided the research in the first place. Since many research studies are guided by theory, understanding theory helps practitioners better understand the evidence on which decisions are based.

As you read this chapter, think of theory as a bridge between ideas and action. Theory helps researchers explain and predict behavior. Research tests those explanations using evidence. Practitioners then use that evidence to make better, fairer, and more effective decisions in real-world criminal justice settings.

4.1: From Paradigm to Research- How Knowledge is Built in Criminal Justice
4.2: Review of Crime Theories

4.3: Theories of Crime and Causation

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4.1: From Paradigm to Research- How Knowledge is Built in Criminal Justice

The image below illustrates how researchers move from broad ideas about the world to specific research studies. Research does not begin with data collection. Instead, research is often guided by a series of connected steps that start with a paradigm, continue through a theory and hypotheses, and eventually lead to research.

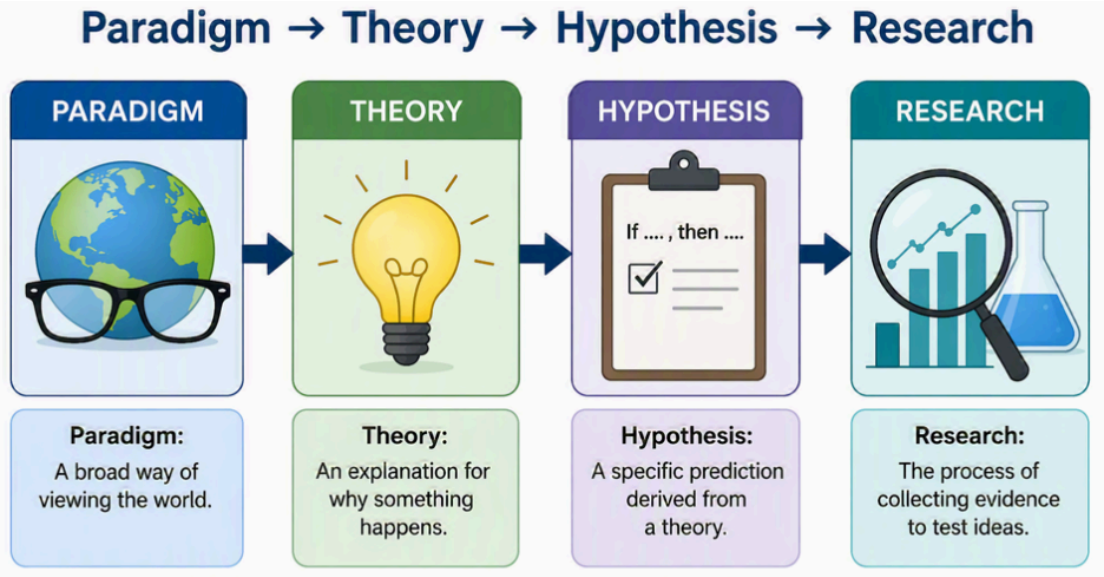


Figure 4.1.1: From Paradigm to Research (Image generated by the author with Canva AI.)

Paradigms

The process begins with a **paradigm**, which is the broadest level of understanding. A paradigm is a perspective or lens through which one views reality.[1] Rather than being right or wrong, true or false, a paradigm is a framework of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that shape the types of questions we ask and how we answer them. A paradigm is a general way of thinking about reality, knowledge, and how we learn about the world. Since there are multiple viewpoints, there are numerous paradigms. Not everyone will group paradigms in the same way, especially since ideas can overlap. Additionally, many subcategories can be used to further distinguish theories from one another. However, there are some traditional and common paradigms in criminology.

Figure 4.1.2: Common criminological paradigms and the assumptions that tie theories together within each paradigm. Reproduced from Peterson & VanderPyl (2025), CC BY 4.0.

Paradigm	Assumptions
Pre-classical criminology	Crime is a result of paranormal forces or demonic possession. This outlook on crime is grounded in religion and superstition.
Classical school of criminology	Crime is a result of free will and an individual's choice to offend. This outlook on crime is grounded in personal choice.
Positivist criminology	Crime is a result of internal or external forces that can be biological, psychological, or sociological. This outlook on crime is grounded in determinism and the scientific method.

Paradigm	Assumptions
Critical/conflict criminology	Crime is a result of society labeling and legislating behavior as "criminal." This outlook on crime is grounded in a social construction of crime.

Paradigms shape what researchers believe is important to study and what counts as valid evidence.

What is Theory?

Within a paradigm, social scientists develop or use theories. Theories are systematic explanations of natural or social behavior, events, or other phenomena.[2] A **theory** is an organized set of ideas that helps explain why something happens and, in some cases, helps predict what might happen in the future.[3] Theory provides a way to look at the world and understand human interaction.[4] Theories help researchers make sense of patterns they observe in society. While a paradigm provides a broad perspective, a theory offers a more focused explanation of a specific issue. In criminal justice, theories may attempt to explain why people commit crimes, why some neighborhoods experience higher crime rates, or why certain interventions reduce offending.

Based on the definition of a theory, it may seem like just about anyone can come up with a possible explanation for what is happening and claim it is a legitimate theory.[5] While it is true that anyone can come up with an idea to explain some phenomenon, legitimate theories involve scientific and systematic study. You can think of your uncle's idea on why people commit sexual assault as a "lower case t" theory, while feminist criminologists' descriptions and unpacking of gender roles based on decades of research is an "upper case T" theory. In other words, a good theory involves more than just personal speculation. A review of common theories is included at the end of this section.

Hypothesis

From a theory, researchers develop hypotheses. Social scientists start with a question such as why what they are witnessing is happening and how they can explain this phenomenon.[6] To respond, they then create an educated prediction, called a hypothesis, based on what they observed. A **hypothesis** is a reasonable explanation for why a phenomenon is occurring. It is not random. It must fit what they are seeing and be simple enough to test. Researchers test predictions or propositions about the relationships among two or more concepts to help explain phenomena.[7] Hypotheses translate broad theoretical ideas into statements that can be examined using evidence.

Research

This is the topic of the next chapter, but very briefly, research is the scientific process of collecting and analyzing evidence to determine whether a hypothesis is supported. Theories and observations are the foundations of scientific knowledge.[8] The findings may support the hypothesis, partially support it, or fail to support it. To be supported, a theory needs to fit the available evidence, or data, that researchers obtain from observations.[9] If it does not fit the evidence uncovered through research, the theory needs to be adjusted or reworked to do so. In any case, the results contribute to our overall understanding of the theory and may lead researchers to refine existing explanations or develop new ones.

For criminal justice professionals, understanding this sequence is important because it helps explain where research findings come from. Research studies do not appear in isolation. They are often built on theories, which are influenced by broader assumptions about knowledge and society. As evidence-informed practitioners, understanding the connection between paradigms, theories, hypotheses, and research allows you to evaluate research more critically and make better decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions, tradition, or personal opinion.

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1. Peterson, J.R., and VanderPyl, T. (2025). *Introduction to criminology: An equity lens* (1st ed.). Open Oregon Educational Resources. https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/criminologyintro1e. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
2. (Chen et al., 2024).
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5. (Peterson & VanderPyle, 2025).
6. (Peterson & VanderPyle, 2025).
7. (Chen et al., 2024; Fedorek, 2019).
8. (Chen et al., 2024).
9. (Chen et al., 2024).

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4.2: Review of Crime Theories

In the previous section, we explored how researchers use paradigms, theories, and hypotheses to study questions about crime and justice. Of these concepts, theory is especially important because it provides a way of thinking about why crime happens and why people, groups, and communities behave the way they do. Researchers use theories to guide their studies, shape their research questions, and make sense of their findings. Because of this, theories appear regularly in criminal justice research. As you read research articles, reports, and program evaluations, you will often see references to one or more theories that help explain what the researcher is studying and why.

The goal of this next section is not to teach crime theories in detail. You will likely encounter more in-depth discussions of these theories in other criminal justice courses. Instead, this section is designed to provide a refresher on some of the major theories you are most likely to see when reading research. You do not need to memorize every theory or every detail. However, having a basic understanding of the major perspectives will make it easier to follow what researchers are studying, understand how they interpret their findings, and evaluate the conclusions they draw.

As you work through research studies in this course, you will probably notice that authors sometimes assume readers are already familiar with the theories they mention. In some cases, a theory may be described in only a sentence or two before the researcher moves on to the study itself. When that happens, it is important to recognize the theory being referenced and know when you may need to look up additional information from a reliable source. Developing this habit will help you become a stronger consumer of research.

This skill is important because criminal justice professionals regularly encounter claims about what causes crime, what programs are effective, and what policies should be adopted. Research can provide valuable insights, but those insights make more sense when you understand the theory behind them. Taking a few minutes to understand the theoretical foundation of a study can help you better evaluate the research design, interpret the findings, and decide whether the author's conclusions are supported by the evidence. As you continue developing your information literacy skills, theory can serve as a useful tool for asking questions, thinking critically about research, and making informed decisions in professional practice.

The theories reviewed on the following page are among the perspectives most common in criminal justice research. The summaries are intentionally brief and focus on the central ideas of each theory rather than the details, debates, or historical development. As you move through this review, focus on the questions each theory attempts to answer and the factors it identifies as important influences on crime and criminal behavior. Having a general understanding of these perspectives will provide a useful reference point as you read research throughout this course and encounter studies grounded in different theoretical explanations of crime.

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4.3: Theories of Crime and Causation

Early attempts to explain crime were difficult concepts to grasp, and even further frustrating to reconcile with what was known in the world at that time.[1] As much of the thinking of the day was focused upon politics and religion, these two repositories of knowledge were believed to hold the keys to why people acted against others or violated the norms, mores and values of the community. In the theories below the reader will see how the evolution of criminological explanations for miscreant behavior and strategies for redemption of one's soul through judicial and correctional techniques, have progressed through time

Figure 4.3.1: A tarred and feathered countryman is paraded past crowds in the streets. Wood engraving. (Photo Credit: Unknown author, Public Domain)

Pre-Classical Theory

As European society attempted to come to terms with the causal factors of crime in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scholars realized that there were no simplistic answers available for why criminal behavior was a component of society. In fact, the entire concept of crime was murky. One of the pre-eminent scholars of the time, Saint Thomas Aquinas, focused his work on trying to better understand the concept of criminal behavior through a lens of spiritual power. Much of the belief structure of the 1300s through the 1700s centered around spirituality, or the lack thereof, in peoples' moral bearing. A king was considered to be above the law and any punishment for acts committed under their reign, in the eyes of scholars at the time. Such thinking has led to today's underpinnings of sovereign immunity. This helped decide (for most people anyway) the notion of Divine Right– that "the king can do no wrong" and ought to be absolved of responsibility for any misdeeds.[2] As for commoners, their acts of violation could only be explained by a general notion that man is an inherently simple creature of nature, and all of the actions of a person are directed by some nebulous super power which was not at all understood. Early criminologists could only believe that the acts of violation of society's rules at the time were due to the pressures exerted upon the violator by some external power. This thinking became known as the demonological theory of criminality,[3] in which the spirit exerting the undesired characteristics of behavior on a person was a substantial, if not overwhelming, power brought upon by a true demon. As this seemed to be an explanation, no further attempt to resolve the real causation of, or issues created by, crime.

Because the accused individual's actions seemed to inform society that the defendant was possessed by demonic spirits, the only cure to the situation was for a testimony of the power and effectiveness of the demon spirit. Typically prescribed testimonies, or "ordeals,", involved sacrifices, worships, challenges and ordeals by water and fire. The belief was that water and fire were powerful cleansing agents of ones' soul, and would help identify the spirit and exorcize it from the accused. If an offender were to plead "not guilty," he might be offered the choice of whether he might be put up for trial upon God and the country, or by twelve men or upon God only. Society believed that this would render "the judgment of God" in the matter, feeling that God would sort out any innocent parties through the strong belief of righteousness. Examples of ordeals included tying a large stone around a man's neck and rowing him out into the center of a pond, burning someone at the stake or on a pyre, or through a trial by combat. Oaths of innocence and participation in ordeals in the medieval judicial system today seem barbaric, Draconian and fraught with ill-conceived tactics, yet are also seen to have played an important role in determining an offender's guilt. Over time, the fairness of such processes came into question, and by the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, these past crude methods of determining guilt and accountability gave way to more rational, studied inquiry as to how people ought to be held responsible if they broke society's laws.

Punishment as a right of society was understood and became part of the early belief structure of criminology. Because he was overtaken by an evil spirit, the accused was considered to be a depraved soul who could only be reclaimed through torture and pain. Thinking was soon to change, however. Hobbes believed that the fear of swift and certain punishment at the hands of a monarch could provide a significant deterrent from committing sinful acts which were the equivalent to crimes.[4] Hobbes and the theosophist movement (most notably St. Thomas Aquinas, and the social contract writers Dante Alighieri, Machiavelli, Martin Luther and Jean Bodin) laid the backdrop for Cesar Beccaria's **classical school** which occurred at a later stage in history. The harsh pre-classical thinking fell by the wayside with the passage of time and the advancement of knowledge.[5]

Classical School

Alphonse Bertillion

Figure 4.3.2: Alphonse Bertillion of the Classical School. This pair of black and white photographs depict the criminologist Alphonse Bertillion, a proponent of the Classical School./ Photo Credit: Unknown author, CC BY 4.0

As a new era of knowledge, understanding and human empathy emerged in the mid-to- late 1700s, an enlightened approach to the sanctions imposed on violators in society evolved. At the forefront of the **Classical School** was Cesare Beccaria, born in aristocracy in Milan, Italy, in 1738. As discussed in the Pre-Classical era, people were beginning to take a stand against what they believed to be the outlandish harbingers of today's "cruel and unusual punishments." The conditions fueling these punishments were deemed to be unacceptable, arbitrary and inherently corrupt, rather than focusing on what was generating the inappropriate criminal behaviors. Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham were two influential scholars who advocated for new ideas and approaches to addressing crime. Rooted in their studies were the concept that men were inherently rational beings, capable of making choices between good and evil, and that any bad acts or criminality they performed were as a result of free will. In this case, the free will "choice" they make is a risk-versus-reward proposition.[6]

Beccaria and two friends Pietro and Alessandro Verri, formed a society called "Academy of Fists" and solicited enrollment of like-minded thinkers. Indeed, today this society would likely be called a "think tank"–their stated mission and purpose was to openly examine and debate society's ills, and assign each member a topic to study and write a treatise on issues discovered in the review. Items under their scrutiny and discussion included subjects involving economic disorder, unnecessary bureaucracy and petty tyrannical acts of government, the narrow-mindedness of religion, and intellectual pedantry.[7] The society's first writings were published in the early 1760s. Perhaps the most influential of the topics assigned to and written was Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764).

In *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), Beccaria lists ten core principles that he believed would make the criminal legal system work in a more cohesive, efficient, effective, and unbiased way. One example cited was that Becarria believed that legislatures of government should not only define crimes against people, property and society, but should also prescribe punishments for the specific crimes. This would preclude the vagueness and application of crimes and punishments. Beccaria recognized that judges had a considerable amount of discretion in their oversight of proceedings before them, and suggested that the judge's only tasks under his proposal would be to determine guilt or innocence, and then follow a predetermined sentence as set forth by the legislature.

Beccaria also suggested that all factors with the exception of the impact of the crime on society were immaterial in determining the severity of a crime. In this view, the impact of a crime on society should be used as a benchmark in determining the significance of the crime, and the punishment due upon one's conviction. A companion principle to this is the notion of proportionality. He felt that the punishment should fit the crime, and believed that the purpose of punishment ought not to be retribution or retaliatory.

Over the next few years, scholars of the time kept a watchful eye as to whether Beccaria's advocacies truly created a deterrent to crime and reduced recidivism. Some thinkers believed the Classical theory had fallen short of its goals of deterrence. The Classical theory, in the eyes of some critics, appeared to be too scientific and not reliant upon some very basic societal principles which were emerging with the many changes occurring in how people worked, raised families, and occupied their few hours of leisure. After some years of observation and critique, a modified approach to the Classical theory was deemed necessary. This new approach sought to further define categories of deterrence, hone in on the methods of punishments meant to better fit crimes, and how life's contributions in the form of psychology, home and community environment, parenting, and other factors affected the ability to deter people from committing crimes. This new approach became known as the Neoclassical movement.

A wall panel containing images of the frontal and profile views of human heads.

Figure 4.3.3: Japanese criminology at the 1904 World's Fair, St. Louis

A footnote to this discussion reveals that, after decades of experiencing some thoughtful dormancy among criminologists, the Classical theory had a revival in the 1970s in the United States.[8] This demonstrates how certain theories of criminal behavior can ebb and flow, based on myriad factors including societal trends, perceptions of increase or decrease in crime, active or passive governance, economic shifts, and regional demographics.

Neo-Classical Theories

"Modern deterrence theory is perhaps the most dominant philosophy of the American criminal justice system."[9] As previously stated, the goal of deterrence theory is to modify one's behavior through enacting a system of known laws, coupled with swift and certain punishments. A conclusion that springs from this belief is that a warning emerges, cautioning a person who is contemplating a criminal act that there will be possible consequences. "Risk versus reward" thinking assumes that the potential criminal will carefully contemplate whether "committing the crime" will carry a higher reward than "doing the time" (receiving sanctions or harsh consequences for the crime if apprehended). Two criminologists, Cornish and Clarke (1986) actively supported this thinking, and proposed the **Rational Choice Theory** to explain this behavior.

Cornish and Clarke posited that violators, whether first-time offenders or seasoned career criminals, engage in a rational thought process–however brief or extended–to calculate costs and benefits prior to committing a crime in terms of maximizing the pleasure or outcome, while minimizing risk and pain. The intent of the Rational Choice Theory was not intended to determine one's motivations for committing a crime, nor did Cornish and Clarke believe that everyone is fully rational or given to committing crimes. Instead, they believed that some people, when presented with an opportunity, will at least explore the possibility of engaging in a criminal act, and may well carry it out. They also did not believe that everyone was entirely rational; instead, it was their belief that offenders have "bounded rationality," meaning that given time and information, a person may elect to commit a crime. They, of course, cannot wait forever to decide.

Figure 4.3.4: A primitive trailhead parking lot, when patrol deterrence is not available, can offer opportunities for vehicle prowling, vandalism, and other crimes./ Photo Credit: NPS/Diane Renkin, Public Domain

As an example, suppose a person who enjoys hiking drove to a trailhead parking lot in a park. It is mid-week during the summer, with about fifteen unoccupied cars sitting in the lot. Our hiker passes by one vehicle whose window is open slightly. As the hiker glances inside they see a light jacket partially covering a purse and an electronic tablet. Presumably, the person who left the items in the car had attempted to hide them from view using the jacket, but it had somehow slipped, revealing the purse and tablet. The hiker now sees an opportunity–and, recognizing that there may be other folks in or near other vehicles, the hiker quickly looks around. Seeing no one, the hiker still needs more time for consideration and to plan. Should he try the door to see if it opens? Does it appear the car has an alarm? Does the hiker hear voices coming from the trail? These would be the choices made by an entirely rational person. In the perfect situation, the hiker might wait until nightfall in order to perpetrate the vehicle prowl. There is time sensitivity here, however-and the hiker cannot wait for extended periods in order to take in all the possible information he may need to proceed with the crime. The hiker either enters the vehicle and takes the objects, or he walks away. He has made a quick decision based upon the facts at hand at the moment.

The **Routine Activity Theory** (advanced by Cohen and Felson in 1979) differs from the **Rational Choice Theory**.

Since the conclusion of World War II, more people have entered the workforce, and more people spend time away from home. Cohen and Felson stated that three things must converge in time in space for a crime to be committed – a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian.[10]

The concept is illustrated in the figure below:

Figure 4.3.5: This figure represents the convergence of a likely offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian, which often leads to crime. /Photo Credit: Nicholas Malara, for WA Open ProfTech, © SBCTC, CC BY 4.0

There will never be a shortage of people who have a desire to exploit an opportunity for criminal gain. Likewise, there will always be targets–cars in a parking lot, houses, businesses or commercial establishments, people, or literally any item. Lastly, the lack of a suitable guardian in the vicinity creates an atmosphere where criminal activity can occur. Examples of suitable guardians include police, security officers, guard dogs, occupying your residence, alarm and camera systems, gates and secure locking devices have been shown to help deter criminal behavior. As you can see, the Routine Activity Theory focuses on the criminal "event" rather than on the criminal "offender."[11]

Strain Theories

Criminologists today often take the view that there are theories involving biological and psychological explanations for why crimes are committed. In this view, crimes result from individuals afflicted by some physical or psychological condition which influences them to exhibit criminal behavior. The criminologist can then attempt to distinguish between those in society who demonstrate proclivity to commit crimes, from persons who do not. Considering this for a moment, one can see there may be flaws to these theories. Can it fully explain why crime rates are variable, often between street addresses? Are we able to use these theories to identify certain groups who may be more prone to committing crimes? When examining the need to be more certain when applying these theories to explain criminal behavior, perhaps we are better served by grouping the theories into three separate, broad categories: strain, cultural deviance, and social control.[12]

There are some similarities that arise from this theory separation. As an example, we can see that **strain theory** is similar to **cultural deviance theory**, since both concur that social strata and criminal behavior are related. Strain theorists believe that all members of society are more aligned to middle class values, and that crime generally can be explained as being the responsibility of those in lower economic status. The reasoning here is that those relegated to lower class status do not have legitimate means to reach the goal of middle-class recognition. Desperate to attain the status of middle-class, the lower class turn to illegitimate means to achieve the recognition of being in the middle economic strata.[13]

Criminologists examine crimes and criminal behavior through a different lens when adopting the cultural deviance theory approach. Here, the belief is that persons occupying a lower socio-economic class have a different, conflicting value system than that of the middle class. It can be easy for someone in the lower class to unintentionally or inadvertently violate middle-class norms, laws or values when they are actually trying to ascribe to their lower-class value system.[14]

As a child my attention was invited to the stately and ornate grandfather clock in my aunt and uncle's home. Maybe you have seen one like it. The clock ran smoothly and continuously, with all of its parts synchronized. Functioning with a measure of precision, it seemed to keep perfect time, as it had for decades. Yet one day, an intricate gear, worn with age, cracked and broke, causing the whole clock to malfunction. Looking at our communities through a similar lens, it would be useful to consider how each component of society contributes to relationships with others. When society is stable, its parts run smoothly and cooperatively; but it must be remembered that, when society is stable, it is often seen that way through the lens of those in power. Through this, positive relationships and cohesive partnerships are forged, and consensus emerges from thoughtful, respectful conversations. However, if there are missing or damaged component parts, in time conditions may become dysfunctional, threatening good social order. Conversations become stilted, disagreements are less civil, creating conflict between classes, in class-oriented societies. One may argue that, throughout history, society has really never been "stable," and so the view taken by all theories promoted tend to be through the lens of the dominant culture at the time.

Before the end of the nineteenth century, the sociologist Emile Durkheim found himself in some conflict of perspective with positivist biological theorists of the time.[15] These theorists were relying on the belief that there were individual differences between criminals and non-criminals. Durkheim was concerned about the normality of crime in society, where the explanation of human conduct and misconduct was a function of the group and the social organization, not of the individual. Durkheim coined the term **anomie**, which he used to describe the breakdown of social order and the resultant loss of standards and values in society. He believed that the gravitation of a simple society to a more urbanized, or complex one, came with a breakdown in the recognition of the need for a common set of rules to regulate the actions of people. As a result, groups become fragmented and divisive, the discourse ratchets up and devolves into arguments and clashes. Ultimately, behavior becomes unpredictable, the social order that had existed has broken down, and society now is in Durkheim's professed state of anomie.

Over time, Durkeim extended his view of the impact of anomie in an attempt to explain troubling non-criminal behaviors such as suicide (especially one he classified as *anomic suicide*), focused upon the rise in suicide rates during times of sudden economic change (either major recession/depression or even when someone experiences sudden unexpected prosperity). One can easily understand suicides when suffering cataclysmic economic loss, but why would someone consider taking their life if they suddenly inherited a fortune or won the lottery? The answer, according to Durkheim, is found in the sudden change. The social construct creates rules of order; sudden changes push the boundaries of those rules, and expectations of behavior change. Some people can handle it; others cannot take the stresses associated with wealth. Whether great financial loss or sudden great prosperity, the result is the same–anomie.[16]

Some decades after Durkheim, Robert Merton attempted to explain the crime problem as a derivative of anomie. Acknowledging some similarities, it is noted that Merton's model has some differences from his predecessor. In Merton's view, criminal behavior springs from conditions in society that fail to provide equity to all people. True, sudden changes in social structure can emerge

from an economic windfall of some sort, but the issue then becomes having a social system which attempts to hold the same goals for all without providing equal means with which to achieve them. Merton argues that culture calls for one social condition, while not integrating what the economic reality of the structure permits. The social structure, in Merton's view, is the root cause, and responsible for, criminal behavior.[17]

A lottery slip.

Figure 4.3.6: This game of chance, more often than not, leads to a loss of a person's money. In some cases, an economic windfall can occur which is life-changing. Photo Credit: Robert Couse-Baker, CC BY 2.0

Extending Merton's Theory of Anomie further, in the United States it is important to find opportunities to move up the social ladder, but these opportunities are not equally distributed among the population. A baby being raised in a slum apartment by a single parent who is unemployed and struggling with addiction, faces a statistically slim chance at moving up in social class. A child living in a middle-class, stable family life has a better-than-average chance of reaching a professional or business position should they choose, and assuming they put forth the effort required to succeed in school, relationships and matriculation into the workforce. Finally, both children will be influenced through direct or indirect exposure to the billions of dollars spent in advertising that spreads the message that they, too, can drive a brand new car, take a luxury vacation, and record it for their viewing later on using the media technology of their choice.

The above view is reinforced by the stories of individuals in industry, sports, and entertainment. An idea ripe for the time, a chance introduction to an agent with transactional capacity, or simply being in the right place at the right time, leads a choice few persons down a path from rags to riches. Merton recognized that such circumstances may be true in some isolated cases, but realistically it was not a legitimate way for everyone to reach their economic or social goals. In fact, tactics such as over-reaching to achieve status in so-called "get-rich-quick" schemes, could lead to problems. Merton didn't believe that a lack of means could be the only reason for the deviant behavior he was studying and the resultant escalating crime rate.[18]

Social Learning Theories

Social learning theory considers how new behaviors can be formed or acquired by observing and imitating the actions of others. How people in different walks of life–parents, friends, team members, co-workers and mentors–present themselves (intentionally or otherwise) as role models, makes a difference to those who look to them for life or situational guidance. Modeling in learning theory in this sense is a cognitive process, but can be acquired passively through direct observation, as a member of a team where rules of some type are to be followed, or by a more direct, formal or rigid learning structure. Pure learning theory does not necessarily require ongoing reproduction or direct reinforcement in order to be successful. Learning can also take place as a result of observing a behavior and by observing what consequences of the behavior are realized. This learning process is known as vicarious reinforcement.

Criminologists have long held that if certain expected behaviors are regularly praised or rewarded, that behavior will likely continue. In contrast, punishing the behavior consistently will likely lead to a reluctance to continue the act. Psychologists have long studied learning theory, and many of the lessons learned through animal tendencies (i.e., Pavlov's famous experimentation with dogs[19]) can be seen to carry over to the human context. We marvel at the precision with which uniformed members of the armed forces or marching bands follow a regimented choreography. Fans cheer for their football team when a complex play is carried out to fruition, mainly because each member practiced their individual role, received praise or critique prior to the game, practiced some more to reinforce any needed changes, and finally, on game day, the work paid off. Finally, technology plays a significant role in the training and execution platform for business, sports and other professional occupations.

Unfortunately, technology and reinforced learned behaviors can also lead to the culmination of victimization and senseless criminal acts. Media violence is certainly an influence, as it is nearly impossible to watch any media segment for a glimpse at local or national news without seeing concerning (if not devastating) acts of violence, and the toll exacted on the witnesses and victims. To that sense the public has, to some degree, become desensitized in what is occurring. This desensitization goes beyond creating an apathetic community; it leads to a sense of feeling like the problems of crime are overwhelming, and no one is able nor willing to stop it. For law-abiding members of the population, there is a cry for reinforcements to set things right: more police, or less discretion on behalf of prosecutors, stronger will in sentencing enacted by judges, and any reasons at all to warehouse convicts to protect society from them, whether they receive any rehabilitative care or not. Those in the community who are of a criminal mindset may look to what is broadcast in media, films, or portrayals in order to exploit gaps, look for areas where vulnerable people may be targeted, or simply to get a better sense as to the "risk versus reward" of the particular crime in which they may participate.

Social Learning Theory greatly depends upon the concept of modeling as mentioned above. The criminologist Bandura argued that there are three types of modeling modalities:[20]

1. **Live models**, where an actual person is demonstrating the desired behavior.
2. **Verbal instruction**, in which an individual describes the desired behavior in detail and instructs the participant in how to engage in the behavior.
3. **Symbolic**, by which modeling occurs by means of the media (movies, television, Internet, video games, literature and radio, as examples). The symbolic stimuli can either be present in the form of real or fictional characters.

Albert Bandura

Figure 4.3.7: Albert Bandura is considered one of the leaders in the study of the social learning theory. He performed the classic "Bobo" study involving children in the three-to-five year old age group were given the choice of playing with common toys, or engaging an inflatable clown doll which had been vigorously and aggressively punched by an adult in their presence./ Photo Credit: U3190490, CC BY-SA 4.0

How might we better explain aggression? By the application of Social Learning Theory concepts to crime studies, several useful ideas have been identified. In trying to explain a broader theory of criminal behavior, the criminalists Ronald Akers and Robert Burgess took the basic principles of the Social Learning Theory, and aligned them with Edwin Sutherland's Differential Association Theory. On one hand, the Akers/Burgess alliance proposes that criminal behavior is grounded through both social and non-social circumstances, and is further achieved via situations involving direct reinforcement, vicarious reinforcement, explicit instruction, and direct and indirect observation.[21] For example, in a neighborhood where criminal activity is normative, a seasoned criminal might teach a youngster how to hot-wire the ignition on a car in order to steal the vehicle. Here, the likelihood of criminal activity in a neighborhood where such behaviors are commonplace, increases the chances that exposure to criminal deviance will occur.

Cultural Deviance Theories

Cultural deviance theories claim that people who are deemed to be in a lower socio-economic class have a different set of values that tend to conflict with the values of what is viewed to be the more normative middle class. A fundamental flaw with theories following this line of thinking is believing that when people conform to their own value system and honor their culture, they may be viewed as being in violation of conventional or middle-class norms. The Cultural Deviance Theory was championed by criminologist Walter B. Miller (1958), and contributed a significant amount of research to sociologists Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, both of whom were part of a larger theoretical project in 1942 attempting to understand and explain social deviance and crime in the rapidly expanding immigrant neighborhoods of Chicago in the 1930s. Miller identified six elements of lower-class subculture that he labeled "focal concerns," of which lower-class youth were focused. The six areas are:

1. **Trouble** – Getting into it, and staying out of it. The "trouble" here came in the form of law enforcement, where respect for the law did not emerge from an altruistic sense of morality, but from a fear of punishment.
2. **Toughness** – In the lower-class neighborhood, toughness was defined as a disregard for consequences, as well as disdain for literary, artistic and scholarly pursuits. Disavowing a need for formal education, a young person might feel more respected among peers if they were instead "street-wise", if they outwardly displayed an objectification of women, and openly engaged in certain behaviors like underage smoking and drinking. Juveniles were particularly drawn to this, aspiring to be "tough" in order to gain respect and acceptance by peers.
3. **Smartness** – Juveniles in the above-described neighborhoods often sought to be cunning, manipulative and intimidating. In this way they could be viewed as a "smart guy", a "wise guy", or a "smooth operator", constantly in contempt of the law.
4. **Excitement** – This aspect pointed to the "thrill-seekers" in the neighborhood. Juveniles often found their days in the neighborhood as boring and monotonous. By joining a gang or engaging in use of recreational drugs, a young person might be viewed as being at the cutting edge of the "in crowd".
5. **Fate** – If a member of the lower-class population felt unappreciated or disempowered, they might put greater emphasis on actions demonstrating fate or luck than would their middle-class contemporaries. If one displayed an attitude of fearlessness or recklessness when engaged in risky activities, they may have felt that the outcome was preordained and thus beyond any intervention from morality. This mindset could act as an enabler for juvenile delinquency.
6. **Autonomy** – The previous five focal concerns created an atmosphere where juveniles felt it was necessary to resist control over any individual or group who sought to exert control over their lives. This included parents, teachers, law enforcement and anyone who was viewed by the youth as being in a position of authority. As a direct result of the attempt to assert their autonomy against the system, delinquent acts such as vandalism or petty crime could result.

The Cultural Deviance Theory is sometimes viewed as a component of a larger theory called the Social Disorganization Theory. The **Social Disorganization Theory** connects crime and delinquent behavior to cultural norms that are prevalent in

particular locations, neighborhoods, or residential areas such as those of low-income groups, or in areas populated with a heavy concentration of poor immigrants. Evidence of some validity to this theory presents itself when considering ethnic gangs who operate and establish "turf" in cities. Individuals residing in such areas are often wrongly labeled as members of such gangs, and find themselves wrongly detained, arrested, or incarcerated by law enforcement personnel, or recruited or targeted by gang members who believe the person to be present in the protected turf. As you can see, the people caught up in the Cultural Deviance Theory are not necessarily committing crimes because they have an innate proclivity to criminal behavior, but instead are influenced by three factors:

1. The place they live in,
2. The people they are surrounded by, and
3. The socio-economic conditions found within their micro-environment.

All three of these elements come together to form a unique subculture influencing the individual and their chances to turn to crime. Because this theory is often used to critique immigrant and working-class cultures and neighborhoods, specifically as it attempts to explain the origins of gang subculture, it is a highly controversial theory in the 21st Century.[22]

Positivist Criminology

Positivist school of criminology is further divided into anthropological and sociological schools.

Figure 4.3.8: Positivist School /Photo Credit: Nicholas Malara, for WA Open ProfTech, © SBCTC, CC BY 4.0

Criminologists who use the empirical evidence they obtain through valid scientific inquiry in an effort to improve society and the world we live in, are considered to be engaging in positivism. By using the basic tenets of scientific inquiry–accurately conducting measurement of elements of cases, remaining passionately objective, and making unbiased attempts to explain causality observed–positivism can emerge as a valid theory in explaining the root cause of crime. Positivists have long speculated that there were two general groups of people: criminals and non-criminals, and as such, it is our duty to determine what causes people to be criminals.

In his famous work *On the Origin of Species* (1859),[23] Charles Darwin wrote extensively on the role of natural selection in the animal kingdom. A dozen years later, in *Descent of Man* (1871),[24] Darwin attempted to apply these viewpoints to the human condition. Darwin postulated that some people who engage in antisocial acts might do so as a result of being a "throwback" to earlier times. He viewed a person's devolvement into what he termed an evolutionary reversion to an early stage of mankind, might explain why the person acted counter to community values and normative behavior. Darwin never explicitly wrote about, or tried to explain, the reasons for criminal behavior, but criminologists in ensuing years utilized his ideas and applied them to their personal studies relating to criminal causation.

Shortly after Darwin's work, the work of Cesare Lombroso, a member of the so-called "Italian School" of criminology, caused criminologists to take notice.[25] Lombroso was a medical student who, later, became a professor of psychiatry at the University of Turin. He theorized that, due to physical features that were distinguishable from non-criminals, some people were "born criminals". Lombroso proposed that criminals were a lower form of life, more apt to display traits and dispositions more crude than those of their non-criminal counterparts. He also believed that, by studying five physical characteristics, such as jaw size, arm span, etc., predictors to the person's inclination to engage in criminal behavior would emerge, and in the case of some of his predecessors, were influenced by, or relied upon, racist stereotypes.[26]

Biological and Psychological Positivism

Unfortunately for the study of criminology, sociological theory and empirical research are sometimes considered by experts as exclusively responsible for criminal behavior. Cast aside are critical factors such as personality and human biology, almost like being seen as irrelevant to the discussion. Further, psychological theory sometimes delves into the individual to the exclusion of external facts like the predispositions with which we are born, the interactions with others in often complex situations. A comprehensive approach would consider the totality of circumstances influencing and affecting an individual, both internal and external in nature.[27]

According to psychologists, a variety of possibilities can be considered for individual differences between people who live normal, law-abiding lives, and those predisposed to committing crimes. A short list of these possibilities might include poor

or undeveloped moral attitudes, inadequate or non-existent socialization during formative childhood years, experiencing the absence of one of the parents for differing reasons, emotional immaturity, and having a defective conscience. When looking at how crime may be related to personality factors, it is important to evaluate some baseline information about the person. How was their aggression learned? What are emotional "triggers" that lead to violent or delinquent actions? Does the individual have a particular crime of choice, and are they somehow related to certain personality factors? All these questions, and more, help to assess the person's potential to plan crimes, carry them out, and be receptive to potential rehabilitation if interrupted at some point.

The recognized father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), postulated that an individual's psychological well-being is dependent upon a healthy and robust interaction among the **id , ego** and **superego**-the three basic components of the human psyche.[28] The **id** is responsible for providing powerful urges and is a driver for seeking gratification and satisfaction. The **ego** can be seen as a referee for the personality of the individual, acting in the role as moderator between the id and the superego. The **superego** takes on the role of keeper of the moral code, or the individual's conscience. It was Freud's position that criminal behavior possibly resulted due to an overactive superego or conscience. As Freud treated patients, he noted several who were suffering from overpowering feelings of guilt and who committed crimes so that they might be apprehended and punished.[29] Once they had been punished, they experienced almost immediate relief from the guilt which they had been carrying. As a counterpoint argument, Freud provided an alternative proposition: in the case of an individual being described above feeling unbearable guilt, perhaps it was because that person's conscience was not too strong, but instead, too weak, and as a result, was unable to resist or control the impulses of the id. If one or both parents are absent in this person's childhood and no other person is available to provide nurturing care, life guidance and to set reasonable limits, Freud believed that the absence of such structure could lead to an unrestrained id and lead straight to a path of delinquency.

The psychoanalytic theory of criminality subscribes to the notion that there are three possible causes behind one's engagement in criminal acts:

1. A conscience so overbearing that it arouses feelings of guilt, as described above.
2. A conscience so weak that it cannot control the individual's criminal impulses.
3. The individual's need for immediate gratification.

Regarding this third element, a defect in the character formation of delinquents may drive them to satisfy their desires immediately, regardless of the presence of sure consequences. This urge is attributed to the id by psychoanalysts, and is so strong that any personal relationships the individual makes with others is important only as a means to an end to achieve the act of gratification. The individual doesn't necessarily care about the wholesomeness or long-term intentions of a relationship–they are only concerned with the immediate gratification they are seeking, and little, if anything more, beyond it.

Other examples exist of psychological theories supporting the roots of criminal behavior, including the well-studied Maternal Deprivation and Attachment Theory.[30] To further examine psychological theories involving Maternal Deprivation and Attachment Theory, baby monkeys were given a choice between two artificially-constructed "monkeys." One monkey, made from raw, uncovered cage wire, was equipped to dispense milk. The other was made from cage wire as well, but was covered in soft fabric. That monkey did not deliver milk. The monkeys interacted with the monkey with soft fabric. Criminologists believe that is because the feeling of warmth, comfort, safety and security were more important than even food was. So, how does this relate to the study of crime? Many years of research shows that the development of social and emotional maternal bonds emerge shortly after the birth of any mammal, and the strength of this bond deeply affects the child's ability to form social attachments to others throughout their lifetime. Case in point: when an outside influence, such as a street gang, provides motivation for enhanced self-esteem, peer acceptance and economic opportunities through crime, impressionable youth who have lacked acceptance in their lives, often will gravitate to the offer.

Criminologists have searched for biological explanations for criminal behavior. Recent advances in science and technology have led to a broad acceptance that biology is certainly a factor in criminal behavior, but is admittedly only one piece to the puzzle. One prominent report, published by the criminologist Adrian Raine et al., introduced in 1997 the concept that criminal behavior springs from some flaw or defect in an individual's biological makeup, after hypothesizing that there would be significant differences in the brain activity in the prefrontal cortex of the brain.[31] As an example, Raine et al. hypothesized that the prefrontal cortex in a murderer should have lower activity visibly demonstrated. After conducting a study using Positron Emissions Technology (PET) scans to compare the brains of two groups (convicted murderers who had pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, and non-murderers), their hypothesis was confirmed. Raine et al. concluded that the study suggests there may be some biological factors that make some individuals more predisposed to committing violent acts. They listed three general areas for focus on biological explanations for crime:

1. Criminal behavior is a function of heredity, passed down generationally at the chromosome level. One example of note is the XYY chromosomal deviation.
2. Neurotransmitter dysfunction–perhaps explained by a chemical imbalance in the person's system, creating a biochemical triggering of aggressive or hostile behavior..
3. Brain abnormality, which could occur as a result of either heredity or neurotransmitter dysfunction, or resulting from brain trauma.

Figure 4.3.9: Criminological Theory – Early Positivism/ Photo Credit: Wellcome Images, CC BY 4.0

Other studies are either mentioned or, in some cases, summarized, regarding the development of a text and learning curricula geared to this level. The subject matter covered includes: "Wilson's 'sociobiology' [1975 study], identical twin studies, the XYY chromosomal deviation, premenstrual syndrome, the male hormone correlation with violent crime, biological origins of schizophrenia and alcoholism, temporal lobe epilepsy, and biochemical triggering of hostile behavior."[32] Of note, these extensive studies have laid the groundwork for criminal defense strategies, similar to that of an insanity defense, by claiming that a genetic or biological defense should be considered in order to mitigate criminal responsibility in a case of deviant criminal behavior.

The Chicago School

Think about crimes of opportunity: doesn't it seem that normal people might be tempted to commit a crime of shoplifting, for example, if the storekeeper disappeared out of view for a brief time, and there were no cameras to capture the image of the thief? In this regard, you see normal persons responding as we might expect to the immediate situation. What is lacking here are personal values and a moral compass–knowing the difference between right and wrong, and exercising self-control to not commit the crime. The theorists of the **Chicago School** subscribed to this idea, as opposed to believing that abnormal persons acted out some sort of individual sickness, leading them to commit criminal acts.[33] The Chicago School of criminologists further believed that systemic social disorganization might be the underlying cause of the problem in a criminalized area, and the only way to correct this would be through assisting the community in ways that could lead to a reduction of crime.

In 1934, the Chicago Area Project was initiated to study the effects and potential arising out of reorganization of the neighborhood. Backing the project were two well-known criminologists, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, representing the Institute for Juvenile Research (1942). The project attempted to coordinate existing community action and support groups, including schools, churches, labor unions, clubs and businesses. Recreational venues, increased and localized presence of law enforcement, and upgrades to neighborhood schools, were instituted with the intent to control delinquency. An extended benefit of the project were improvements to community sanitation and the general appearance of the areas of the city involved.

A look back fifty years later to the outcomes derived from the city of Chicago's first community-based delinquency program offered a dose of reality and modest success.[34] South Chicago, the city's largest area targeted, remained very much like it did fifty years before. Although pollution from the area's surrounding steel mills had been cleaned up, the visible examples and on-ground reminders of urban decay were not. Boarded-up buildings, trash-littered vacant lots, and severely deteriorated housing units characterized the areas that Shaw and McKay originally targeted for improvement.

Figure 4.3.10: An illustration of the Burgess Concentric Zone model, developed in 1925 by Edward Burgess. This model attempts to provide an urban planning analysis on cities, moving through five demographic zones from a rural perimeter toward a central business district. Each named zone contains characteristics unique to the others, even though there are common themes within them. /Photo Credit: Nicholas Malara, for WA Open ProfTech, © SBCTC, CC BY 4.0

Edward Burgess created the Concentric Zone Model shown above.[35] The original Concentric Zone Model contained only five zones; a sixth zone was added later (the "Factory Zone", due to the relocation of industrial components closer to the city center for efficiency). This zone may or may not apply to all situations. The circles included:

1. The Center Core, known as the **Central Business District** of a city. This area was considered largely unsuitable for long-term housing, and consisted of government buildings, retail establishments, etc.
2. The **Factory Zone:** as mentioned above.
3. The **Zone of Transition**. This area lies just outside the Central Business. The Zone of Transition is the zone where we are largely concerned with criminogenic behavior. As soon as people are able to move out of this zone, they do.
4. District, and is mixed-use in nature. This zone frequently has a diverse population, to include both low-income residents and

some businesses.
5. The **Zone of Independent Workers' Homes**: traveling further from the Central Business District one encounters this zone, readily identifiable by older houses and small apartments. The residents of this zone are typically middle-class working folks who hold jobs in the factories or are manual laborers. Some small shops and services may be available for convenience of those living in this zone.
6. Moving further out, one finds the **Zone of Better Residences**. As the name implies, you will find larger and nicer homes here, and their occupants are, by and large, middle-class families. The area tends to be more spacious, and parks, schools, and certain recreational or entertainment venues may be found here. This zone tends to be generally quieter, and has fewer businesses.
7. The **Commuter Zone** is the outer ring of the model. This zone generally finds people who hold jobs in the city, but who prefer to have more space as well as peace and quiet. Residences in this zone are typically detached, and garden spots or mini-farms are present in many cases. This zone is less populated than the others, although larger shopping centers, supermarkets, and strip malls are present, to cater to the needs of the residents.

Consider the area in which you reside, or places you frequent. In which zone would you consider your residence to be located? Does the Burgess Concentric Zone Model apply well to the area in which you currently live? Are there major differences, such as evidence that certain zones are hard to differentiate or don't exist at all?

The Chicago Area Project remains in place, working in any ways it can to act as a self-help group, committed mainly to community treatment of juvenile delinquency. Its mission has not changed over the 86 years of its existence: "To work toward the prevention and eradication of juvenile delinquency through the development and support of affiliated local community self-help efforts in communities where the need is greatest."[36] Working in cooperation with Mayor Lightfoot's INVEST South/West commercial corridor improvement strategy, it is one of ten priority communities taking part in the upgrade. However, critics argue that little has been done to improve the safety proposition for juveniles, as over 283 youth have been the victims of firearms in 2022, with 33 deaths tallied among that number.[37] Indeed, in February 2023, Mayor Lightfoot was voted out of office. Her inability to achieve a second term was the first time in forty years this had occurred in Chicago. The Burgess model, however, has seen its applicability challenged when attempts to apply it in other complex settings are made. The reasons often are that those who wish to apply this model try to do so based upon locations of ethnic or racial geographic distribution in and around an urban area, rather than considering the more appropriate socio-economic considerations in their application.

Considering Other Criminological Theories

It is simply not possible, within the scope of this textbook, to identify and sufficiently cover all of the possible explanations for crime and criminal conduct. As you can see from the entries above, myriad theories, supported and unsupported concepts, and geopolitical biases, try to explain crime causation and predisposition to crimes while looking through various spectacles–and not all are positive. Some theories have attempted to integrate ideas from other theorists' work, and indeed over time some have collaborated to investigate their joint creations to a further extent. They hope to arrive at a new, more satisfactory, explanation of crime and criminal behavior that is evinced in their new model.

Social Reaction and Labeling Theories

In childhood, you may have heard the rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break one's bones, but words will never hurt me." Over your lifetime, your viewpoint may change on this matter. Words are impactful. They carry power and meaning, and one of the most harmful things we as a society can do to an individual is to apply a label to them. Adversely labeling someone carries negative connotations, and often consequences, because of the way family, neighborhoods, communities and indeed, society, views the individual. People will react to what they hear, often without substantiating the source. Were there circumstances beyond the control of the labeled individual so significant that they could not be overcome? Was the person a mere victim of circumstances? Was the label contrived in order to gain some sort of social leverage over the person by someone else seeking to climb a social or political ladder? Meanings behind the derogatory words or labels may be culturally appropriated or created through harmless interaction with friends or from within a peer group. Tastes are cultivated in this manner as well–the fashion brands we choose to wear, the brands of food and drink, as examples. We become associated with these meanings, and build a currency–a status–by our choices.

How does this relate to crime? Not everyone who breaks the law is apprehended. Even if they are, not everyone is then labeled as a criminal or deviant. This is mainly due to the social construct of crime. A crime in one part of Washington state may be viewed as serious, but less seriously taken if the same crime is committed in other parts of the state, and vice versa. Expanding this concept nationally, there can be significantly greater gaps. As an example, simple use and possession of cannabis is prohibited

under federal law, but individual states in increasing numbers are legalizing recreational use of marijuana. What is then legally permitted under Washington state law[38] may be illegal in Idaho, Wyoming and South Carolina.

What if a person is labeled? Are they likely to be treated as a criminal? A repetitive reminder of one's minor criminal involvement in a minor first-time shoplifting offense might cause the individual to adopt that label for the rest of his or her days. Becoming so ingrained by this belittling, unhelpful attitude demonstrated by others can cause the labeled person to delve deeper and deeper into criminal behavior. The labeling effect works both ways, however. Telling someone they are a very good speaker in front of audiences might be all it takes for that person to take steps to improve so as to become an even better, more confident orator. Similarly, telling someone they can't do anything right, can lead the person to internalize the label and withdraw, never feeling confident enough to try even the simplest task. Their belief would be, "Why should I try? I'll only fail."

Man with pink mohawk style hair

Figure 4.3.11: Punks: Labeling theory argues that people, such as punks, become deviant as a result of people forcing that identity upon them and then adopting the identity./ Photo Credit: Ricardo Murad, CC BY 3.0

In an important 1989 study relevant to corrections, Braithwaite studied some of the ideas mentioned above in the context of reintegrative shaming.[39] Braithwaite believed, as many of us do, that not every social reaction to a situation is severe or cold-hearted. In fact, some reactions can be uplifting and beneficial. In this way, it is the quality of social responses that is most significant, an acknowledgment to "words matter," as does tone of voice, timeliness and other factors.

Shaming in modern society takes two forms: stigmatizing or reintegrative. Stigmatizing, of course, carries a most negative connotation–harsh punishment, deep psychological hurt, and a degradation of a person's bond to their family and community. In the community corrections realm, stigmatizing shaming is counter-productive, drawing a sharp divide between the offender and the community. Since the focus on reintegrative shaming is on forgiveness, personal dignity, love and a notion that the person can redeem themselves, it carries the most powerful potential for successful reintegration into society. The United States, as in some other countries, seems to appreciate stigmatizing shaming, unfortunately, as we continue down a failed path of labeling. "Stigmatizing shaming propels people towards crime whereas reintegrative shaming seeks to correct the behavior through respect and empathy."[40]

After the conclusion of World War II, it was anticipated that the United States would experience major growth in areas of the economy, culture and politics. However, Americans were taken aback by the political turmoil occurring inside and outside of the country. An entire generation of sociological scholars expressed their disenchantment with society, and importantly, with the more mainstream and traditional theories ascribed to why crimes occurred. Over the next several decades, a host of sociologists, psychologists, professionals in law and justice, and interested others, attempted to pinpoint the source of criminal behavior.

Finally, in 2018, three collaborating criminologists, Cullen, Agnew and Wilcox, who had been studying the events of the time forward, opined that critical theories of crime shared five central themes.[41] Those central themes include:

First, to understand crime, one must appreciate the fusion between power and inequality. People with power, political and economic, have an enormous advantage in society. Second, crime is a political concept. Not all those who commit crime are caught, nor are those who are caught punished. The poor are injured the most by the enforcement of laws, while the affluent (i.e., powerful) are treated leniently. Third, the criminal justice system and its agents serve the ruling class, the capitalists . . . Fourth, the root cause of crime is capitalism because capitalism ignores the poor and their atrocious living conditions. Capitalism demands profits and growth over values and ethical considerations. Perhaps this is why crimes of the streets are punished more severely than crimes of the suites. Finally, critical theories believe the solution to crime is a more equitable society, both politically and economically.[42]

In the words of wisdom passed down through generations, we each have traveled our own pathways in life, experienced our own unique situations, thought our own thoughts. This personal time travel creates an opportunity for us to formulate our own opinions on matters such as crime, criminal behavior, and the community's role (if any) in society's governance. The question is: Why do you think someone commits crime?

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5: UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain how research questions guide criminal justice studies.
- Demonstrate the habits of an evidence-informed practitioner by critically evaluating research claims rather than accepting them at face value.
- Use research questions, variables, and findings to better understand criminal justice policies, programs, and practices.
- Apply concepts such as variables, units of analysis, correlation, and causation when reading criminal justice research.
- Evaluate whether a researcher's conclusions are supported by the evidence presented.
- Recognize alternative explanations that may affect research findings.
- Ask critical questions about claims that one factor caused another.
- Explain the difference between correlation and causation.
- Differentiate between positive and negative correlations.
- Interpret basic relationships between variables described in research findings.
- Recognize the level of analysis used in a criminal justice study.
- Differentiate between micro-, meso-, and macro-level research.
- Identify the unit of analysis in a research study.
- Recognize the difference between independent and dependent variables.
- Explain how researchers define and measure abstract concepts.
- Identify the concepts, variables, and measures used in a research study.
- Differentiate between a topic, a research question, and a hypothesis.
- Recognize when a study includes a hypothesis and explain its purpose.
- Explain how literature reviews help researchers build on existing knowledge.
- Identify the research question a study is trying to answer.

When people hear the term research methods, they often think about learning how to design studies, collect data, and conduct research. Many research methods textbooks are organized with that goal in mind because they are written for students who plan to become researchers. While understanding how research is conducted is important, the primary goal of this course is different. Most of you are not preparing to spend your careers conducting research studies. Instead, you are preparing for careers in criminal justice where you will need to read research, make sense of it, and use it to inform professional decisions.

Because of that, this section is organized from the perspective of a research consumer rather than a researcher. As you work through research articles in this course, you will encounter certain concepts repeatedly. Researchers begin by identifying a question they want to answer within a topic and, in many cases, a hypothesis they want to test. They then identify what they are studying, who or what they are studying, and what their findings reveal about the relationships between different factors. Understanding these concepts will help you follow a study's logic and better understand what the researcher is trying to tell you.

This section will walk you through those ideas in the same general order that you are likely to encounter them when reading research. Along the way, you will learn how to identify research questions, understand hypotheses, recognize variables and units of analysis, and think critically about claims of correlation and causation. These are not just research concepts. They are practical tools that can help you evaluate information, ask better questions, and avoid being misled by unsupported claims. As a future criminal justice professional, these skills will help you become a more thoughtful consumer of research and a more informed decision-maker in the field.

5.1: Understanding Questions and Predictions

5.2: Understanding What Researchers Study

5.3: Understanding Relationships in Research

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5.1: Understanding Questions and Predictions

Topics

Research projects usually grow out of a question or area of interest.[1] Researchers usually start with questions or observations about the world around them when they develop social science research projects. This is known as a **topic** or area of interest, or a subject the researcher might be interested in learning more about. Topics can be very broad. The researcher then moves from a topic to a question that can be answered through scientific research. In criminal justice, research topics often center on issues such as policing, corrections, victimization, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, recidivism, or crime prevention. It is important to remember, however, that criminal justice topics are not limited to criminal justice publications. Because criminal justice issues are connected to many aspects of society and human behavior, researchers often study these topics within other disciplines. For example, a topic such as police stress may be examined in psychology research, while a topic such as poverty and crime may be studied in sociology or economics. Similarly, topics related to rehabilitation, treatment, or reentry may be explored in social work research. As you begin researching criminal justice topics, you should expect to find valuable information in a variety of disciplines, not just in sources specifically labeled as criminal justice.

Research Questions

Research design is the planning process for a scientific study, which typically involves a thorough review of relevant literature, the formulation of a focused research question, and a detailed proposal for the method and approach that will be used to answer the question.[2] This part of a published research study may not take you long to read, but the researcher needed to create a research question from the topic, which can be a lengthy process. Transforming a topic into a research question takes significant work on the researcher's part.[3] A research question is a question that can be answered using scientific knowledge, which includes collecting and analyzing data.[4] The research question is crucial to a research project because it gives the researcher a "road map" for the design of their study.[5] Researchers will often develop a "working research question" as they begin their research because it is likely to change. Most often, when you are reading research findings, you only see what the researcher finally decided on.

Identifying the research question helps readers understand the purpose of a study and what the researcher is trying to find out. When you know the research question, it is easier to follow the rest of the study because you can see how the literature review, methods, findings, and conclusions all connect to answering that question. Some things to think about when identifying a high-quality research question:[6]

1. **Research questions are actually questions or a set of questions, not just a topic.** Example: The death penalty is a topic. What do students think about the death penalty? is a research question.
2. **Research questions should be focused on a particular aspect of the topic the researcher wants to understand.** When looking at a research question, you may think it is awfully specific, but researchers refine their question to narrow the focus to make it a feasible research project. Using the example above, the researcher may narrow down their questions about what students think about the death penalty to: How do criminal justice students' opinions of whether the death penalty should be legal compare to other students' opinions on the subject? This allows the researcher to compare two different groups (criminal justice majors versus students with different majors).
3. **Research questions cannot be answered with a simple yes or no answer.** If the researcher simply asked, "Do criminal justice majors support the death penalty?" it would not leave much for the researcher to discover or add to the existing collection of knowledge. For this reason, researchers tend to avoid yes-or-no research questions.
4. **Research questions should have more than one plausible answer.** In addition to avoiding yes or no questions, a high-quality research question will have more than one plausible answer. Using the death penalty example, does the college major influence perception of the death penalty, or are there other factors such as political or religious beliefs that impact their opinions? Questions with predetermined or obvious answers do not require investigation, while questions with multiple possible answers allow researchers to objectively examine evidence and discover what the data actually show.

Identifying the research question also helps you read more critically. As you work through the study, you can ask whether the researcher actually answered the question, whether the evidence supports the conclusions, and whether there may be alternative explanations for the findings. As stated above, the research question serves as a roadmap for the researcher, but it is also a

roadmap for the reader. Identifying it helps readers understand where the research is headed and why it matters.

Literature Review

One important part of a researcher's decision on a research question and research design is reviewing the research already available on this topic.[7] A **literature review** is a comprehensive survey of what has been written about a particular topic, theory, or research question.[8] Before conducting a new study, researchers examine what other researchers have found by reading academic journal articles, books, and other credible sources. Typically, researchers explain the findings of a literature review in one section of their published study, but they review existing literature at many points during the research process.[9] Researchers review previous studies for three main reasons: (1) to understand what is already known about a topic, (2) to identify the important researchers, theories, and findings related to that topic, and (3) to discover questions that have not yet been fully answered or areas where more research is needed.[10]

For readers, the literature review provides important context. It helps you understand the background of the issue being studied, the theories that may explain it, and how the current study builds on earlier research. When you read a research article, the literature review can help you determine whether the researcher is making reasonable claims and whether the study addresses an important question.

As an evidence-informed criminal justice professional, the literature review can also help you see the "big picture." A single study provides only one piece of evidence. A literature review can also be a valuable resource for readers who want to learn more about a topic. In literature reviews, researchers cite the studies, books, and other sources they used. The literature review of the study you are reading can point you to additional research that may be useful to read and examine. If a particular study, theory, or finding interests you, the literature review often provides a starting point for finding other credible sources and gaining a deeper understanding of the topic. The literature review shows how that study fits into a larger conversation among researchers and can help you understand whether the findings support, challenge, or add to what is already known about a topic.

Hypotheses

Next, we are going to bring the text back to hypotheses. As you recall, a hypothesis is a specific, testable prediction about what a researcher expects to find in a study. Not every research study, however, includes a hypothesis. Researchers typically develop a hypothesis when they want to examine whether a relationship exists between two or more factors or whether one factor may influence another. For example, a researcher might hypothesize or predict that individuals who participate in a cognitive behavioral treatment program will have lower recidivism rates than individuals who do not participate in the program. The hypothesis gives the researcher a prediction to test and helps guide the design of the study.

Hypotheses are most common in quantitative studies, where researchers use numerical data to test relationships and compare groups.[11] These studies often seek to explain why something happens or determine whether a particular factor is associated with a specific outcome. Remember, not all research is designed to test predictions. Often qualitative studies do not include or identify a hypothesis. Some studies are conducted to describe a population, document a trend, or explore a topic that is not yet well understood. In these cases, researchers may use only a research question and not develop a formal hypothesis.

For example, an exploratory study might seek to understand how probation officers view a new supervision strategy. A descriptive study might examine the characteristics of individuals participating in a diversion program or describe trends in crime within a community. Because the goal of these studies is to explore or describe rather than test a specific prediction, a hypothesis may not be necessary. As you read research, do not assume that every study will include a hypothesis. Instead, focus on understanding what the researcher is trying to accomplish. Whether a study is describing, exploring, or explaining a topic will often determine whether a hypothesis is used.

Hypotheses are most commonly found in explanatory or applied research because these types of studies often test predictions about relationships, effects, or outcomes. Remember, explanatory research asks questions that deal with why something happens and tries to explain it. This allows researchers to make predictions based on previous research literature and their research questions. Applied research seeks to solve a practical problem or evaluate a program, policy, or practice. These types of studies frequently include hypotheses where the researcher predicts the outcome related to the program, policy, or practice.

If a study is trying to explain something or test whether something works, it will often include a hypothesis (prediction). If a study is trying to describe or explore a topic, it may not need one.

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1. (Williams, 2022).
2. (Chen et al., 2024).
3. (Williams, 2022).
4. (Williams, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).
5. (Chen et al., 2024).
6. (Williams, 2022).
7. (Chen et al., 2024).
8. (Hassan et al, 2025).
9. (Williams, 2022).
10. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
11. (Chen et al., 2024).

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5.2: Understanding What Researchers Study

Once researchers have developed a research question and, in some cases, a hypothesis, they must decide what information they need to collect to answer that question or test that prediction. This is where variables and units of analysis become important. For criminal justice students, understanding variables and units of analysis is important because these concepts help you understand exactly what a researcher is studying and what conclusions can reasonably be drawn from the findings. When reading a research article, it is easy to focus on the results and overlook how the study was designed. However, identifying the variables tells you what factors or characteristics were measured, while identifying the unit of analysis tells you who or what was actually studied. Together, these concepts provide important context for interpreting the research accurately.

As a future criminal justice practitioner, you will likely encounter research that is used to support policies, programs, and professional practices. Knowing how to identify variables and units of analysis will help you read that research more critically, recognize its limitations, and make better-informed decisions. These skills are an important part of information literacy because they allow you to move beyond simply accepting research findings and instead understand how those findings were developed and what they really mean.

Concepts & Conceptualization

A **concept** is the notion, mental image, or general idea that comes to mind when we think about a particular topic.[1] Concepts help us organize and understand the world around us by grouping together related ideas, characteristics, or observations. Concepts help us think about complex issues, but they are often too abstract to measure directly. For example, consider the concept of emergency service demand in a 911 dispatch center. When you hear that phrase, you might think about the number and types of calls a dispatch center receives, such as medical emergencies, traffic crashes, domestic disturbances, burglaries, welfare checks, or suspicious activity reports. However, different people may have different ideas about what "emergency service demand" means. Some may focus on the total number of calls received, while others may focus on the types of emergencies being reported, the severity of incidents, or the amount of dispatcher time and resources required to handle those calls. People may understand the concept differently, so researchers must clearly define what they mean by emergency service demand before they can measure and study it.

Concepts can be interpreted in different ways. Without understanding how a researcher has defined key concepts, it would be nearly impossible for readers to understand the meaning of that researcher's findings and conclusions.[2] Researchers must clearly define what they mean when they use a particular concept. This process of clearly and concretely defining a concept is called **conceptualization**. Through conceptualization, researchers explain exactly how they understand a concept and identify the specific aspects they want to examine. Once a concept has been clearly defined, researchers can determine how to measure it and use it in a study. When reading a research study, it is important to remember that the meaning you associate with a concept may not be the same as the meaning intended by the researcher. For this reason, readers should pay attention to how the researcher defines a concept. Understanding the researcher's definition helps ensure that you accurately understand the study and its conclusions.

Operationalization

Once a researcher has defined, or conceptualized, a concept, exactly how did they measure it?[3] This is done through a process known as operationalization. **Operationalization** is the process of turning a concept into something that can be observed and measured.[4] Research studies begin by clearly defining a concept and then how the researcher measured it. Finally, they identify specific **indicators**, which are the observations or pieces of information that represent the concept. Because many concepts are complex, researchers often use several indicators rather than relying on a single measure.

For example, a researcher may be interested in the concept of recidivism. You have likely discussed recidivism in previous classes. What comes to mind when you hear that term? Before recidivism can be studied, the researcher must decide exactly what it means for the purposes of the study. This process, known as conceptualization, might involve defining recidivism as a return to criminal behavior after a person has been sanctioned or released from custody. The researcher must then decide how recidivism will be measured, the process known as operationalization. One researcher might measure recidivism as being arrested again within three years of release from prison, while another might measure it as being convicted of a crime within

two years. The specific measures used, such as rearrests or reconvictions, serve as indicators of the concept. As a reader, it is important to understand how the researcher measured recidivism because different definitions and measurements may lead to different findings and conclusions.

Often researchers will identify indicators by turning to the information they discovered during their literature review. Previous studies include specific examples of how others have defined important concepts.[5] You may see a new research study explaining the definition of a concept or indicator the same way another study does. Researchers may also develop new definitions or indicators that improve or expand on other ones.

Variables

Now that you are familiar with how researchers move from broad concepts to specific measures, we can take a closer look at variables. **Variables** are the characteristics, factors, or conditions that researchers measure in a study.[6] A variable is something with a quality or quantity that can vary. They are called variables because they can differ from one person, group, place, or situation to another. Each variable consists of possible values or categories, called **attributes**.[7] One way to connect variables and attributes is to think of a variable as a grouping of two or more characteristics, and of attributes as the characteristics that represent the values or categories of a variable.[8] This may be easier to picture with a non-criminal justice example first.

A simple example of a variable is hair color. Hair color is a variable because it can be different from one person to another. Some people have brown hair, some have blonde hair, some have black hair, and others have red or gray hair.

The different possible characteristics of the variable are called attributes. In this example, the variable is hair color, and the attributes are brown, blonde, black, red, gray, and any other hair colors included in the study. Researchers could record a person's hair color by selecting the attribute that applies to that individual. This example shows that a variable is simply something that can vary, while attributes are the specific categories or values that the variable can take.

An example within criminal justice would be offense level. Offense level is a variable because different individuals may be convicted for different levels of offenses. The attributes of this variable might include felony, misdemeanor, and non-criminal infraction (ticket or forfeiture). A researcher studying cases handled by a state circuit court might record the offense level for each case. In this example, offense level is the variable, and felony, misdemeanor, and non-criminal infraction are the attributes. Just like hair color, an offense level can vary from one case to another, which makes it a variable.

When you read a research study, variables tell you what is being measured, and attributes show the different categories or values within that variable. Identifying variables and attributes can help you make better sense of research findings. It allows you to see exactly what the researcher studied, how information was organized, and how different groups were compared. As a future criminal justice professional, these skills will help you read research more confidently, evaluate claims more carefully, and make decisions based on evidence rather than assumptions.

Levels of Measurement

The next step is understanding how those variables are measured. Researchers can measure variables in different ways depending on the type of information they are collecting. Levels of measurement are the way attributes of a variable are related to one another.[9] Based on their characteristics, variables are generally categorized into one of four possible levels of measurement: nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio.

Nominal – Nominal variables place people, objects, or cases into categories. The categories have names, but there is no ranking or order. An example of a nominal level is eye color. There are categories (blue, green, hazel, etc.) but no ranking order. An example in criminal justice is type of crime. There are categories of crime (violent, property, drug, public order) but no ranking order.

Ordinal – Ordinal variables place people, objects, or cases into categories that can be ranked from low to high, but the distance between categories is not necessarily equal. An example of an ordinal variable could be a grading scale. A (90% to 100%), B (80% to 89%), C (70% to 79%), D (50% to 69%), and F (Below 50%). The categories have a ranking, but the distance between the categories does not have to be equal. Note: D and F are larger than the others but still fall into the ranking order from high to low. In criminal justice, a risk assessment may rank offenders by their likelihood of reoffending. Offenders may fall into categories of risk levels such as low (1 to 10 points), medium (11 to 20 points), medium high (21 to 26 points), or high (26 points or higher).

Again, these rankings go from high to low, but the category measurements (number of points) vary, making them ordinal.

Interval – Interval variables are numeric measurements that have equal distances between attribute values, but they do not have a true zero point. Temperature is a great example of an interval variable. Temperature is measured in Fahrenheit or Celsius. The difference between 40 and 50 degrees is the same as the difference between 70 and 80 degrees. However, 0 degrees does not mean there is no temperature, which is why this is an interval measure. Interval variables are less common in criminal justice research than nominal, ordinal, and ratio variables.

Ratio – Ratio variables are numerical measures with equal distances between values and a true zero point. Years of formal education (being in school) can be measured. There is equal distance between measurements (as a year is always the same length), and there is an absolute zero (having not been in school at all yet). This can translate into a criminal justice example: number of times arrested. Each time arrested counts as one (this is equal... someone cannot be half arrested), but there are people who have never been arrested and would fall into the 0 (true zero) category.

In a research class for future researchers, levels of measurement would be covered in much more detail. As a consumer of research, having a basic understanding of levels of measurement can help you recognize the differences between them when reading a study.

Identifying Who and What is Being Studied

When reading criminal justice research, it is important to pay attention not only to the topic or issue being studied, but also to the people, groups, organizations, or places being studied. Some studies focus on individual people, such as offenders, victims, correctional officers, or probationers. Other studies focus on larger groups, organizations, communities, or even entire populations. Understanding the focus of a study helps readers interpret research findings correctly and avoid drawing conclusions that go beyond what the evidence actually supports.

This skill is especially important for future criminal justice practitioners. Throughout your career, you will likely encounter research that is used to support policies, programs, training, and day-to-day practices. For example, a patrol officer may read a study about factors associated with repeat offending, another study evaluating the effectiveness of a department-wide training program, and yet another examining crime trends across an entire state. Although all three studies may be relevant, they focus on different things and answer different questions. Understanding who or what is being studied helps you determine whether the findings are applicable and if they apply to an individual, an agency, a community, or a broader criminal justice issue.

Levels of Analysis

In the hard sciences, researchers can study phenomena at very different levels – from stars to planets, to microscopic cells and microbes.[10] In a similar way, social scientists study the social, and in many of our cases the criminal, world using different levels of analysis. Criminal justice research can examine issues at different levels, from individual people to larger groups, communities, and entire populations. The three broad levels of analysis are micro, meso, and macro.

Micro – Studies focused on individuals. When researchers study individual people, they are focusing on the smallest level of analysis. In criminal justice, this might involve studying individuals such as officers or jurors. For example, a researcher might examine whether participation in a treatment program affects an individual's likelihood of reoffending, or whether participation in a victim support program affects a victim's satisfaction with the criminal justice process. In these studies, the individual person is the focus of the research.

Meso – Studies focused on groups and organizations. Some research focuses on groups, organizations, or communities rather than individual people. In criminal justice, researchers might study police departments, correctional institutions, specialty courts, schools, neighborhoods, or community organizations. For example, a researcher might compare use-of-force incidents across police departments or examine how different prosecutors' offices make charging decisions. In these studies, the focus is on the group, organization, or community rather than any single individual.

Macro – Studies focused on large systems and populations. Other research examines broader patterns across large populations or social systems. These studies may focus on cities, states, regions, or entire countries. For example, a researcher might compare incarceration rates across states, examine national crime trends, or study how changes in state laws affect criminal justice outcomes. Rather than focusing on individuals or organizations, these studies seek to understand patterns and issues that occur on a larger scale.

As a reader of research, it is important to recognize the level at which a study is focused. This helps you understand what conclusions the researcher can reasonably make and prevents you from applying findings to people, groups, or situations that were not actually studied.

Units of Analysis

You have seen that researchers can study issues at different levels, from individual people to organizations and entire populations; it is important to identify exactly who or what is being studied in a particular research project. This is known as the unit of analysis. The **unit of analysis** helps readers move beyond the general focus of a study and identify the specific person, group, organization, community, or population from which the researcher collected data. Understanding the unit of analysis is important because it helps you determine what conclusions can reasonably be drawn from a study and how broadly those findings can be applied.

When reading a research study, the unit of analysis is the person, group, organization, place, or population that the researcher is ultimately trying to learn about and draw conclusions about.[11] For example, a study may be interested in offenders, police departments, neighborhoods, or states.

Some of the most common categories of units of analysis include:[12]

1. **Individuals** – Focuses on individual people such as witnesses, victims, correctional officers, or probationers
2. **Groups** – Focuses on collections of people who share something in common, such as juries, gangs, or correctional staff (everyone who works in a prison)
3. **Organizations** – Focuses on formal entities such as police departments, courts, correctional institutions, or nonprofit victim services agencies.
4. **Social phenomena** – Focuses on social behavior, interaction, trend, or problem such as crime, voting, substance use, cyberbullying or recidivism.
5. **Policies and principles** – Focuses on laws, policies, procedures, programs, or guiding principles, such as a use-of-force policy, a diversion program, or a state sentencing law.

It is important to acknowledge that the unit of analysis is not necessarily where the information comes from, but the thing the researcher is collecting data about. When you read a research study, one of the easiest ways to identify the unit of analysis is to ask yourself:

Who or what is the researcher trying to learn about and draw conclusions about?

Do not focus on who completed the survey, interview, or questionnaire (methods of collecting data we will talk about soon) right away. Instead, focus on who or what the researcher is ultimately studying. If the study is trying to understand offenders, then offenders is the unit of analysis. If the study is trying to understand police departments, then police departments are the unit of analysis. As you read, look for clues in the research question, purpose statement, and findings. Ask yourself: Are the conclusions being made about people, groups, organizations, communities, or larger populations? The answer will usually point you to the unit of analysis. A good habit is to finish reading the study's purpose and then complete this sentence:

This study is trying to tell me something about _____.

The word or phrase that fills in the blank is often the unit of analysis. It is best to identify this before moving on to the "methodology" or how the research collected data. Once you identify the unit of analysis, it becomes easier to understand what the findings mean and avoid applying the results to people or groups that were not actually studied.

Understanding variables and units of analysis can also help you avoid common mistakes when evaluating research. For example, a study examining neighborhood crime rates is studying neighborhoods, not individual offenders. Likewise, a study examining police departments is not necessarily drawing conclusions about individual officers. By paying attention to the unit of analysis, you can better determine whether the author's conclusions match the data that was collected. Similarly, understanding the variables being measured helps you evaluate whether the study is actually addressing the research question and whether the findings are relevant to a particular criminal justice issue.

1. (Hassan et al., 2025).
2. (Hassan et al., 2025).
3. (Hassan et al., 2025).
4. (Williams, 2022).
5. (Williams, 2022).
6. (Hassan et al., 2025).
7. (Hassan et al., 2025).
8. (Chen et al., 2024).
9. (Hassan et al., 2025).
10. (Chen et al., 2024).
11. (Blackstone, 2012).
12. (Blackstone, 2012).

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5.3: Understanding Relationships in Research

As we have discussed throughout this resource, not all research is designed to explain why something happens. Some studies are conducted simply to describe a situation, population, or trend, while others seek to explore a topic that is not yet well understood. However, many research studies do attempt to explain relationships between factors and answer questions about why certain outcomes occur. When researchers move beyond describing and exploring a topic and begin examining relationships between variables, concepts such as causality and correlation become important. Questions about correlation and causation are most common in explanatory research, where the goal is to understand why something happens, and in applied research, where researchers often evaluate whether a program, policy, or practice produces a desired outcome. So, what are correlations and causation?

Variables Revisited

We have discussed a lot of information about research questions and how they lead to the setup of actual research studies. Before we can discuss relationships, it is important to review the idea of a variable. A variable is any characteristic, condition, or factor that can take on different values when it is measured in research. In criminal justice research, variables might include age, education level, number of prior arrests, job satisfaction, fear of crime, or the amount of time an officer spends on patrol. Researchers use variables to help organize information, answer questions, and better understand what is happening in the real world. Simply put, if something can vary from one person, place, event, or situation to another, it can be considered a variable.

Variables can be used differently depending on the purpose of the research. In exploratory research, researchers are often trying to learn about a topic that is not yet well understood. At this stage, variables may not be clearly defined at the beginning of the study. Instead, researchers use interviews, observations, focus groups, or other methods to identify important concepts and possible variables that deserve further investigation. For example, a researcher exploring stress among correctional officers may discover that staffing levels, workplace culture, and mandatory overtime appear to be important factors. The goal is not necessarily to test these variables but to identify them and develop new questions for future research. Researchers generally do not focus on measuring relationships or establishing causation in exploratory research.

In descriptive research, variables are used to describe people, groups, events, or conditions. The purpose is not to explain why something happens but to provide an accurate picture of what is occurring. For example, a descriptive study might examine the age, gender, education level, and offense types of individuals housed in a county jail. The variables help answer questions such as who, what, when, and where. Descriptive research provides valuable information that can help criminal justice professionals understand the populations and issues they serve. Researchers may look for relationships in descriptive research but do not tend to apply causation.

In explanatory research, variables play a more central role because researchers want to understand relationships between them. Explanatory studies seek to answer questions about why something happens or whether one factor is related to another. For example, a researcher might examine whether participation in a drug treatment program is related to lower rates of recidivism. In this type of study, researchers measure variables and analyze whether changes in one variable are associated with changes in another. Explanatory research moves beyond description and begins investigating possible explanations for observed outcomes. This means explanatory research may identify and explain relationships.

Variables are also important in applied research, which focuses on solving real-world problems and improving professional practice. Applied research often uses findings from exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory studies to evaluate programs, policies, and interventions. For example, a police department may want to know whether a new community policing strategy improves citizen trust or reduces calls for service. Researchers would measure relevant variables before and after the program and use the results to help practitioners make informed decisions. In criminal justice, applied research is especially valuable because it connects research evidence to everyday practice.

As criminal justice professionals, you will often encounter studies that examine whether a relationship exists between variables. These studies are most common in explanatory research and are frequently used in program evaluations and other forms of applied research. Researchers may ask questions such as whether increased patrol visibility is related to lower crime rates, whether educational programs in correctional facilities are related to reduced recidivism, or whether response times are related to citizen satisfaction. How do researchers measure and analyze relationships between variables? Understanding these relationships is an important step toward understanding causality

Relationships

As a criminal justice professional, understanding relationships between variables helps you evaluate whether a policy, program, or intervention might actually make a difference in the outcomes you care about. Causality refers to the idea that one factor may cause or influence another factor.[1] For example, you might want to know whether participation in a diversion program reduces recidivism, whether increased patrol visibility affects crime rates, or whether officer training improves interactions with the public. Answering these questions requires looking at the relationship between different variables. Just because a relationship exists does not mean that researchers can say one thing caused the other.

A variable is anything that can vary or change. When you read a research study, one of the first things to identify is what outcome the study is trying to explain and what factor might be influencing that outcome. Doing this can help you better understand the purpose of the study and the conclusions the researchers are trying to reach.

A simple way to think about it is to ask two questions:

1. What is happening? (the outcome)
2. What might be causing or influencing it? (the possible influence)

The **independent variable** is the factor that might influence or affect something else. A simple way to think about it is as the potential reason for a change.[2] The **dependent variable** is the outcome or result that may be affected by that factor (the independent variable). Often, researchers use more than one independent variable to collectively help us understand the dependent variable.

Going back to our two questions:

1. What is happening? (the outcome) = **Dependent Variable**
2. What might be causing or influencing it? (the possible influence) = **Independent Variable**

Think about a student preparing for a test. The student wants to know whether the amount of time spent studying affects the score earned on the test. In this example, **study time is the independent variable** because it is the factor that may influence something else. The **test score is the dependent variable** because it is the outcome being measured. If students who spend more time studying generally earn higher scores, and students who spend less time studying generally earn lower grades, researchers might conclude that study time is related to test performance.

In simple terms, the independent variable is the possible cause or influence, and the dependent variable is the result or outcome that may change because of it. A helpful way to remember this is that the dependent variable *depends* on the independent variable.

Correlation

After you have identified the independent and dependent variables in a study, the next thing to look for is what the relationship is between the two variables. **Correlation** occurs when two variables are associated with one another.[3] This means that when one is present, the other is also present.

As a future criminal justice professional, you do not need to know the math behind research studies, but it is helpful to understand what researchers are doing. Researchers collect information from many people, cases, or events and look for patterns.[4] They want to know whether two variables appear to be related. For example, a researcher might study whether a defendant's age is related to how jurors assess guilt. The goal is to see whether a pattern exists between the two variables.

Researchers also compare their findings to what previous studies have found.[5] When you read research, focus on the main question being asked: What outcome is the researcher trying to explain, and what factor do they think might be related to that outcome? You do not need to understand the calculations. Instead, focus on whether the researchers found a relationship between the variables and whether the evidence supports their conclusions.

Types of Correlation

When researchers identify a relationship between two variables, they also look at the direction of the relationship.[6] To say that two variables are related, researchers must show that when one variable changes, the other also changes in a predictable way. A **positive correlation** exists when two variables move in the **same direction**. If one variable increases, the other increases. If one decreases, the other decreases. For example, as study time increases, test scores may also increase. A **negative correlation** exists when two variables move in **opposite directions**. If one variable increases, the other decreases. If one decreases, the other increases. For example, as the amount of sleep a person gets decreases, feelings of tiredness may increase.

A simple way to remember this is:

- **Positive correlation = both variables move together.**
- **Negative correlation = the variables move in opposite directions.**

Correlation vs. Causation

When reading research, it is important to pump the brakes before jumping to conclusions. Just because two variables are related does not mean that one variable caused the other. Researchers call the relationship between two variables a correlation. A correlation simply means that the variables appear to be connected in some way. Causation is different. Causation means that one variable actually causes a change in another variable (the result).[7] When researchers claim that an independent variable causes a change in a dependent variable, they need to provide evidence to support that claim.

As a reader of research, there are three important questions you can ask:[8]

1. Does the claim make sense? This is called **plausibility**. In simple terms, is the explanation reasonable? For example, it would not make much sense to claim that ice cream sales cause drowning deaths. However, it is reasonable to think that not wearing a life jacket could increase the risk of drowning. When you read a study, ask yourself, "Does this explanation seem logical?"

2. Did the possible cause happen before the outcome? This is called **temporality**. For something to cause an outcome, it must happen first. For example, if a treatment program is supposed to reduce recidivism, people must participate in the program before researchers measure whether they reoffend. A cause cannot happen after its effect.

3. Could something else explain the relationship? Researchers call this a **spurious relationship**. Sometimes two variables appear to be related, but a third factor is actually responsible. For example, if both ice cream sales and drowning deaths increase during the summer. That does not mean buying ice cream causes drowning. Instead, hot weather leads to more people buying ice cream and more people swimming. When reading research, ask yourself, "Could there be another explanation for this relationship?"

As an evidence-informed criminal justice professional, these three questions can help you evaluate research claims. If a study says that a program, policy, or practice caused a particular outcome, ask: Does the explanation make sense? Did the cause come before the outcome? Could another factor explain the results? The more confidently a study can answer "yes" to the first two questions and "no" to the third, the stronger the evidence for causation.

Conclusion

Throughout this section, you learned that researchers begin with questions they want to answer and goals they want to achieve. Depending on the purpose of the study, they may be trying to explore a new issue, describe a problem, explain why something happens, or determine whether a program or practice is effective. To answer these questions, researchers gather evidence and examine relationships between different factors and outcomes.

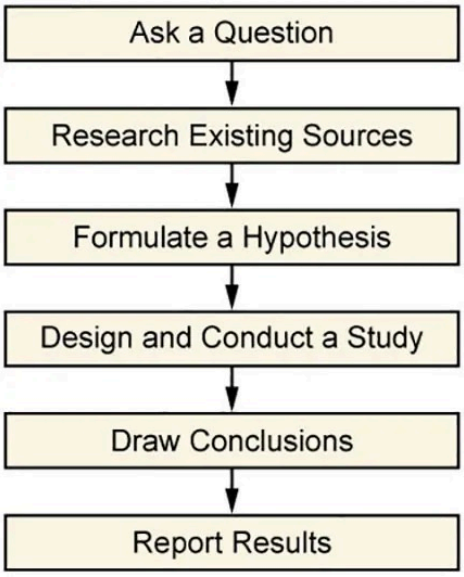


Figure 5.3.1: The Scientific Method. (Reproduced from Conerly et al., 2021, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

As consumers of research, it is important to understand not only what question the researchers are asking but also whether the evidence supports their conclusions. Once researchers have identified their research question and the goal of their study, they must decide how they will collect information and gather evidence to answer that question. The next section examines the different ways researchers conduct their studies and how those choices affect the quality and usefulness of the findings.

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1. (Hassan et al., 2025).
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6: RESEARCH DESIGN IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why research design is important when evaluating criminal justice research.
- Describe the difference between research methodology and research design.
- Explain how research questions influence the choice of research design.
- Recognize the strengths and limitations of different research designs.
- Differentiate between qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches.
- Identify whether a study uses an experimental, quasi-experimental, cross-sectional, or longitudinal design.
- Explain the purpose of treatment groups, control groups, and random assignment in experimental research.
- Recognize why experimental research generally provides stronger evidence of cause and effect than many other designs.
- Differentiate between true experimental and quasi-experimental research.
- Explain what cross-sectional and longitudinal studies can tell researchers about criminal justice issues.
- Recognize the types of conclusions that different research designs can and cannot support.
- Evaluate how well a research design matches the purpose of a study.
- Explain the concepts of validity and reliability and why they matter when evaluating research findings.
- Recognize how research safeguards, such as random assignment and blinding, can increase confidence in research findings.
- Explain the importance of replication in building confidence in research evidence.
- Assess the strength of evidence presented in a criminal justice study based on its design.
- Ask critical questions about how research findings were produced before accepting conclusions.
- Differentiate between stronger and weaker forms of evidence used to support criminal justice policies, programs, and practices.
- Use knowledge of research design to evaluate the credibility and usefulness of criminal justice research.
- Demonstrate the habits of an evidence-informed practitioner by considering how evidence was produced before applying research findings to decision-making.

In the previous chapter, we examined the basic elements that make up a research study. We explored how researchers identify topics, develop research questions, review existing knowledge, define concepts, measure variables, and examine relationships among those variables. These elements provide important information about what a study is trying to understand and how key ideas are being measured.

Understanding these foundational elements is an important first step when reading research. However, identifying the topic, variables, and relationships in a study only tells part of the story. To fully understand research findings, it is also necessary to understand how the study was conducted. The way a study is organized and carried out can influence the conclusions that can be drawn from the results and the amount of confidence readers should place in those conclusions.

When criminal justice professionals encounter research, they should not focus only on the findings. They should also pay attention to how the evidence was produced. Two studies may examine the same issue and collect similar information, but the evidence from one study may be stronger than the evidence from the other. Understanding these differences helps readers become more informed consumers of research and better able to evaluate the evidence presented to them.

As you continue learning about criminal justice research, it is important to move beyond the individual parts of a study and consider how those parts fit together. Looking at the overall structure of a study provides a clearer understanding of what the findings do and do not tell us. This broader perspective helps readers evaluate the quality of research and better understand the evidence that informs criminal justice policy, practice, and decision-making.

6.1: Research Methodology

6.2: Why Research Design Matters

6.3: Research Design Should Match the Research Purpose
6.4: Research Designs in Criminal Justice
6.5: Increasing Trust in Research Findings
6.6: Research Design & Evidence-Informed Practice

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6.1: Research Methodology

Before collecting data, researchers must decide on an overall approach for answering their research question.[1] This overall approach is known as **research methodology**. Methodology includes the strategies and methods researchers use to collect, analyze, and interpret information. Depending on the question being studied, researchers may use quantitative methods, qualitative methods, or a combination of both.

One part of a study's methodology is its research design, which is the specific plan for how the study will be conducted. For example, a researcher may choose an experimental design to test whether a program causes a particular outcome or a longitudinal design to examine how people change over time. The research design should match the research question because different questions require different types of evidence. Understanding the relationship between methodology and research design helps practitioners better understand how research is conducted and how much confidence they should place in a study's findings.

Research Methodology

Methodology is the overall approach to answering a research question, while research design is the specific plan used to carry out that approach.

1. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).

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6.2: Why Research Design Matters

Research findings do not all carry the same weight. Some studies provide stronger evidence than others, and much of that difference comes from the research design used to conduct the study. Research design matters because different research questions require different approaches.[1] A study that seeks to understand people's experiences with a reentry program may use interviews or focus groups (types of data collection discussed in the next chapter), while a study that examines whether the program reduces recidivism may compare outcomes between groups. The design influences what information is collected, how conclusions are drawn, and the types of questions the study can answer.

The research design also affects how much confidence we can place in a study's findings. A design that is well matched to the research question is more likely to produce useful and trustworthy evidence. For this reason, informed consumers of research pay attention not only to a study's results but also to how the study was conducted. Understanding the research design helps practitioners recognize what conclusions are supported by the evidence and what limitations may exist.

As evidence-informed practitioners, you do not need to know how to conduct every type of research study. However, you should understand enough about research design to evaluate the strength of the evidence presented to you. When reading research, one of the most important questions to ask is not simply "What did the researchers find?" but also "How did they find it?" The answer to that question can help you determine how much confidence you should place in the findings and whether they are useful for informing practice and decision-making.

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1. (DeCarlo, 2018).
2. (Bhattacherjee, 2019; DeCarlo, 2018).

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6.3: Research Design Should Match the Research Purpose

In criminal justice, researchers use different designs for different purposes. Some designs are useful for exploring a problem that is not yet well understood.[1] Others are better suited for describing a group, examining patterns, or testing whether a program or intervention produces a particular outcome. No single design is appropriate for every situation. The value of a research study depends, in part, on whether the design fits the question the study is attempting to answer.

Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed-Method

The research question helps determine which research design is most appropriate for a study. Different research questions require different approaches to collecting and analyzing information. For example, a researcher who wants to understand how formerly incarcerated individuals experience the reentry process may use interviews or observations, while a researcher who wants to examine whether a reentry program reduces recidivism may use a survey, an experiment, or another design that allows outcomes to be compared. The type of question being asked should guide the choice of research design.

As you learned earlier, criminal justice researchers may use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches.[3] It is important to remember that these approaches are tools for answering research questions rather than competing ways of conducting research. **Qualitative** approaches are often useful when researchers want a deeper understanding of experiences, perspectives, or social processes. **Quantitative** approaches are often useful when researchers want to measure patterns, compare groups, or examine relationships among variables. In some cases, researchers combine both approaches using a **mixed-method** to gain a more complete understanding of a problem.

No single research design is best for every study.[4] A design that works well for one research question may be a poor choice for another. When evaluating research, practitioners should consider whether the design fits the purpose of the study and whether it allows the researcher to answer the question being asked. Understanding this connection between the research question and the research design helps practitioners better evaluate the strength and usefulness of the evidence they encounter in criminal justice practice.

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1. (Bhattacherjee, 2019; DeCarlo, 2018).
2. (Williams, 2022).
3. (Williams, 2022).
4. (Williams, 2022).

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6.4: Research Designs in Criminal Justice

Research Designs for Studying Cause and Effect

Experimental

Experimental research is used when researchers want to determine whether one thing causes another.[1] In fact, the only way to establish a cause-and-effect relationship with a high degree of confidence is through a properly designed experiment.[2] In everyday life, the word experiment often refers to trying something new, such as a new hairstyle or a new recipe. In research, however, an experiment has a much more specific meaning and must follow certain design requirements.

Experimental research begins with a hypothesis, or a specific prediction about the relationship between variables. This distinguishes experimental research from many other research designs. Researchers conduct experiments to test whether their prediction is supported by the evidence. The hypothesis may be developed through observations of the real world, previous research, theory, or a combination of these sources.

True experiments are designed to test whether an independent variable causes a change in a dependent variable. A true experiment includes three key features: an independent variable that is manipulated by the researcher, a dependent variable that is measured, and random assignment of participants to treatment and control groups (Williams, 2022). To test a hypothesis, researchers compare at least two groups.[3] The **experimental group** (often called the **treatment group**) receives the program, treatment, or intervention being studied, while the **control group** does not. The program, treatment, or intervention is the independent variable, and the outcome being measured is the dependent variable. Researchers then compare the outcomes of the two groups to determine whether the intervention appears to have caused a difference.

Some true experiments also use **pre-tests** and **post-tests**.[4] In these studies, researchers measure participants before the intervention is introduced and then measure them again afterward. Comparing the pre-test and post-test results helps researchers determine whether outcomes changed over the course of the study.

Researchers then compare the outcomes of the two groups to determine whether the intervention appears to have caused a difference.[5] Since the experimental group and control group are designed to be similar in all important ways except for the intervention being studied, researchers can be more confident that differences in outcomes are the result of the intervention rather than chance or other factors.[6] The outcome being measured is the dependent variable. Researchers compare the dependent variable across groups to determine whether the intervention appears to have made a difference.

Random Assignment

A **classic experiment** randomly assigns participants into groups. **Random assignment** means that participants are placed into groups by chance rather than by choice. This helps ensure that the groups are similar at the beginning of the study. As a result, researchers can be more confident that differences in outcomes are due to the intervention rather than other factors. In true experiments, the researcher measures participants before and after they are exposed to the program, treatment, or intervention.[7]

For example, a criminal justice agency might want to know whether a new cognitive-behavioral program reduces recidivism among people on probation. Researchers could place some participants in the new program and compare their outcomes to a similar group that receives standard probation services. If the group that participated in the program has lower recidivism rates, researchers may have evidence that the program contributed to that result.

For practitioners, the greatest strength of a true experimental design is its ability to provide strong evidence about cause and effect.[8] Because participants are randomly assigned to groups, researchers can be more confident that differences in outcomes are the result of the intervention being studied rather than other factors. This makes true experiments one of the strongest types of research for evaluating whether a program, policy, or practice is effective.

True experiments can be difficult to conduct in criminal justice settings. Agencies may face legal, ethical, or practical barriers

that make random assignment impossible. For example, a court may not allow individuals to be assigned to different sanctions by chance, or an agency may be unwilling to deny services to some people simply for research purposes. As a result, although true experiments provide strong evidence, they are relatively uncommon in many areas of criminal justice research.

Quasi-Experimental

A quasi-experimental design is similar to a true experiment in that researchers compare groups to evaluate the effects of a program, policy, or intervention. The key difference is that participants are not assigned to groups randomly. A **quasi-experimental design** is a research design that evaluates the effects of a program, policy, or intervention by comparing groups without using random assignment.

For example, a county may implement a new diversion program for individuals with substance use disorders while a neighboring county continues to use traditional case processing. Researchers could compare recidivism rates between participants in the diversion program and individuals in the neighboring county. If the diversion program participants have lower recidivism rates, the program may appear to be effective.

The challenge is that the two groups may differ in important ways before the study even begins. One county may have different community resources, different population characteristics, or different criminal justice practices. Any of these factors could influence the results. For this reason, quasi-experimental designs generally provide weaker evidence of cause and effect than true experiments. Even so, they are widely used in criminal justice research because they allow researchers to study programs and policies in real-world settings where random assignment is often not possible.

Research Designs for Understanding Change, Trends, and Patterns

Not all research designs are intended to determine whether one thing causes another. While some designs focus on cause-and-effect relationships, others are used to better understand change, trends, and patterns. These designs help researchers describe what is happening, identify relationships among variables, and examine how attitudes, behaviors, or outcomes develop over time. For criminal justice practitioners, these studies can provide valuable information about populations, programs, and issues even when they cannot establish causation.

The following sections introduce two common research designs used for these purposes: cross-sectional designs and longitudinal designs. Each design provides a different way of examining change, trends, and patterns, and each has strengths and limitations that practitioners should understand when evaluating research findings.

Cross-Sectional Designs

A **cross-sectional design** examines people, groups, or issues at one point in time. Researchers typically collect information once, often using a single questionnaire, and use the information to examine relationships between variables.[9] Since all of the information is collected during the same period, a cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of a group's beliefs, behaviors, experiences, or situations at that particular moment.[10] Cross-sectional designs are useful for describing groups, identifying patterns, and examining relationships between variables. However, since the variables are measured at the same time, it is difficult to determine whether one variable caused another.[11]

Cross-sectional designs are most often used in descriptive and explanatory research. In descriptive research, they help researchers describe the characteristics, attitudes, experiences, or behaviors of a group at a particular point in time. In explanatory research, they can be used to examine whether relationships exist between variables. Cross-sectional designs may also be used in applied research when practitioners or agencies need information about a current issue or population. However, because all information is collected at the same time, these designs are generally unable to determine cause-and-effect relationships.

An example of a cross-sectional design used in descriptive research: A researcher surveys correctional officers across Wisconsin to describe their levels of job satisfaction, stress, and perceptions of workplace safety during the current year. The survey is administered one time to provide a picture of current working conditions. The goal is to describe what correctional officers are experiencing rather than explain why those experiences occur.

An example of a cross-sectional design used in explanatory research: A researcher surveys probation officers across

Wisconsin to examine whether there is a relationship between workload and job stress. The survey is administered one time, and the responses are used to determine whether officers with larger caseloads report higher levels of stress. This cross-sectional design can identify a relationship between workload and stress, but it cannot determine whether larger caseloads actually cause higher stress levels.

An example of a cross-sectional design used in applied research: A police department launches a new community policing program and, six months later, surveys community members to assess their perceptions of police legitimacy, trust, and fairness. The survey is administered one time to gather information about community attitudes following the implementation of the program. Department leaders can use the findings to evaluate the program and identify areas for improvement. However, because the information is collected at only one point in time, the study cannot determine whether the community policing program caused the observed attitudes.

Longitudinal Designs

A **longitudinal design** examines how people, groups, or outcomes change over time.[12] Instead of collecting information only once, researchers collect information from the same participants or population at multiple points in time. This allows researchers to see whether attitudes, behaviors, or outcomes change over months, years, or even decades. For example, a researcher interested in criminal behavior might collect information from a group of teenagers and then follow up with the same individuals as adults to see how their behavior changes over time.

Longitudinal designs are useful for studying trends, development, and long-term outcomes. In criminal justice research, they can help researchers better understand issues such as recidivism, victimization, substance use, or career development among criminal justice professionals. Since information is collected at different points in time, longitudinal designs can provide a clearer picture of change than a study conducted only once. However, longitudinal designs do not automatically demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships. Even when one variable is measured before another, researchers must still consider other factors that may have influenced the outcomes.

Longitudinal designs can be used in all four types of research, but they are most commonly associated with descriptive, explanatory, and applied research.

Exploratory Research

Researchers may use a longitudinal design when they are trying to learn more about a topic that is not well understood and want to see how it develops over time.

Exploratory Example: A researcher follows individuals leaving prison over several years to explore the challenges they experience during reentry and identify issues that may need further study.

Descriptive Research

Longitudinal designs are frequently used for descriptive research because they allow researchers to describe changes and trends over time.

Descriptive Example: A researcher follows a group of probation officers for five years and measures their levels of job stress each year to describe how stress changes throughout their careers.

Explanatory Research

Longitudinal designs are often used in explanatory research because measuring variables at different points in time can help researchers better understand how variables are related and how outcomes change over time.

Explanatory Example: A researcher follows individuals released from prison for three years to examine whether stable employment is associated with lower rates of recidivism over time.

Applied Research

Longitudinal designs are also common in applied research because agencies often want to know whether a program, policy, or practice is producing long-term effects.

Applied Research Example: A probation department implements a mentoring program for officers and surveys participants annually for three years to examine changes in job satisfaction and retention. The results can help agency leaders evaluate the program and make decisions about future improvements.

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1. (Bhattachrjee, 2019).
2. (Spielman et al., 2020).
3. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
4. (Williams, 2022).
5. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
6. (Spielman et al., 2020).
7. (Williams, 2022).
8. (Bhattachrjee, 2019).
9. (Williams, 2022).
10. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
11. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
12. (Williams, 2022).
13. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).

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6.5: Increasing Trust in Research Findings

Research findings are not automatically trustworthy simply because they come from a research study. Criminal justice professionals should understand the factors that increase confidence in research findings and help determine how much trust to place in the evidence. Researchers use a variety of methods to strengthen the quality of their studies, including ensuring that measures are valid and reliable, reducing the influence of participants' and researchers' expectations, and examining whether findings can be replicated in other studies. Understanding these concepts helps evidence-informed practitioners evaluate the strength of research and make more informed decisions based on the available evidence.

Validity and Trustworthy Findings

An important factor that increases trust in experimental findings is validity. In simple terms, **validity** refers to whether a study is actually measuring what it claims to measure.[1] If researchers want to measure recidivism, for example, they need to use a measure that accurately reflects recidivism rather than something related to it. If the measure does not accurately represent the concept being studied, the findings may be misleading regardless of how well the rest of the study was conducted.

Treatment and control groups, random assignment (both discussed already in this chapter), and blinding procedures (discussed below) all help strengthen the validity of experimental research. These features increase confidence that the study's findings reflect the true effects of the intervention rather than chance, expectations, or other influences. The more accurately a study measures what it is intended to measure and the more effectively it rules out alternative explanations, the more confidence practitioners can have in the results.[2]

When reading research, criminal justice professionals do not need to calculate measures of validity or understand complex statistical tests. However, they should understand that validity is an important indicator of trustworthiness. A study with strong validity provides greater confidence that its conclusions accurately reflect what is happening in the real world, making the findings more useful for informing criminal justice policy and practice.

Reliability: Are the Measurements Consistent?

When evaluating research, it is important to consider not only whether the findings are valid but also whether the measurements are reliable.[3] **Reliability** refers to the consistency of a measurement. If the same thing is measured multiple times under the same conditions, a reliable measure should produce similar results each time. For example, a properly working scale should give you nearly the same weight each time you step on it. If the results vary widely from one measurement to the next, the measure is not reliable.

Reliability and validity are related, but they are not the same thing.[4] A measurement can be reliable without being valid. For example, a scale that consistently shows a weight that is five pounds too low is reliable because it produces the same result each time, but it is not valid because it does not measure weight accurately. Research measures should be both reliable and valid in order to produce trustworthy findings.

Researchers can improve reliability by using clear and consistent procedures.[5] Questions should be written in simple, unambiguous language so that respondents understand them in the same way. Measurements should focus on things that participants are able to answer accurately. Researchers may also use standardized surveys, forms, or data collection procedures so that information is gathered consistently across participants.

As consumers of research, criminal justice professionals do not need to calculate reliability statistics. However, they should understand the basic idea that research findings are more trustworthy when the measurements used in a study are consistent and dependable. When a study uses reliable and valid measures, practitioners can have greater confidence in the conclusions drawn from the research.

Reducing the Influence of Expectations

Researchers can take additional steps to increase the trustworthiness of experimental findings. One way to do this is by limiting who knows which participants are in the treatment group and which are in the control group.[6] If researchers or evaluators know who received the intervention, their expectations could unintentionally influence how they interpret the results.

In a **single-blind study**, the participants do not know whether they are in the treatment group or the control group, but the researchers do know.[7] For example, researchers evaluating a new offender rehabilitation program might tell participants that they are taking part in a study without telling them whether they are receiving the new program or standard services. This helps ensure that participants' expectations do not influence their behavior or responses during the study.

In a **double-blind study**, neither the participants nor the researchers who interact with them know who is in each group until the study has been completed.[8] For example, a researcher conducting interviews to evaluate a correctional treatment program may not know which participants completed the new program and which received standard services. This helps prevent the interviewer's expectations from influencing how responses are interpreted and prevents participants' expectations from influencing their behavior.

Double-blind studies also help address the **placebo effect**, which occurs when participants experience changes in their attitudes, behaviors, or outcomes simply because they believe they are receiving a treatment or intervention, even if they are not. For example, a participant who believes they are receiving a promising new program may report feeling more positive or motivated regardless of whether the program itself is effective. Double-blind studies are common in medical research but are often difficult or impossible to conduct in criminal justice settings because participants and staff frequently know which programs or services are being provided. Even so, researchers try to design studies in ways that increase confidence that the findings accurately reflect the effects of the program, policy, or practice being studied.

In general, the more a study can rule out alternative explanations for its findings, the greater confidence practitioners can have in the results. Features such as treatment and control groups, random assignment, single-blind studies, double-blind studies, and efforts to address the placebo effect all help increase confidence that the findings reflect the actual effects of a program, policy, or intervention. When evaluating experimental research, practitioners should consider whether the study included these safeguards, as they can reduce the influence of expectations, increase the trustworthiness of the evidence, and strengthen confidence in the study's conclusions.

Replication: Getting Supporting Results

Another factor that can increase confidence in research findings is replication.[9] Replication is the process of repeating a study to determine whether similar results are found again. Researchers may repeat a study with a different group of participants, in a different location, or under somewhat different conditions. If the findings remain consistent across multiple studies, confidence in those findings generally increases.

Replication is especially important in criminal justice because decisions about policies, programs, and practices should not be based on a single study. Even a well-designed study can produce results that are influenced by unique circumstances or chance. When multiple studies examining the same issue reach similar conclusions, practitioners can have greater confidence that the findings are trustworthy and useful for informing practice. If later studies produce different results, researchers may need to reexamine earlier conclusions and look more closely at the evidence.

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1. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
2. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
3. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
4. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
5. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
6. (Spielman et al., 2020).
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9. (Maxfield & Babbie, 2025).

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6.6: Research Design & Evidence-Informed Practice

Together, research design, research methodology, and safeguards help increase the trustworthiness of research findings. Different research questions require different research designs, which is why researchers may choose experimental, quasi-experimental, cross-sectional, or longitudinal designs depending on the purpose of the study. Understanding these features helps practitioners evaluate how evidence was produced and how much confidence they should place in the findings. This is important because evidence-informed practice depends on the quality of the evidence being used. Criminal justice professionals who understand these concepts are better prepared to evaluate research, distinguish stronger evidence from weaker evidence, and make decisions based on the best available knowledge rather than assumptions, personal opinions, or a single study.

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7: DATA COLLECTION

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why data collection is important for producing trustworthy research findings.
- Demonstrate the habits of an evidence-informed practitioner by evaluating the quality, accuracy, and completeness of data before applying research findings to criminal justice decisions.
- Ask critical questions about where research data came from and whether the data support the conclusions.
- Evaluate the quality of data used in a criminal justice study.
- Explain how inaccurate or incomplete data can affect research conclusions.
- Recognize how hard-to-reach populations can affect research findings.
- Identify common threats to data quality, including sampling bias, nonresponse, response bias, underreporting, and data entry errors.
- Evaluate whether a data collection method is appropriate for a research question.
- Recognize that different data collection methods produce different types of evidence.
- Explain the differences between NIBRS and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).
- Describe the purpose of content analysis and how it is used in criminal justice research.
- Recognize common sources of secondary data used in criminal justice research.
- Differentiate between primary and secondary data sources.
- Identify common methods of primary data collection, including surveys, interviews, case studies, and observation.
- Recognize the concept of generalizability and why it matters when applying research findings.
- Explain how sampling affects the quality and usefulness of research findings.
- Recognize the strengths and limitations of convenience and purposive sampling.
- Differentiate between random and non-random sampling methods.
- Explain why researchers often study samples instead of entire populations.
- Describe the difference between a population and a sample.

In the last chapter, you learned about research design, which is the overall plan researchers use to answer a research question. Research design helps researchers decide how a study will be organized and what type of evidence is needed. Different research questions require different research designs, and understanding those designs helps us evaluate the strength of a study's findings.

However, having a good research design is only part of the research process. Researchers must also decide how they will collect the information needed to answer their research question. In other words, if research design answers the question, "What is the plan?" then data collection answers the question, "How will the information be gathered?"

The way data are collected matters because the quality of research findings depends on the quality of the information collected. Good research requires good information. A carefully designed study can still produce misleading conclusions if the data are incomplete, inaccurate, or collected in a way that introduces bias. For example, a survey with poorly written questions may not accurately measure what researchers intended to study. Likewise, official crime statistics may not fully reflect the amount of crime that occurs because many crimes are never reported to law enforcement.

As evidence-informed practitioners, criminal justice professionals should understand where research data come from and what limitations may affect them. When reading research, it is important to look beyond the findings and ask questions such as: Who or what was studied? How was the information collected? Are there reasons the data might be incomplete or inaccurate? Understanding how data are collected helps practitioners become more critical consumers of research and better prepared to evaluate evidence used to guide criminal justice policy, practice, and decision-making.

In this chapter, you will learn about common methods of data collection used in criminal justice research, how researchers select the people or records they study, and the factors that can affect the quality of the information collected. Understanding these concepts will help you better evaluate research findings and make more informed decisions in professional practice.

7.1: Population, Samples, and Sampling
7.2: Data Collection Methods
7.3: Data Quality Concerns
7.4: Trustworthy Data- Reliability and Validity Revisited

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7.1: Population, Samples, and Sampling

When reading criminal justice research, one of the first questions you should ask is "Who or what was studied?" We have already seen that understanding a study's topic and research design is important, but it is also important to understand where the information came from. The answer to this question helps you decide how much confidence to place in the findings and whether they can be applied to other situations.

Researchers are often interested in understanding large groups of people, organizations, events, or records. For example, a researcher may want to learn about correctional officers who work for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections Division of Adult Institutions. As of June 2026, this population included approximately 2,601 correctional officers.[1] In this example, and in many criminal justice studies, collecting information from every member of the group would often be expensive, time-consuming, and impractical. In this example, it could be possible to have every single correctional officer participate, but many populations in criminal justice are not as clearly defined or accessible to researchers. Instead, researchers typically collect information from a smaller group and use what they learn to better understand the larger group. Understanding this process is important for evidence-informed practitioners because it affects how much confidence we can place in a study's findings.

A **population** is the entire group a researcher wants to learn about.[2] Researchers must clearly define the population they are studying.[3] In the correctional officer example, the population is not simply "correctional officers." Instead, it is all correctional officers working in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections Division of Adult Institutions. Depending on the study, a population might also include all people released from county jails during a particular year, all police departments in a region, or all criminal cases processed by a court system. The population is the group that the researcher ultimately wants to draw conclusions about.

A **sample** is the smaller group from which the researcher actually collects information. Returning to the correctional officer example, a researcher interested in job satisfaction may not be able to survey all 2,601 officers. Instead, the researcher might survey 300 correctional officers and use their responses as the study's sample. The goal is to use information gathered from the sample to better understand the larger population of correctional officers.

Many researchers study samples rather than entire populations, making it important to consider whether the sample represents the population well. If the sample differs significantly from the larger population, the findings may not accurately reflect the experiences or views of the group being studied. For example, a researcher who surveys only correctional officers working at maximum-security institutions may not capture the experiences of officers working in medium-security, minimum-security, or specialized facilities. As informed consumers of research, you should consider who was included in the sample, who may have been excluded, and whether the sample appears reasonably representative of the larger population the researchers hope to understand.

The process of selecting a sample is called **sampling**. Researchers use different sampling methods depending on their research question, available resources, and the population they want to study. As evidence-informed practitioners, you do not need to become experts in sampling techniques. However, you should understand that the quality of a study's sample can affect the quality of its findings.

Sampling Methods

Researchers use different methods to select samples, but most sampling approaches can be grouped into two broad categories: random sampling and non-random sampling. Understanding the difference between these approaches can help you evaluate how much confidence to place in a study's findings.

Random Sampling

In **random sampling**, participants are selected by chance. Every member of the population has a known chance of being selected for the sample. For example, if a researcher wanted to study correctional officers working in Wisconsin's Division of Adult Institutions, they might use a list of all correctional officers and randomly select officers to participate in the study. Since participants are selected by chance rather than by researcher choice, random samples are often more likely to represent the larger population.

NOTE: Do not confuse random sampling with random assignment. Random sampling is used to select participants for a study, while random assignment is used in experiments to place participants into treatment and control groups. Researchers may use one, both, or neither depending on the purpose of the study.

Non-Random Sampling

In **non-random sampling**, participants are selected using methods other than chance. Researchers may choose people because they are easy to access, because they have specific experiences that are relevant to the study, or because they volunteer to participate. For example, a researcher studying correctional officer job satisfaction might survey only officers attending a professional training conference or interview officers who have worked in a particular type of institution. These approaches may provide useful information, but the resulting sample may not fully represent all correctional officers in Wisconsin.

Researchers use many different types of non-random sampling. The following sections introduce two common examples, convenience sampling and purposive sampling, because they are frequently used in criminal justice research. While other non-random sampling methods exist, understanding these two approaches will help you recognize and evaluate many of the studies you may encounter as a criminal justice practitioner.

Convenience Sampling

A **convenience sample** consists of participants who are easy for the researcher to access.[4] Researchers may use convenience sampling when time, resources, or access to participants are limited. For example, a researcher might survey criminal justice students enrolled in a particular class because they are readily available. Convenience samples can provide useful information, but the findings may not represent the larger population.

Purposive Sampling

A **purposive sample** is created when researchers intentionally select participants because they have specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics related to the research topic.[5] For example, a researcher studying prison reentry may interview formerly incarcerated individuals who recently completed a reentry program. Purposive sampling allows researchers to gather information from people who can provide valuable insights about a particular issue. However, findings from purposive samples may not be applicable to a larger population.

Neither approach, random or non-random sampling, is automatically better than the other. The most appropriate sampling method depends on the purpose of the study. Researchers who want to describe a large population often prefer random sampling because it increases confidence that the sample reflects the larger group. Researchers seeking a deeper understanding of a particular experience or issue may use non-random sampling to identify participants who have specific knowledge or experiences related to the topic being studied.

Evaluating the Sample

As evidence-informed practitioners, you do not need to become experts in sampling methods. However, when reading research, it is important to ask how participants were selected. Studies that use random sampling are often more likely to include a sample that reflects the larger population, while studies that use non-random sampling may provide valuable insights but may be less applicable to other groups or settings. Understanding this distinction can help you better evaluate the strength and usefulness of research findings.

When evaluating research, it is important to look at who was included in the study and who may have been left out. Ask yourself: Does the sample appear to represent the population the researchers are trying to understand? The answer can help you determine how much confidence to place in the findings and whether they are applicable to the criminal justice issue, agency, or community you are interested in. It is also important to consider whether the findings apply to the specific population you are interested in. For example, findings from a study of correctional officers in Wisconsin may not automatically apply to police officers, probation officers, or correctional officers working in another state. Similar job roles may still differ in important ways, so practitioners should be cautious when applying research findings beyond the population that was actually studied.

Applying Findings Beyond the Sample

Researchers often collect information from a sample rather than an entire population. One reason the sample is important is that researchers usually hope to learn something about the larger population from which the sample was drawn. **Generalizability** refers to the extent to which findings from a sample can be applied to a larger population. In other words, generalizability helps us determine whether what researchers learned from a smaller group is likely to apply to the larger group they are trying to understand. For example, if researchers study a sample of Wisconsin correctional officers, generalizability refers to whether the findings can reasonably be applied to correctional officers throughout Wisconsin rather than only to the officers who participated in the study.

Studies that use representative samples are generally more likely to produce findings that reflect the larger population. A **representative sample** is a sample that closely resembles the larger population on important characteristics related to the study. Random sampling can help improve generalizability because members of the population are selected by chance rather than by researcher choice. For example, if a randomly selected sample of correctional officers closely reflects the characteristics of correctional officers throughout Wisconsin, researchers can be more confident that the findings apply to the larger population. Not all studies are designed to achieve a high degree of generalizability. Some researchers intentionally study smaller groups or people with specific experiences in order to gain a deeper understanding of a particular issue. These studies can still provide valuable information, but their findings may not apply as broadly to other people, agencies, or settings.

As evidence-informed practitioners, it is important to ask whether a study's findings can reasonably be applied beyond the sample that was studied. Understanding who participated in the research can help you determine whether the findings are relevant to the population, agency, or community you serve.

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7.2: Data Collection Methods

After deciding who or what will be studied, researchers must determine how they will collect the information needed to answer their research question. The data collection method should match the purpose of the study and the type of information needed. Different methods can provide different kinds of information, and each has strengths and limitations. As evidence-informed practitioners, you do not need to become experts in every data collection method. However, understanding common methods can help you evaluate where research findings come from and how much confidence to place in them.

Researchers generally collect either primary data or secondary data. **Primary data** is information collected directly by the researcher for a specific study. **Secondary data** is information that already exists and was originally collected by someone else, often for a different purpose.

Primary Data Collection

Researchers often collect information directly from the people, groups, or situations they are studying. This approach is known as primary data collection.[1] Primary data are gathered firsthand by the researcher for a specific study rather than obtained from existing records or previously collected information. Common forms of primary data collection include surveys, interviews, case studies, and observation. Each method allows researchers to gather information directly from participants or settings and provides different types of evidence that can help answer a research question.

Surveys

A **survey** is a method of collecting information by asking people a series of questions about their experiences, attitudes, behaviors, or opinions.[2] Surveys are one of the most commonly used data collection methods because they allow researchers to gather information from many people in a relatively efficient manner. You have likely been asked to participate in a survey, perhaps even at your school. Surveys can be administered in several ways, including online, by mail, by telephone, or in person. In criminal justice research, surveys may be used to examine topics such as community attitudes toward law enforcement, correctional officer job satisfaction, victimization experiences, or perceptions of fairness within the criminal justice system.

Surveys typically use a questionnaire that contains a series of questions. Some questions are closed-ended questions, which provide specific response options such as "yes" or "no" or multiple-choice answers. These responses can be counted and analyzed. Other questions are open-ended questions, which allow participants to respond in their own words and provide more detailed explanations.

One advantage of surveys is that they can collect information from large numbers of people and may allow participants to respond anonymously. However, surveys rely on what people say they think, feel, or do. Participants may misunderstand questions, forget information, or provide inaccurate responses.

Interviews

An **interview** is a one-on-one conversation between a researcher and a participant used to gather information about a particular topic.[3] Interviews allow participants to answer questions in their own words, and they give researchers the opportunity to ask follow-up questions or request clarification. For example, a researcher studying reentry might interview formerly incarcerated individuals about the challenges they experienced when returning to their communities. The researcher could ask additional questions to better understand the participant's experiences and perspectives.

One strength of interviews is that they often provide detailed and in-depth information. Researchers can explore topics that may be difficult to capture through a questionnaire alone. However, interviews are time-consuming and usually involve fewer participants than surveys. Researchers must also be careful not to influence participants' answers through their wording, tone, or reactions.

Focus Groups

A focus group is a qualitative research method in which a researcher leads a discussion with a small group of people about a specific topic.[4] Unlike a one-on-one interview, the goal is to encourage participants to talk to each other, share opinions, and react to one another's ideas. Researchers collect data not only from what participants say but also from how they interact during the discussion. A focus group is typically led by a moderator (or facilitator), whose role is to guide the discussion, encourage participation from all group members, and keep the conversation focused on the research topic. Focus groups are useful when researchers want to understand people's experiences, attitudes, perceptions, or beliefs. In criminal justice research, for example, a researcher might conduct a focus group with former jurors to learn how jurors interpreted evidence, discussed the case with one another during deliberations, and reached a verdict. The interaction between participants is an important source of information. A focus group can help researchers better understand group decision-making processes.

Focus groups have several strengths and weaknesses.[5] They can provide detailed, in-depth information and allow researchers to observe how participants influence one another's thinking and responses. They are especially useful for studying opinions, experiences, and group decision-making processes. Researchers can gather information from several participants at once; as a result, focus groups may also be more efficient than conducting many individual interviews. However, focus groups require careful planning and skilled moderation. Some participants may be uncomfortable speaking in a group, while others may dominate the discussion. Participants may also change their responses because other people are present, and researchers cannot guarantee that comments made during the session will remain confidential after the discussion ends.

Case Studies

A **case study** is an in-depth examination of a single person, event, situation, organization, or program.[6] Rather than studying a large number of people or cases, researchers focus on one case and gather detailed information from a variety of sources. These sources may include interviews, observations, documents, reports, or records.

Case studies are commonly used in criminal justice research. For example, a researcher might examine a particular wrongful conviction, a high-profile criminal investigation, a police department's reform efforts, or a specific correctional program. By focusing closely on one case, researchers can develop a detailed understanding of what happened and identify important factors that may not be visible in larger studies.

The primary strength of a case study is the depth of information it provides. However, findings from a single case may not apply to other people, organizations, or settings. For this reason, case studies are often useful for understanding a specific issue in detail, but they generally provide limited evidence about broader patterns or trends. As evidence-informed practitioners, it is important to ask whether a case study reflects a larger issue or whether it describes a unique situation. Case studies can provide valuable insights, but broad conclusions should not be based on a single case alone.

Observation

Sometimes researchers collect information by watching people, events, or interactions in real-world settings. This approach is known as **observation**.[7] Observation allows researchers to study behavior in natural environments rather than relying entirely on what participants report about themselves. For example, a researcher may observe interactions between officers and community members during community policing events or observe courtroom proceedings to better understand courtroom behavior and decision-making.

Observation can help researchers understand what people actually do rather than what they say they do. It can also provide valuable insights into behaviors and social interactions that may be difficult to capture through surveys or interviews. However, observation does not always reveal why people behave in certain ways, and researchers may find it difficult to determine cause-and-effect relationships based solely on observation.

Secondary Data Collection

Researchers do not always collect new information directly from participants. In many criminal justice studies, researchers analyze information that already exists.[8] This approach is known as secondary data analysis.

Secondary data are often obtained from agency records, reports, databases, documents, or previously completed research. Examples commonly used in criminal justice research include:

- Arrest records
- Court records
- Correctional records
- Probation and parole records
- Crime statistics
- Government reports
- Previously published research studies

One advantage of secondary data is that it can save time and resources because the information has already been collected. Researchers may also gain access to large amounts of data that would be difficult to gather on their own. However, secondary data is often collected for purposes other than the research study being conducted. Important information may be missing, the data may not contain exactly what the researcher wants to examine, or researchers may have limited ability to verify the accuracy of the information.

Content Analysis

A common form of secondary data analysis is content analysis. Content analysis is a systematic examination of existing documents, reports, media sources, policies, or other materials to identify patterns and gather information related to a research question.[9] For example, a researcher might examine police department policies to identify how agencies address use of force, analyze news coverage of crime, review court decisions involving a specific legal issue, or study correctional policies related to inmate discipline.

One advantage of content analysis is that it does not require direct interaction with participants. Researchers can examine existing information and identify patterns across documents or records. However, the quality of the findings depends on the quality, completeness, and accuracy of the materials being analyzed.

Official Crime Data

Criminal justice practitioners frequently rely on official crime data to understand crime trends, evaluate programs, allocate resources, and make policy decisions. Researchers also use these data sources to study crime, victimization, and criminal justice system outcomes. When evaluating research, it is important to understand where crime data come from and what limitations they may have.

Two of the most commonly used sources of national crime data are the National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and the **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**. Each provides useful information, but each measures crime in a different way.

National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)

The **National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS)** is the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s current method for collecting crime data from law enforcement agencies. NIBRS was developed to improve the quality and detail of crime information collected nationwide. Unlike the older Summary Reporting System, NIBRS collects detailed information about each incident, including information about victims, offenders, arrests, property involved, locations, and circumstances surrounding the crime.

One important advantage of NIBRS is that it captures information on multiple offenses that occur during a single incident. This allows researchers and criminal justice professionals to gain a more complete picture of crime and victimization. Because NIBRS collects more detailed information than earlier systems, it allows for more in-depth analysis of crime patterns and trends.

Official website: https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/more-fbi-services-and-information/ucr/nibrs

National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)

The **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)** is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The NCVS is the nation's primary source of information about criminal victimization. Each year, researchers collect information from a nationally representative sample of households about crimes they have experienced.

The NCVS is especially important because it includes information about crimes that were not reported to the police. Many victims choose not to report crimes for a variety of reasons, including fear, embarrassment, concerns about retaliation, or a belief that reporting will not help. As a result, official law enforcement data alone do not capture all crime that occurs. The NCVS helps researchers and policymakers better understand the extent of both reported and unreported crime.

The survey collects information about nonfatal violent crimes, property crimes, whether incidents were reported to law enforcement, reasons crimes were or were not reported, and victims' experiences with the criminal justice system.

Official website: https://bjs.ojp.gov/data-collection/ncvs

Why Practitioners Should Understand These Data Sources

As evidence-informed practitioners, it is important to recognize that no single data source provides a complete picture of crime. Official law enforcement data, including NIBRS, tell us about crimes that come to the attention of law enforcement agencies, while the NCVS helps identify crimes that may never be reported to police. Understanding where crime statistics originate and what they do and do not measure can help you better evaluate research findings and make more informed decisions in practice.

Choosing the Right Method

No single data collection method is best for every study. Researchers choose methods based on the research question they are trying to answer and the type of information they need to collect.[10] Surveys may be useful for gathering information from large numbers of people; interviews may provide deeper insight into individual experiences; case studies may provide detailed information about a particular situation; observation may help researchers understand behavior in natural settings; and secondary data may provide access to large amounts of existing information.

As evidence-informed practitioners, it is important to understand how information was collected because different methods produce different kinds of evidence. When reading research, ask yourself: Was this method appropriate for the question being studied? The answer can help you evaluate the strengths, limitations, and usefulness of the findings.

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1. (Conerly et al., 2021).
2. (Conerly et al., 2021).
3. (Conerly et al., 2021).
4. (Chen et al., 2024; DeCarlo, 2018).
5. (Chen et al., 2024; DeCarlo, 2018).
6. (Conerly et al., 2021).
7. (Conerly et al., 2021).
8. (Conerly et al., 2021).
9. (Conerly et al., 2021).
10. (Conerly et al., 2021).

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7.3: Data Quality Concerns

The quality of research findings depends on the quality of the data used in a study. Even a well-designed study can produce misleading results if important groups are left out, if too few people participate, if crimes go unreported, or if information is recorded inaccurately. As evidence-informed practitioners, it is important to think critically about the quality of the data on which research findings are based.

Sampling Bias

Earlier in this chapter, you learned that researchers often use a sample to learn about a larger population. Ideally, the sample should represent the population the researcher hopes to understand. Sampling bias occurs when the people or cases selected for a study do not adequately represent the larger population from which they were drawn.[1] For example, imagine a researcher wants to understand community attitudes toward law enforcement but collects responses only from people who attend neighborhood watch meetings. Individuals who attend these meetings may have different experiences, concerns, or opinions than community members who do not attend. As a result, the findings may not accurately represent the views of the entire community.

Sampling bias can occur in many ways.[2] Some groups may be more likely to participate in a study than others. Researchers may unintentionally recruit participants from only certain locations or backgrounds. In some cases, people who choose to participate may differ in important ways from people who choose not to participate. When evaluating research, practitioners should consider whether the sample appears to reflect the population being studied or whether certain groups may have been left out.

Nonresponse and Missing Information

Even when researchers select a strong sample, not everyone who is asked to participate will actually participate. Some people may refuse to respond, while others may begin a survey but leave questions unanswered. As a result, researchers may end up with less information than they originally planned to collect.[3] For example, a researcher may randomly select 500 correctional officers to complete a survey, but only 150 officers may choose to respond. If the individuals who responded differ from those who did not respond, the findings may not accurately reflect the views of the larger population.

Missing information can also occur when participants skip questions or provide incomplete answers.[4] If large amounts of information are missing, researchers may have difficulty drawing accurate conclusions. As informed consumers of research, it is important to consider not only how participants were selected but also whether enough of them actually participated to provide meaningful information.

Response Bias

Surveys and interviews rely on participants providing accurate information. However, researchers must also consider the possibility of **response bias**, which occurs when participants provide answers that do not accurately reflect their true beliefs, attitudes, experiences, or behaviors.[5] For example, individuals may underreport illegal behavior, overreport socially desirable behaviors, or provide answers they believe the researcher wants to hear. As a result, survey and interview responses may not always reflect what actually occurred.

Hard-to-Reach Populations

Some criminal justice populations are considered hidden or hard to reach because barriers make it difficult for researchers to identify, contact, recruit, or collect information from them.[6] Hard-to-reach populations may be difficult to locate, difficult to contact, reluctant to participate, or difficult to interview because of factors such as privacy concerns, fear of legal consequences, stigma, lack of trust, language barriers, low literacy, or other communication challenges. For example, a researcher interested in studying illegal drug use may have difficulty identifying and recruiting participants because many individuals may not want to admit engaging in criminal behavior. Similarly, researchers studying people experiencing homelessness, gang-involved individuals, victims of domestic violence, or undocumented immigrants may face challenges locating potential participants,

gaining their trust, or encouraging them to participate in research. When certain groups are difficult to reach, they may be underrepresented in research findings, which can affect how well the results reflect the larger population.

The U.S. Census Bureau notes that populations may be hard to reach for several different reasons.[7] Some groups are hard to locate, meaning researchers have difficulty identifying or finding members of the population. Others are hard to contact because they may not have stable housing, reliable communication methods, or a fixed location. Some groups are hard to persuade because they are reluctant to participate in research due to mistrust, privacy concerns, fear of consequences, or competing demands on their time. Finally, some populations are hard to interview because of language barriers, low literacy levels, disabilities, or other communication challenges. Understanding these barriers helps researchers recognize why some populations may be underrepresented in research findings.

Underreporting

Hard-to-reach populations can also contribute to underreporting. Underreporting occurs when incidents occur but are never reported to authorities or recorded in official data systems. Individuals who are reluctant to interact with researchers or criminal justice agencies may be less likely to report crimes, victimization, or other experiences. As a result, important information about these populations may never be included in research studies or official crime statistics, making it more difficult for researchers and practitioners to fully understand the issues affecting them.

This is one reason the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is so important. The NCVS helps researchers understand crimes that may never appear in official law enforcement records. When reading research that relies on official crime statistics, practitioners should remember that official data often reflect reported crime rather than all crime that occurred.

Data Entry and Recording Errors

Criminal justice data is only as accurate as the information entered into criminal justice records and databases. Errors can occur when reports are completed incorrectly, information is entered into a records management system inaccurately, incidents are coded improperly, or important details are omitted.

For example, if an officer records the wrong offense type, enters an incorrect date, or leaves out important information from an incident report, that error may become part of the official record. Researchers, administrators, and policymakers who later rely on those records may unknowingly use inaccurate information when making decisions or conducting research.

Why Accurate Data Entry Matters

As future criminal justice professionals, you will not only use data, but you will also help create it. Every time an officer completes an incident report, a dispatcher enters information into a records management system, a correctional officer documents an inmate's behavior, a probation officer records a violation, or an evidence technician enters information into an evidence tracking system, they are creating data that may later be used by supervisors, administrators, policymakers, and researchers.

The quality of criminal justice research depends on the quality of the information entered into these systems. If reports contain errors, important details are left out, or data are entered inconsistently, those problems become part of the records that researchers may later analyze. As a result, inaccurate or incomplete data can lead to inaccurate or incomplete research findings. Even the most skilled researcher cannot produce high-quality evidence from poor-quality information.

As you prepare for careers in criminal justice, think about the importance of accuracy every time you complete a report, document an incident, update a case file, or enter information into a database. The information you record may affect decisions made by investigators, prosecutors, judges, correctional administrators, agency leaders, and researchers. Careful and accurate documentation is not simply an administrative task. It is an important part of professional practice and helps ensure that future decisions are based on the best information available.

1. (Blackstone, 2012).
2. (Blackstone, 2012).

3. (Blackstone, 2012).
4. (Blackstone, 2012).
5. (Maxfield & Babbie, 2025).
6. U.S. Census Bureau. (2019, July). *Counting the hard to count in a census*. U.S. Department of Commerce. https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2019/demo/Hard-to-Count-Populations-Brief.pdf
7. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

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7.4: Trustworthy Data- Reliability and Validity Revisited

The data quality concerns discussed in this chapter are closely connected to the concepts of reliability and validity that were introduced in the previous chapter. Remember that reliability refers to the consistency of a measurement, while validity refers to whether a study is actually measuring what it claims to measure.

Problems with data collection can affect both reliability and validity. For example, if participants misunderstand survey questions or if criminal justice personnel record information inconsistently, researchers may collect data that are not reliable. If different people record the same event in different ways, the resulting information may be inconsistent and difficult to compare.

Data quality issues can also affect validity. If certain groups are excluded from a study because of sampling bias, if many participants fail to respond, or if crimes are not reported to law enforcement, the data may not accurately represent the issue researchers are attempting to study. In these situations, researchers may reach conclusions that do not fully reflect what is happening in the real world.

Data entry and recording practices can influence both reliability and validity as well. For example, if officers classify incidents differently from one another, reliability may be reduced because similar events are not recorded consistently. If important details are omitted from reports or entered incorrectly, the data may not accurately represent what occurred, reducing validity.

As evidence-informed practitioners, it is important to remember that the quality of research depends not only on the research design but also on the quality of the data that is collected. When reading research, consider whether the data appears complete, accurate, and representative of the population being studied. Doing so can help you evaluate the trustworthiness of research findings and make more informed decisions in practice.

Evaluating Data Quality

When reading research, it is important to consider the quality of the data that were collected. Ask yourself:

1. Who or what was studied?
2. How was information collected?
3. Was the sample appropriate?
4. Are important groups missing?
5. Could participants have provided inaccurate information?
6. Could the data be incomplete or underreported?
7. Are the measures reliable and valid?
8. Does the data support the conclusions?

Answering these questions can help you determine how much confidence to place in the findings and whether they provide useful evidence for criminal justice practice and decision-making.

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8: UNDERSTANDING AND INTERPRETING FINDINGS

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain how researchers move from data to findings and conclusions.
- Differentiate between data, findings, and conclusions in a research study.
- Describe the purpose of data analysis in criminal justice research.
- Differentiate between quantitative and qualitative data analysis.
- Explain the purpose of descriptive statistics and what they tell readers about a study.
- Explain the purpose of inferential statistics and how researchers use them to draw conclusions beyond a sample.
- Recognize that statistical analysis helps researchers identify patterns, relationships, and differences in data.
- Describe how qualitative researchers use coding, categories, and themes to analyze information.
- Recognize how researchers use evidence to support findings and conclusions.
- Differentiate between evidence, findings, and researchers' interpretations of findings.
- Identify the main findings reported in a research study.
- Interpret basic information presented in tables, charts, and graphs.
- Recognize relationships and comparisons reported in research findings.
- Explain the concept of statistical significance in plain language.
- Differentiate between statistical significance and practical significance.
- Evaluate whether a research finding is meaningful for criminal justice practice.
- Identify limitations and alternative explanations that may affect research conclusions.
- Assess whether a study's conclusions are supported by the evidence presented.
- Ask critical questions when evaluating research findings, tables, charts, and graphs.
- Demonstrate the habits of an evidence-informed practitioner by critically evaluating research findings before applying them to criminal justice policies, programs, and professional decisions.

Most research methods textbooks move directly from data collection to data analysis. In many criminal justice research courses, students learn statistical procedures, complete mathematical calculations, and use software to analyze data. These courses often require a prerequisite mathematics or statistics course because understanding and performing data analysis can involve mathematical concepts that take significant time to learn. However, the purpose of this textbook is different. The goal is not to teach you how to conduct statistical analyses or calculate research results. Instead, the goal is to help you become an informed consumer of research who can understand how researchers move from data to findings and how those findings are used to support conclusions. As a future criminal justice professional, you are more likely to read research than conduct complex statistical analyses yourself. Therefore, this chapter focuses on identifying research findings, understanding what those findings mean, and evaluating whether the conclusions drawn by researchers are supported by the evidence. These skills will help you think critically about research and apply evidence responsibly in criminal justice practice.

8.1: From Data to Findings- How Do Researchers Turn Information into Conclusions?

8.2: What Is Data Analysis?

8.3: Quantitative Data Analysis

8.4: Qualitative Analysis

8.5: Understanding Research Findings

8.6: Reading Results and Discussions

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8.1: From Data to Findings- How Do Researchers Turn Information into Conclusions?

In the previous chapter, you learned about how researchers collect data. The next step in the research process is figuring out what that information means. After researchers collect data, they must determine what the information means. The process of moving from data to conclusions is an important part of the research process and is often referred to as the analysis stage of research.[1] Researchers do this by examining the information they have gathered and looking for patterns, relationships, and other evidence that can help answer the research question.

Researchers begin with **data**, which are facts, details, statistics, and other information used to understand some phenomenon of interest.[2] Data can come from many sources, including surveys, interviews, observations, documents, and criminal justice records. At this stage, the information has been collected but has not yet been organized or interpreted. For example, imagine a researcher surveys 500 probation officers about their job satisfaction. Each officer's responses become part of the study's **dataset**, which is the collection of information gathered for a particular research project.[3] The completed surveys contain valuable information, but they do not immediately answer the research question.

Researchers must examine the data to identify patterns and organize the information into a form that can be understood. The goal is to condense large amounts of information into smaller, more manageable pieces that help answer the research question.[4] After examining the survey responses, the researcher might determine that most police officers reported moderate to high levels of job satisfaction. This statement represents a result of the analysis because it summarizes a pattern observed in the data. Researchers use information such as this to answer their research questions and develop conclusions about the topic being studied. Understanding this process helps readers see how researchers move from large amounts of raw information to evidence that can be used to support decisions and improve understanding of criminal justice issues.

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1. Arthur, M. M. L., & Clark, R. (2021). *Social data analysis*. Rhode Island College. https://pressbooks.ric.edu/socialdataanalysis/. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
2. (Chen et al., 2024).
3. (Chen et al., 2024).
4. (Williams, 2022).

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8.2: What Is Data Analysis?

The process researchers use to examine and make sense of data is called **data analysis**. Data analysis uses scientific methods to organize information, identify patterns and trends, and explore relationships within the data.[1] Regardless of the type of information collected, the purpose of analysis is to transform large amounts of information into evidence that can help answer a research question.

Most research uses one of two broad approaches to data analysis: quantitative analysis or qualitative analysis.

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1. (Chen et al., 2024).

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8.3: Quantitative Data Analysis

In quantitative research, the data analysis stage involves examining numerical information to identify patterns, compare groups, and answer research questions. **Quantitative analysis** focuses on information that can be expressed as numbers, and its overall goal is to condense large amounts of data into smaller, more manageable pieces of information that can help answer a research question.[1]

In criminal justice research, quantitative data may come from surveys, official crime statistics, court records, correctional records, or other sources that can be counted or measured. For example, researchers might examine arrest rates, recidivism rates, response times, victimization rates, or survey responses about attitudes toward policing. These types of data often produce large amounts of standardized information that can be organized into datasets and analyzed using computer software.[2]

Researchers use quantitative analysis to answer questions such as:

- How many?
- How often?
- How much?
- Are two groups different?
- Is there a relationship between two variables?

For example, a researcher might compare recidivism rates for individuals who completed a reentry program with those who did not participate in the program. Another researcher might examine whether police officers with more years of experience report different levels of job satisfaction than newer officers. By counting, comparing, and examining patterns in numerical data, researchers can better understand issues and answer research questions.

Although quantitative analysis often involves statistical procedures, researchers rarely perform complex calculations by hand. Modern computer software performs most of the calculations required to analyze large datasets, allowing researchers to focus on interpreting the results rather than performing the mathematics themselves.[3] As evidence-informed practitioners, you do not need to know how to perform these calculations. What is more important is understanding what the results mean and how researchers use them to support conclusions.

Descriptive Statistics: Describing the Data

One way researchers analyze quantitative data is through descriptive statistics. **Descriptive statistics** are used to summarize, organize, and present information about the data that was collected.[4] In simple terms, descriptive statistics help researchers answer the question, "What does the data look like?"

Researchers often use descriptive statistics to describe the characteristics of a sample. For example, a researcher studying police officers might report:

- The number of officers who participated in the study
- The percentage of officers working different shifts
- The average years of experience among participants
- The percentage of officers who reported high job satisfaction

Descriptive statistics are commonly presented as counts, frequencies, percentages, averages, tables, charts, or graphs.[5] These summaries help readers quickly understand important characteristics of the people, events, or situations being studied without examining every individual piece of data. When reading criminal justice research, you will encounter descriptive statistics frequently. They provide a picture of the data and help researchers communicate what they observed in their sample.

Inferential Statistics: Looking Beyond the Sample

Researchers are often interested in more than simply describing the people who participated in a study. They usually want to

learn something about a larger population. To do this, they use inferential statistics.

Inferential statistics are statistical procedures used to draw conclusions about patterns, differences, or relationships that may exist beyond the sample that was studied.[6] While descriptive statistics describe the data researchers collected, inferential statistics help researchers determine whether the patterns they observe in a sample are likely to reflect the larger population.

For example, imagine a researcher surveying 300 Wisconsin juvenile probation officers and finds that officers who received specialized training report lower levels of job stress than officers who did not receive the training. Inferential statistics help researchers determine whether that difference is likely to reflect a real pattern among juvenile probation officers more broadly or whether it may have occurred simply by chance. At this level, you do not need to understand the mathematical procedures researchers use to make these determinations. Instead, it is important to understand the purpose of inferential statistics. They help researchers move beyond describing a sample and make informed judgments about larger populations and possible relationships within the data.

As evidence-informed practitioners, understanding the difference between descriptive and inferential statistics can help you read research more effectively. Descriptive statistics tell you what the data shows. Inferential statistics help researchers determine what those results may mean beyond the specific sample that was studied. Both play an important role in helping researchers answer questions and develop evidence that can inform criminal justice policy and practice.

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1. (Williams, 2022).
2. (Williams, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).
3. (Chen et al., 2024).
4. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
5. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
6. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).

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8.4: Qualitative Analysis

While quantitative analysis focuses on numbers, **qualitative analysis** focuses on words, experiences, observations, and meanings. Qualitative data often come from interviews, focus groups, field notes, observations, documents, and other sources that provide detailed descriptions rather than numerical measurements.[1] The goal of qualitative analysis is similar to the goal of quantitative analysis: researchers want to answer a research question by making sense of large amounts of information. However, instead of counting and comparing numbers, qualitative researchers look for patterns, ideas, and meanings that appear across the data.

For example, a researcher studying reentry after incarceration might interview individuals who recently returned to their communities after being released from prison. The interviews could produce hundreds of pages of text. Researchers must find a way to organize all of that information so they can understand what participants are saying and identify common experiences.

Coding: Organizing Qualitative Information

Researchers organize qualitative data through a process called coding. A code is a label or short phrase used to represent a more complex idea or issue found in the data.[2] Coding helps researchers sort large amounts of text into smaller, more manageable pieces.

For example, imagine several participants in a reentry study make comments such as:

- "Nobody would rent an apartment to me."
- "I could not find a place to live after I was released."
- "Housing was my biggest challenge."

A researcher might apply the code:

- Housing Barriers

Similarly, comments about difficulty finding work might receive the code:

- Employment Barriers

And comments about transportation problems might receive the code:

- Transportation Challenges

Researchers often read through interviews, observations, and field notes multiple times, looking for recurring ideas and patterns across participants.[3]

From Codes to Categories

As researchers continue reviewing the data, they often notice that some codes are related to one another.[4] Similar codes can then be grouped into broader categories.

For example:

Codes = Housing Barriers, Employment Barriers, Transportation Challenges

Category = Reentry Challenges

Creating categories helps researchers reduce large amounts of information into broader topics that are easier to understand and discuss.[5]

From Categories to Themes

As researchers continue their analysis, they look for larger patterns that connect multiple categories and help explain what is happening in the data. These broader patterns are called themes.[6]

Continuing the example:

Codes = Housing Barriers, Employment Barriers, Transportation Challenges

Category = Reentry Challenges

Theme = Practical barriers make successful reentry difficult.

Themes help researchers move beyond individual comments and identify broader ideas that appear across many participants. Rather than focusing on one person's experience, themes describe patterns found throughout the data.

Why Practitioners Should Understand Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysis

As evidence-informed practitioners, you do not need to be an expert in data analysis. However, understanding the basic purpose of quantitative and qualitative analysis can help you become a more informed consumer of research. Researchers use analysis to organize large amounts of information and identify evidence that can help answer research questions.[7]

When reading research, it is important to remember that quantitative findings are based on the analysis of numerical data, while qualitative findings are based on the careful examination of participants' words, experiences, and observations.[8] Understanding these processes can help you evaluate how researchers reached their conclusions and whether the evidence supports the claims being made.

As a future criminal justice professional, you will encounter research in policy reports, agency evaluations, professional publications, and workplace decision-making. A basic understanding of quantitative and qualitative analysis will help you think critically about research findings and better assess how evidence can inform criminal justice policy, practice, and decision-making.[9]

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1. (Williams, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).
2. (Williams, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).
3. (Williams, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).
4. (Williams, 2022).
5. (Williams, 2022).
6. (Williams, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).
7. (Williams, 2022; Chen et al., 2024).
8. (Bhattacherjee, 2019; Williams, 2022).
9. (Williams, 2022; Bhattacherjee, 2019; Chen et al., 2024).

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8.5: Understanding Research Findings

Researchers collect data, which serves as the evidence for a study. After gathering that evidence, they analyze it to identify findings and determine what the data show. The findings help researchers answer their research question, but the results of a single study cannot prove that a theory is true because research findings can be affected by errors, limitations, or new evidence discovered later.[1] As you read research, it is important to understand the difference between evidence and conclusions. **Evidence** is the information that was collected during the study, such as crime reports, arrest statistics, survey responses, or interview data. **Findings** are the patterns or results that emerge when researchers analyze that evidence. **Conclusions** are the researchers' interpretations of what those findings mean and whether the evidence supports the original hypothesis or theory.

For example, imagine a researcher studies whether a community policing program reduces fear of crime. The survey responses collected from residents would be the evidence. If the analysis shows that residents reported feeling safer after the program was implemented, that would be a finding. The researcher's statement that the program appears to improve perceptions of safety would be a conclusion. Researchers may conclude that evidence supports a theory, but they do not claim the theory has been proven.[2]

One mistake students sometimes make is treating a research conclusion as if it were an unquestionable fact. Scientists avoid claiming proof because findings may reflect errors, alternative explanations may exist, and future studies may produce different results.[3] Even theories that have strong support remain open to revision when new evidence becomes available.

Consider a criminal justice example involving body-worn cameras. Researchers may collect data on citizen complaints before and after cameras are introduced. The complaint records are the evidence. If the analysis shows that complaints decreased, that is a finding. A conclusion might be that body-worn cameras are associated with fewer citizen complaints. However, researchers must still consider other possible explanations and recognize that additional research could produce different findings.[4] For example, the agency may have implemented new training on topics such as de-escalation and overall communication skills, which could also contribute to the conclusion.

The key point is that researchers use evidence to develop findings and then draw conclusions from those findings.[5] When reading research, focus first on the evidence and findings before accepting the conclusions. Scientific conclusions are based on evidence, but they are not the same thing as facts and may change as additional evidence becomes available.

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2. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).
3. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).
4. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).
5. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).

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8.6: Reading Results and Discussions

As a future criminal justice professional, you will often encounter research studies that make claims about topics related to your field. To evaluate these claims effectively, you need to understand how researchers present their findings and how to interpret the information they provide. Rather than focusing only on the authors' conclusions, it is important to examine the evidence, findings, and explanations presented throughout the results and discussion sections of a research report.

What Should You Look for in the Results Section?

The results section explains what the researchers found after analyzing their data.[1] Researchers do not typically present all of their raw data, such as every survey response or interview transcript. Instead, they summarize the information and report the findings that help answer the study's research questions. When reading the results section, focus on the questions the researchers are trying to answer. Researchers often remind readers of the research question, explain the answer in words, present the supporting statistics, and then summarize the findings. Even if you do not understand every statistical detail, you should still be able to identify the main finding and understand how it relates to the research question.

Ask yourself:

- What question is the researcher trying to answer?
- What did the researchers find?
- What evidence supports that finding?
- Does the evidence seem strong enough to support the claim being made?

How to Read a Table

Many students skip tables because they appear complicated. However, tables are often one of the fastest ways to understand a study's findings.[2] Tables provide a condensed summary of important information and can help you identify patterns before reading the researchers' interpretation of the results.

When reading a table, start with the title. The title tells you what information is being presented in the table.[3] Next, look at the rows and columns to see what is being compared. Some tables provide basic information about the people who participated in the study. These tables often use N to show the number of participants and % to show the percentage of the sample in each group. For example, a table might show how many participants were male or female and what percentage of the sample each group represented.

As another example, a criminal justice study might report that 60% of participants were police officers, 25% were probation officers, and 15% were correctional officers. This type of table helps you understand who participated in the study before you evaluate the findings.

Looking for Relationships in a Table

Some tables are designed to help readers compare groups and identify relationships between variables. In these tables, readers can compare numbers across rows or columns to see how outcomes differ between groups.[4]

Imagine a study examining whether participation in an offender reentry program is related to recidivism. One column might show participants who completed the program, while another column shows participants who did not. If the recidivism percentages are lower for program participants, the table suggests a relationship between program participation and lower recidivism rates.

As you read these tables, ask yourself:

- Which groups are being compared?
- What differences do I see in the numbers?
- Are the differences large or small?

- Do the findings appear to support the researchers' claims?
-

Paying Attention to Statistical Significance

Many quantitative research tables include information about **statistical significance**, which helps readers determine whether a finding is likely to represent a real relationship rather than a pattern that occurred by chance alone.[5] Before analyzing data, researchers establish a significance level, which is the risk threshold they are willing to accept that their conclusion may be wrong because the results occurred by chance.[6] A significance level of .05 means researchers accept a 5% risk of making that error. The lower the probability that results occurred by chance, the greater the confidence that the findings reflect a real relationship rather than random variation.

You do not need to be a statistician to be a good consumer of research. Many researchers will explicitly state in their publication whether their findings are statistically significant. When reviewing a study, pay attention to whether researchers report that a finding is statistically significant.[7] If they do, the relationship is less likely to be the result of random chance. If a finding is not statistically significant, readers should be cautious about drawing strong conclusions from the result.

Considering Practical Significance

When reading research, it is important to remember that a finding can be statistically significant without being very important. Statistical significance tells researchers that a result is unlikely to have occurred by chance alone. However, statistical significance does not tell us how strong, meaningful, or useful the finding is in the real world.[8]

Researchers use the term **practical significance** to describe the real-world importance or usefulness of a finding. A result may be statistically significant but still have little practical value. This can occur when a study finds a very small relationship or difference that becomes statistically significant because the study included a large number of participants.

A finding can be statistically significant but not practically significant. For example, imagine a study finds that officers who complete a new report-writing training program finish their reports 30 seconds faster than officers who do not complete the training. The difference is statistically significant, meaning it is unlikely to have occurred by chance. However, saving 30 seconds per report may not meaningfully improve officer performance, public safety, or agency operations. In this case, the finding has statistical significance but little practical significance because the effect is too small to make a meaningful difference in the real world.

In contrast, a finding may have both statistical significance and practical significance. For example, suppose a study finds that participation in a reentry program reduces recidivism from 40% to 25%. The reduction is statistically significant, suggesting that it is unlikely to have occurred by chance. It is also practically significant because a 15% decrease in recidivism could lead to fewer arrests, lower correctional costs, and improved public safety. The finding has meaningful real-world implications, since it is considered both statistically and practically significant.

These examples demonstrate an important point for criminal justice professionals. Statistical significance helps determine whether a finding is likely real, while practical significance helps determine whether that finding is important enough to influence policies, programs, or professional practice.

When evaluating research findings, ask yourself:

- Is the finding statistically significant?
- How strong is the relationship or difference?
- Would the finding make a meaningful difference in practice?
- Is the benefit large enough to justify the resources needed to implement a change?

Understanding practical significance can help you avoid assuming that every statistically significant finding is automatically important. As a critical consumer of research, you should consider not only whether a finding is real, but also whether it is meaningful enough to influence policies, programs, or professional practices.[9]

Reading Qualitative Results

Not all criminal justice research relies on numbers. Qualitative studies often explore people's experiences, perceptions, and perspectives through interviews, observations, documents, and case studies. Instead of presenting findings primarily through statistics, researchers often use participant quotes, stories, and detailed descriptions to illustrate important themes.[10] When you read qualitative research, do not focus only on the quotes. The quotes are evidence, but the researcher must explain why those quotes matter and how they connect to the study's findings. Researchers are responsible for interpreting the evidence and helping readers understand the meaning behind the participants' words.

For example, a study on prosecutor stress might include quotes describing long work hours, staffing shortages, or deadline concerns. As a reader, you should look beyond the individual quote and consider the larger theme the researcher is identifying. What pattern is emerging across multiple participants? What does that pattern tell us about the issue being studied?

What Should You Look for in the Discussion Section?

After presenting the findings, researchers move into the discussion section. The discussion usually begins with a summary of the study's results and an answer to the research question.[11] This is where they explain what the findings mean and why they matter. Researchers then explain the broader implications of their findings. They may discuss how the results support or challenge existing theories, how the findings can be applied in practice, or what the results suggest about a particular problem or policy.

As a future criminal justice professional, pay close attention to these practical implications. Researchers may suggest changes to training programs, correctional interventions, victim services, crime prevention efforts, or public policies. Understanding these implications can help you evaluate whether the evidence justifies the recommendations being made.

Looking for Limitations

Good researchers also acknowledge the limitations of their studies. They discuss factors that may have influenced the results and explain how those limitations should affect the interpretation of the findings.[12] Researchers may also suggest directions for future research and identify questions that still need to be answered.

When reading the discussion section, ask yourself:

- What limitations did the researchers identify?
- Could these limitations affect the conclusions?
- Are there alternative explanations for the findings?
- What additional research might be needed?

Becoming a Critical Consumer of Research

Throughout this chapter, you learned how researchers move from raw data to findings and from findings to conclusions. You also learned how quantitative and qualitative data are analyzed, how researchers present their results, and how statistical and practical significance can help readers evaluate research. These skills are important because, as a future criminal justice professional, you will regularly encounter research findings in reports, policy discussions, professional publications, and media stories. Understanding research is not just about knowing what researchers concluded. It is about determining whether the conclusions are supported by the evidence.

When reading research, your goal should be to think critically about the information presented. Researchers collect evidence, analyze that evidence, identify findings, and draw conclusions. As an informed consumer of research, you should carefully evaluate each step of that process rather than automatically accepting the conclusions. This means examining the evidence, reviewing the findings, and determining whether the conclusions are reasonable based on the information presented.

As you read a research study, ask yourself the following questions:

- What did the researchers actually find?
- Do the findings support the conclusions?
- Are the claims larger than the evidence supports?
- Did the researchers acknowledge limitations?
- Are alternative explanations possible?

These questions can help you distinguish between evidence-based conclusions and conclusions that may go beyond what the data can support.

You should also apply the same critical thinking skills when examining tables, charts, and graphs. Visual displays can make findings easier to understand, but they still require careful evaluation. Rather than looking only at the researchers' interpretation, examine the information presented for yourself.

Ask questions such as:

- What is being measured?
- What population was studied?
- What groups are being compared?
- What trend or pattern appears in the data?
- Does the figure actually support the author's claim?

As a future criminal justice professional, you will likely make decisions that affect individuals, communities, and organizations. Those decisions should be based on evidence rather than assumptions, opinions, or headlines. By understanding how research is conducted, how findings are presented, and how conclusions are drawn, you can become a more thoughtful and informed consumer of research. The ultimate goal is not simply to know what a study says, but to determine whether the evidence justifies the conclusions being made and whether those conclusions should influence criminal justice policy, practice, or decision-making.

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1. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).
2. (DeCarlo, 2018).
3. (DeCarlo, 2018).
4. (DeCarlo, 2018).
5. (DeCarlo, 2018).
6. (Bhattacherjee, 2019).
7. (DeCarlo, 2018).
8. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).
9. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).
10. (Arthur & Clark, 2021).
11. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).
12. (Jhangiani et al., 2019).

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9: ETHICS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE RESEARCH- PROTECTING PEOPLE WHILE BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why ethical research is important in criminal justice.
- Demonstrate the habits of an evidence-informed practitioner by considering both the quality of the evidence and the ethical manner in which it was collected.
- Apply ethical principles when evaluating criminal justice research, policies, and programs.
- Recognize that ethical research practices contribute to the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings.
- Evaluate whether researchers took appropriate steps to minimize harm and protect participants.
- Ask critical questions about whether a study was conducted ethically.
- Identify ethical issues that may arise when research involves incarcerated individuals, victims, justice-involved populations, or criminal justice professionals.
- Evaluate how researchers protect participants' rights, dignity, and privacy.
- Describe the concepts of deception and debriefing and when they may be used in research.
- Explain why researchers must balance the benefits of research with the potential risks to participants.
- Recognize the potential risks participants may face in research studies, including physical, psychological, social, legal, and economic harms.
- Explain the concepts of confidentiality, anonymity, and data security.
- Recognize ethical concerns that may arise when conducting research in criminal justice settings.
- Identify situations in which vulnerable populations may require additional research safeguards.
- Explain the purpose of informed consent and why participation must be voluntary.
- Recognize why human subjects require ethical protections during research.
- Explain the role of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in protecting research participants.
- Identify the three ethical principles of the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.
- Explain the significance of the Nuremberg Code and the Belmont Report.
- Describe how historical research abuses influenced modern research ethics.

Research plays an important role in modern criminal justice. Stakeholders such as law enforcement agencies, jails, courts, community corrections programs, and victim service organizations regularly rely on research to evaluate programs, identify problems, improve policies, and guide decision-making. As future criminal justice professionals, you may be asked to collect information for a study, provide access to agency records, participate in interviews or surveys, or use research findings to inform your work. Research can lead to safer communities, more effective practices, and fairer outcomes. However, research can also create risks when it involves sensitive information, vulnerable populations, or people whose freedom and rights may already be limited. Before learning about the principles and rules that guide ethical research, consider the following scenario. As you read, think about the ethical questions it raises and the responsibilities researchers and criminal justice professionals have to protect the people involved.

9.1: Opening Scenario

9.2: Human Subjects

9.3: Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)

9.4: Ethical Issues in Scientific Research

9.5: Opening Scenario Revisited

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9.1: Opening Scenario

A county sheriff's office partners with a local college to learn more about a new inmate classification system being used in the jail. An inmate classification system helps staff make decisions about housing, supervision, and programming by assessing factors such as risk level, safety concerns, behavior, criminal history, and individual needs.

To evaluate the system, researchers plan to review jail records, interview correctional officers, and survey incarcerated individuals about their experiences. The goal is to better understand how the classification process works in practice and whether it is helping the jail operate more safely and effectively.

The project appears to have the potential to provide useful information. Findings could help jail administrators improve operations, inform future policy decisions, and contribute to the broader understanding of correctional practices.

As you read about the study, consider some broader questions. What responsibilities do researchers have when working with people in criminal justice settings? What factors should researchers think about before collecting information from incarcerated individuals or correctional staff? What challenges might arise when gathering information about people's experiences, opinions, or behaviors? How should researchers handle sensitive information? What steps should they take to ensure that participants are treated fairly and respectfully?

As you work through this chapter, keep this scenario in mind. The concepts discussed throughout the chapter will provide tools for thinking more critically about the choices researchers must make when conducting studies involving people in criminal justice settings. By the end of the chapter, return to this scenario and consider what additional questions you would ask about how the study was designed and conducted.

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9.2: Human Subjects

A Brief Historical Look at Research on Humans

Criminal justice is fundamentally a human profession. Whether working in law enforcement, courts, or corrections, criminal justice professionals make decisions that affect people's rights, safety, opportunities, and lives. Because of this, much criminal justice research involves human beings. Researchers may study police officers, correctional staff, crime victims, people who have committed offenses, jurors, communities, or others connected to the justice system. As future criminal justice professionals, it is important to understand how researchers are expected to treat participants ethically and why those protections exist. Learning about the history of research involving human subjects helps us understand both the value of research and the responsibility that comes with collecting and using information about people.

The ethical rules that guide research today did not appear overnight.[1] They developed in response to serious mistakes and harms that occurred in the past. The examples below are some important historical cases that shaped modern research ethics. They are not the only examples. Many other cases have influenced how research is conducted today. However, these examples help illustrate why strong ethical standards are necessary when conducting research with human participants.

Some of the earliest documented examples of research involving human subjects occurred in medical studies. In the late 1700s, physician Edward Jenner tested an early smallpox vaccine by exposing an 8-year-old boy to the disease. While the study contributed to an important medical breakthrough, it took place long before modern ethical standards and participant protections existed.

For many years, research involving human subjects was conducted with little formal oversight. This changed significantly after World War II. During the war, Nazi doctors and scientists conducted cruel and deadly experiments on people who were imprisoned in concentration camps. These individuals were forced into research without their consent and suffered severe physical and psychological harm. After the war, the responsible doctors and scientists were tried in Nuremberg, Germany.

One important lesson from these trials is that having rules on paper does not automatically protect people. Germany already had written regulations stating that research participants should voluntarily agree to participate. The Nazi researchers ignored those rules. This reminds us that ethical research depends not only on regulations but also on researchers' commitment to respecting human rights and human dignity.

The Nuremberg trials led to the development of the **Nuremberg Code**, a set of ten principles designed to guide ethical research involving human subjects. One of its most important ideas is that people must voluntarily choose whether to participate in research. The Nuremberg Code continues to influence research ethics today, including research conducted in criminal justice and the social sciences.

Unethical research has occurred outside of medicine as well. In the 1960s, psychologist **Stanley Milgram** conducted a series of studies to examine obedience to authority. Participants were led to believe that they were delivering electric shocks to another person as part of an experiment. The shocks were not real, but the participants did not know that at the time. Many experienced significant emotional stress during and after the study. While Milgram's research produced important findings about human behavior, it also raised serious questions about deception in research and the responsibility researchers have to protect participants from psychological harm.

Another important example is the **Tuskegee Syphilis Study**, conducted in Alabama between the 1930s and 1970s. Researchers enrolled hundreds of poor African American men, some with syphilis and some without, to study how the disease progressed over time. Even after effective treatment became available in the 1940s, researchers intentionally withheld treatment from participants so they could continue observing the disease. The men were not fully informed about the study or the treatment options available to them.

In 1972, when the public learned about the Tuskegee study, there was widespread outrage. The study became a powerful example of how research can harm participants when ethical principles are ignored. It also contributed to public distrust of research and government institutions.

The Belmont Report

The Tuskegee study led to major changes in how research involving human subjects is reviewed and monitored in the United States. In 1974, Congress passed the **National Research Act**, which created a national commission to examine research ethics and participant protections. The commission later produced the **Belmont Report** in 1979, a landmark document that continues to guide research involving human subjects today.

The Belmont Report identifies three core ethical principles:

- **Respect for Persons**: People should be treated as autonomous individuals who can decide for themselves whether to participate in research. People with diminished autonomy require extra protections. Participants must give voluntary, informed consent.
- **Beneficence**: Researchers should maximize potential benefits and minimize possible harms. Researchers must use sound, safe research designs intended to "do no harm."
- **Justice**: The benefits and burdens of research should be distributed fairly among different groups of people.

These principles remain especially important in criminal justice research. Many criminal justice studies involve individuals and groups who may be vulnerable because of their age, legal status, victimization, incarceration, or other circumstances. As future evidence-informed practitioners, understanding the history of research ethics will help you evaluate research more critically and think carefully about how knowledge is collected, interpreted, and applied in the criminal justice system. Ethical research is not only about following rules. It is about respecting people, protecting rights, and ensuring that the information used to guide criminal justice decisions is gathered responsibly and fairly.

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1. Following content on this page adapted from Williams, M., & Allen, M. (2022). Ethics in research. *Research methods for criminal justice students*. Weber State University. https://uen.pressbooks.pub/researchmethodscriminaljusticestudents/chapter/chapter-3-ethics-in-research/. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

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9.3: Institutional Review Boards (IRBs)

An **Institutional Review Board (IRB)** is a committee that reviews research projects involving human participants to help ensure that people are treated ethically and that their rights are protected.[1] As discussed, criminal justice research often involves people; protecting participants is an important part of the research process.

The National Research Act required institutions that receive federal research funding to establish IRBs. Over time, many organizations that conduct research, even those that do not receive federal funding, have adopted similar review processes because of the important role they play in protecting research participants.

Today, IRBs review research conducted at universities, hospitals, nonprofit organizations, and other institutions. These committees are usually made up of people with different backgrounds, experiences, and areas of expertise. A review board may include researchers, healthcare professionals, legal experts, and community members. In some cases, individuals with experience in criminal justice, corrections, treatment services, or victim advocacy may also participate. Having a variety of perspectives helps ensure that research projects are carefully evaluated and that potential ethical concerns are identified before the study begins.

Before researchers can collect data, they must submit a detailed application explaining their project. The application typically describes the purpose of the study, who will participate, how information will be collected, and what steps will be taken to protect participants. Researchers may also need to submit consent forms, interview questions, surveys, recruitment materials, and other documents that participants will see or receive. In addition, researchers are often required to complete training on research ethics, so they understand their responsibilities when working with human subjects.

Researchers generally cannot begin recruiting participants or collecting information until the IRB has approved the project. Student researchers may also be required to follow these procedures, depending on the institution and the nature of the project. As future criminal justice professionals, you may one day be asked to participate in a research study or work for an agency that partners with researchers to evaluate programs, policies, training, or outcomes. When this happens, it is important to understand whether the project has been reviewed by an IRB and what safeguards are in place to protect participants. Being aware of ethical guidelines can help you ask informed questions about confidentiality, informed consent, potential risks, and how information will be used. Evidence-informed practitioners do not only evaluate research findings; they also consider whether the research was conducted ethically and whether participants' rights and dignity were respected throughout the process.

For criminal justice professionals, the existence of IRBs is important because the quality of research depends not only on good methods but also on ethical practices. As consumers of research, you should be aware that studies involving people have often been reviewed to ensure that participants were treated fairly and respectfully. When evaluating research, it is important to consider not only what was found but also how the information was collected.

Although most researchers agree that protecting participants is essential, disagreements sometimes arise about how IRBs evaluate certain types of research. Review boards are often most familiar with medical or experimental studies, where researchers can plan many details in advance. However, some social science and criminal justice research is more flexible. For example, a researcher conducting observations in a community setting or studying a criminal justice agency may not be able to predict every interaction, question, or finding ahead of time.

These challenges do not mean that IRBs are unnecessary. Rather, they highlight the balance that researchers and review boards must strike between protecting participants and allowing important research to be conducted. Ethical oversight remains a critical safeguard in criminal justice research. By understanding the role of IRBs, you can become a more informed consumer of research and better evaluate whether a study was conducted in a way that respects the rights and dignity of the people involved.

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1. This section adapted from Williams, M., & Allen, M. (2022). Ethics in research. *Research methods for criminal justice students*. Weber State University. https://uen.pressbooks.pub/researchmethodscriminaljusticestudents/chapter/chapter-3-ethics-in-research/. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

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9.4: Ethical Issues in Scientific Research

As future evidence-informed practitioners, you will be expected to critically evaluate the research that informs criminal justice policies, practices, and decisions. Much of the research used in criminal justice involves human participants, making an understanding of research ethics an important part of evaluating evidence responsibly. This section examines some of the ethical considerations researchers must address before conducting studies with people and explains how these protections help ensure that research is conducted responsibly and produces trustworthy information.

Informed Consent[1]

One of the most important ethical principles in research is informed consent. **Informed consent** means that people choose whether to participate in a study after receiving enough information to understand what the study is about, what participation involves, and any potential risks or benefits. Participation must be voluntary, and participants must be free to decline or leave a study at any time without penalty. This principle is especially important in criminal justice research because studies often involve people whose rights, privacy, employment, or personal experiences may be affected by the information they share. Research participants may include police officers, correctional staff, victims, individuals involved in the court system, or members of the community. Researchers have a responsibility to ensure that participants understand what they are agreeing to before taking part in a study.

Researchers typically provide this information to the prospective participant through an informed consent form or a similar process. Participants should be told the purpose of the study, what they will be asked to do, any potential risks, how their information will be protected, and whom they can contact with questions. Researchers must also explain whether participation is confidential and how the data will be stored and used. As a future criminal justice professional, you may be asked to participate in research or work for an agency that collaborates with researchers. Understanding informed consent can help you evaluate whether a study is being conducted ethically. As a participant, you should expect to be informed about the study, allowed to participate voluntarily, and treated with respect throughout the research process.

Deception and Debriefing[2]

Researchers should be honest with participants about their study. However, in some cases, providing all the details beforehand could influence participants' behavior and affect the results. When necessary, researchers may use **deception**, which involves withholding limited information about a study's true purpose. Any use of deception must be justified, approved, and designed to avoid harming participants. The IRB considers the use of deception during review of the study design. When deception is used, researchers must provide a **debriefing** after the study. During the debriefing, participants learn the true purpose of the study, why information was withheld, and how the data will be used.

As future criminal justice professionals, it is important to recognize that deception should be used only when necessary and when appropriate safeguards are in place to protect participants and maintain the integrity of the research.

Vulnerable Populations[3]

Not all people are in the same position to freely decide whether to participate in research. Some individuals may be more vulnerable to pressure, influence, or coercion. These groups are often called **vulnerable populations**. Examples include children, individuals with significant cognitive impairments, and people who are incarcerated or under criminal justice supervision.

Researchers must take additional steps to ensure that participation is truly voluntary when working with vulnerable populations. For example, children typically need permission from a parent or guardian before participating in a study. This issue is especially relevant in criminal justice research because studies often involve individuals who are involved in the justice system. Researchers must make sure that these participants understand that participation is voluntary and that choosing not to participate will not affect their legal status, supervision, services, or treatment in any way. For example, people who are incarcerated require special protections because they may feel pressure to participate or may mistakenly believe that participating could improve their treatment, privileges, or chances for release.

As future criminal justice professionals, it is important to recognize that vulnerable populations still deserve a voice in research. Excluding these groups entirely would mean that important experiences and perspectives are missing from the evidence used to inform policy and practice. Ethical research seeks to include vulnerable populations while providing the additional protections needed to safeguard their rights, dignity, and well-being.

No Harm to Participants

A fundamental principle of research ethics is that participants should not suffer unnecessary physical or psychological harm as a result of participating in a study.[4] Researchers must carefully weigh the potential benefits of a study against the possibility of harm to participants or others who may be affected by the research.[5] Potential harms can take many forms. Some are more obvious, such as physical harm (for example, injury) or psychological harm (such as feeling upset, embarrassed, stressed, or guilty). However, researchers must also consider less visible risks. These may include legal harm, such as information being disclosed that could lead to arrest, prosecution, or incarceration; social harm, such as damage to a person's relationships, reputation, or social standing; and economic harm, such as losing wages, employment opportunities, or professional credibility. Criminal justice research often involves sensitive topics and vulnerable populations. In turn, researchers must take steps to identify, reduce, and manage these risks whenever possible. As future criminal justice professionals, understanding potential harms can help you evaluate whether a study was conducted ethically and whether its findings should be considered trustworthy and responsible.

Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Data Security

Protecting participants also means considering potential harms that may result from sharing information. In criminal justice settings, the risks are often not physical but social, professional, or legal. For example, if a police officer, corrections employee, probation agent, or victim shares sensitive information during a research study, the disclosure of that information could affect workplace relationships, professional reputation, personal safety, or even legal matters. Ethical researchers take steps to minimize these risks and protect participants whenever possible.

Researchers generally protect participants in one of two ways: anonymity or confidentiality. **Anonymity** means that no identifying information is connected to a participant's responses. In an anonymous study, not even the researcher can determine which person provided specific information. **Confidentiality** means that the researcher knows who participated but does not reveal participants' identities to others. In many criminal justice studies, confidentiality is more realistic than anonymity because researchers often conduct interviews, observations, or focus groups where participants' identities are known.

Researchers must also think carefully about **data security**, which refers to how participant information is stored, protected, and accessed. Ethical researchers take steps to secure records, limit access to sensitive information, and reduce the risk of unauthorized disclosure. These protections should be explained to participants as part of the informed consent process.

As future criminal justice professionals, you may be asked to participate in research studies or work for agencies that partner with researchers to evaluate programs, policies, or practices. Understanding confidentiality, anonymity, and data security can help you evaluate whether a study is being conducted ethically and whether to participate. When reviewing research, consider how participant information was collected, how identities were protected, and whether appropriate safeguards were in place to reduce potential harm. Strong privacy protections not only protect participants but also improve the quality and trustworthiness of the evidence used to inform criminal justice decisions and practice.

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1. This section adapted from Williams, M., & Allen, M. (2022). Ethics in research. *Research methods for criminal justice students*. Weber State University. https://uen.pressbooks.pub/researchmethodscriminaljusticestudents/chapter/chapter-3-ethics-in-research/. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
2. (Spielman et al., 2020).
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9.5: Opening Scenario Revisited

Now that you have learned about research ethics, informed consent, vulnerable populations, confidentiality, deception, and harm, take a moment to return to the opening scenario at the beginning of this chapter. As you reread it, consider how your perspective may have changed.

> **A county sheriff's office partners with a local college to learn more about a new inmate classification system being used in the jail. An inmate classification system helps staff make decisions about housing, supervision, and programming by assessing factors such as risk level, safety concerns, behavior, criminal history, and individual needs.**
>
> **To evaluate the system, researchers plan to review jail records, interview correctional officers, and survey incarcerated individuals about their experiences. The goal is to better understand how the classification process works in practice and whether it is helping the jail operate more safely and effectively.**
>
> **The project appears to have the potential to provide useful information. Findings could help jail administrators improve operations, inform future policy decisions, and contribute to the broader understanding of correctional practices.**

When you first encountered the scenario, you may have focused primarily on the research question, the methods being used, or the potential findings. After learning about research ethics, however, you are likely to view the situation through a different lens. You may find yourself asking questions such as: Were participants fully informed about the study? Was participation truly voluntary? Were participants protected from potential harm? How were confidentiality and privacy addressed? Since vulnerable populations were involved, were additional safeguards in place?

Consider the people who are incarcerated in the jail. Although participation in the study is voluntary, some individuals may believe that participating could improve their standing with staff or influence decisions that affect their daily lives. Others may worry that declining to participate could make staff view them negatively. Can individuals who live in a highly controlled environment truly feel free to participate or refuse? What responsibilities do researchers have to ensure that participation is genuinely voluntary?

Researchers also ask incarcerated individuals about their experiences in the jail. Some participants describe conflicts with other incarcerated people, concerns about staff conduct, mental health struggles, victimization while incarcerated, or traumatic events from their past. What could happen if this information were accidentally disclosed? Could participants experience embarrassment, stigma, damaged relationships, retaliation, or emotional distress? How should researchers protect sensitive information and minimize potential harm?

The study also involves correctional officers. Researchers conduct confidential interviews with staff members and ask them to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the new classification system. Officers may share concerns about policies, staffing levels, supervision practices, or decisions made by agency leadership. They may also describe incidents involving specific incarcerated individuals or fellow employees.

What concerns might officers have about participating in the study? Could they worry that supervisors will learn what they said? Might they hesitate to discuss problems honestly if they fear criticism, damaged relationships, or professional consequences? How can researchers encourage candid participation while protecting confidentiality?

Researchers must also consider the information officers provide. What if an officer reveals practices that conflict with agency policy? What if an interview includes information that could identify a particular incarcerated individual, victim, or staff member? How should researchers balance the need for accurate information with the obligation to protect privacy?

Finally, imagine that the study's results identify significant problems within the jail. The findings could lead to improvements in policy and practice, but they could also attract public criticism of the agency. How should researchers report their findings honestly while avoiding unnecessary harm to individuals who participated in good faith?

These questions illustrate why research ethics is essential in criminal justice settings. Ethical research is not only about following

rules. It is about protecting people's rights, dignity, safety, and well-being while producing knowledge that can improve criminal justice policy and practice.

These are the kinds of questions that evidence-informed criminal justice professionals should ask when evaluating or participating in research. Ethical considerations are not separate from the quality of research. Research that fails to protect participants or respect their rights can undermine the credibility and trustworthiness of its findings.

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GLOSSARY

S

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