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**NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STATISTICS IN EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY
RESEARCH: A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Submitted by Department of Justice, Canada *

I. The growing and evolving demands for evidence-based research in policy development

1. Canada has not been immune to a seemingly global demand for “evidence-based” justice policy development. Signs of this increasing demand continue to surface and take hold in most departments at all levels of governments. The evidence demanded, for the most part, is quantitative. This trend towards “show me the numbers” has increased the visibility and importance of the role of statistics in policy work. At the same time, it has created new demands and challenges for policy departments’ capacity for receiving and making sense of statistical and research findings.

2. In the case of the justice system and the role of official statistics, evidence-based policy development and research has been challenging. Namely because the system does not have an exceptionally strong tradition of evidence-based policy development in which statistics play a predominant role, and there are many reasons for this to have occurred. Quite often justice policy development has been driven by what is before the courts, with less reliance on the official data. In addition, a lawyer culture prevails, particularly at Justice Canada, which translates into the policy development work that is being done. This can have a significant impact on the policy process and the views held towards the relevance and utility of official statistics of any sort. The culture of an

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institution can dictate the core attitudes and values that an organization holds towards the policy development process and the demand for statistics when making an 'informed' decision.

3. Organizations in the justice field need to encourage the development of a policy culture that is less reactive, more evidence based and more knowledgeable of broader issues, recognizing that political and legal drivers of justice policy development will always be intervening factors. Over the past number of years, we have come to the realization, however, that the notion of evidence as it is used in a social science and justice research environment has many different interpretations and applications. Different notions bring different understandings of the role of official data and statistics and how and when we use them.

4. The reality of justice policy research is that there are pressures and demands placed upon official sources of data which are often unreasonable, unplanned for, under-funded and often required within impossible timelines. The resulting strain upon official data sources requires that policy research explore other options for information and statistics. There is agreement among users of data that access to 'official' national and international data bases, statistics and trends which are comprehensive, valid and reliable are key elements for evidence-based research. Nevertheless, there is also the growing realization among those charged with policy development and policy research that these data bases are only part of the larger puzzle. It is rare that any established official national and international data bases can answer all of the varied policy questions which arise. Therefore, policy researchers must often search for answers elsewhere, mining information from a host of other sources. From a policy research perspective, rapidly changing information needs are resulting in evolving data mining strategies and practices.

II. Evidence-Based policy development starts with sound national and international data

5. The policy and operational needs for research in the Department of Justice Canada are dependent on the collection of data, official or otherwise, which derive from sound principles and techniques of statistics, methodology and social science research. These data need to withstand a variety of uses and analytical frameworks: For different situations we may need to stretch data to their analytical extreme or to boil them down to their basic elements. It is not uncommon in policy research development that data are used in ways that, while methodologically and technically sound, were not originally intended when the base was initially conceived, designed and developed. Today, policy development demands more from the data in terms of versatility and applicability, researchers and statisticians responsible for policy research push the boundaries of mining data wherever they can find it and using it in ways that were never initially intended.

6. In reaction to the growing need for more data, the 1980's and 1990's witnessed a general movement away from aggregate data bases to micro level data and records. The purpose was to develop large national data bases which were detailed enough to try and answer a myriad of questions that arose from policy development and operational priorities. We are at the point in Canada where there are excellent micro record data bases that are allowing us to organize and analyze the data in ways never possible before. Despite this continuing positive development, these bases can still only provide a portion of the information that is required. As the questions become multi-dimensional so too must the analytical approaches to the research and the data it relies upon.

III. Policy development and policy research place considerable demands and strains upon official data sources

7. The volatility of policy development can often lead to a strain between national and international data strategies, operational requirements and the needs of policy research. This results from a number of

drivers, some of which were mentioned previously concerning the role of the courts or the culture of a department, but it can also include the way national and international data bases are constructed and maintained, the short lived and elastic policy environment that these data are intended to inform and the governance structures which are in place for the data collection. One other very important, and perhaps overarching driver from a justice policy research perspective is that the development and evaluation of policy is increasingly being by applying notions and frameworks that have strong political, social and cultural elements, but are often very abstract from a quantitative perspective.

8. It is not uncommon for policy objectives to be defined in terms that are difficult to measure and even more difficult to describe. For example, federal politicians and officials have embraced the notion of accountability and consultation with Canadians. In the case of the Department of Justice, we have adopted a basic principle that we will provide to Canadians some general metrics on how well the government is dealing with matters related to the 'State of the Justice System'. This is very alluring from a policy and a political perspective. However, it can consume a lifetime of work to define it and requires the collection of massive amounts of information, much of which is not readily available. In a country like Canada, the additional challenge is the split responsibility for the justice system between provincial, territorial and federal levels of government.

9. Over and above the Constitutional dictates of the justice system, different components of the justice community measure and describe the State of the Justice System differently. To a large extent an operational perspective on the State of the Justice System can be described in trends over time in terms of dollars spent, number of cases, number of people, outcomes, recidivism and so on. Since many large official justice data bases are derived from operational systems, these sources are more suitable to providing base line metrics over time. A representation of the Justice system from this perspective is perhaps more linear and focused on two dimensions, the traditional line graph of volumes over time.

10. From the policy perspective, the notion of the State of the Justice System is far less linear and includes a wider range of information, both quantitative and qualitative, that needs to be looked at together. This does not mean, however, that this perspective is always feasible or always measurable. As an example, when the question of how the State of the Justice System can be measured is asked of people in the policy community, their perspective can be somewhat different, as represented in Figure 1. Often, their starting point begins beyond the scope of traditional justice statistics from the realization that many actors, institutions and social trends originate from outside of the parameters of the justice system, affecting its performance and capacity.

provide that data does not always move in unison, regardless of the demand or the willingness to spend more money.

V. New policy questions are often asked to address old problems creating a need for new analytical frameworks

14. The need for more and diverse data to inform evidence-based research in the justice policy domain is advancing the exploration of ancillary data collection and analysis strategies that are more flexible and adaptable. Necessity requires that policy research explore diverse statistical sources, new methodologies and new partnerships in order to answer increasingly complex and at times politically charged questions. At the Department of Justice Canada, the policy research community is looking to diverse sources of data to support the development of broader analytical justice policy frameworks, from disciplines such as health, finance and the environment to name but a few. These frameworks require research strategies that include combinations of ‘official’ national and international data, as well as data from various other sources, to better support broader and more complex policy frameworks such as: ‘*The Role of Justice in a Healthy Community*’; ‘*Social Cohesion*’; ‘*The State of the Justice System*’; ‘*International Competitiveness and the Justice System*’; and, ‘*Promoting a Law Abiding Society*’. Broader justice frameworks require the mining and analysis of data in diverse and innovative ways, and they foster new networks and partnerships. As well, they allow policy researchers to be more nimble and multi-dimensional in addressing complex justice policy issues. In turn, alternative approaches to fulfilling the data needs of these frameworks can also augment and strengthen the utility and adaptability of ‘official’ and traditional national and international statistics.

15. The benefit to applying the lens of broader policy frameworks to traditional and perennial problems is that it allows us to analyze and discuss issues in new ways and apply new and diverse data that can advance an issue. For example, there is value in utilizing a framework of ‘Justice in a Healthy Community’ which can provide a lens and a vocabulary to look at issues differently: early identification, prevention, alternative solutions, innovation, public information and access to name a few. This approach stems from the realization that justice issues of public safety and risk are important to the healthy community and that many of the solutions that our citizens are looking for and are demanding cannot come from the justice system alone.

VI. Broader frameworks require connections between partners and data

16. At the end of the day it falls to many different departments and partners to address the related socio-economic pressures from which crime often occurs. There are many occasions when we need to look to instruments of choice outside of the traditional justice responses, like legislation and/or the courts, in targeting specific problems, crime prevention through social development for example. There is a need to look differently at options on how justice systems respond to identify problems and solutions. An important tool for helping to determine the instrument of choice and options often begins with analysis of available data. The appropriate data can help determine where specific problems lie and which solutions might be most appropriate.

17. There are a number of gaps and holes in the social safety net that need to be included within a Justice lens. These types of gaps create increasing pressures on the Justice system and they cannot be addressed solely by legal remedies. This demands instruments of choice which offer broader social and economic perspectives that need to be supported by a wider range of data sources. The argument is made that problems present themselves in many different ways long before they become problems for the justice system. These are problems which can be derived from a multitude of socio-economic-demographic indicators that abound in official data sources. It is incumbent upon policy researchers and analysts to look to these sources in ways that can help to ensure that the suggested responses to issues

are also forward looking, multi-disciplinary and based upon strategic intelligence—of which data are an integral component.

18. From a government policy perspective, this type of framework brings home the reality that efforts to identify solutions to justice problems requires an active linkage with other government departments and agencies, other countries and non-governmental organizations. These linkages become even more imperative as new challenges and issues arise which can put a new dimension to old problems such as the impact that technology or transnational crime can have on the level and nature of criminal activity.

19. Often, the questions asked and the analysis demanded can only be met with linkages between traditional justice data sources as well as linkages with data sources from other diverse social and economic spheres across agencies and across countries. This level of integration can only be achieved through increased horizontality at the organizational level, across networks and across data bases. The needs of evidence-based policy development present many compelling reasons and pressures to deal with justice issues in more horizontal and inclusive ways that take into account the different drivers that the justice system must deal with.

VII. Horizontal connections of data sources need to be connected vertically as well.

20. As important as it is to reach across organizations and data bases to develop a horizontal approach to policy research and data analysis, it is equally important to drill down, to move from a macro to a micro view of justice.

21. The traditional and horizontal view of crime in Canada is widely available from the ongoing statistical work of official data agencies, specifically the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics at Statistics Canada. Often we use these data as indicators with which to benchmark the changing nature of crime problems that place stress upon the healthy community. For many issues we accept these national data as being sufficient because the policy development process will not have the patience or the time to contend with data that go beyond national metrics. However, from a policy research perspective, national metrics are simply one layer of the criminal justice picture. For policy research purposes, the picture of criminal activity as reported by police and collected by Statistics Canada, in this case over the past twenty years, is the surface we need to get under.

22. The familiar story to Canadians is that the overall rate of criminal activity reported by the police in Canada has been in decline nationally for much of the past decade. We are now at a point where the level of criminal activity is the lowest it has been since the start of the 1980s. This is a success story in many ways. However, the top layer national picture is partial at best and the story gets more complete and more complex as we dig deeper. The reality is, there are many small stories and trends which provide a far richer picture of the crime trends in communities across Canada. In order to be able to piece together the different crime pattern stories, there is a growing dependency on diverse micro data sources (economic trends and developments, demographics, legislative changes, policy shifts and the changing nature of our communities to name a few) which account for the behaviour of crime, the nature of it and its extent.

23. Unfortunately, the more explanation that data and analysis require, the more it diminishes the utility of those data for purposes of political brevity or for policy development efficiency. The deeper you delve into the data, the more difficult it is to fully understand, analyze and tell a story in small digestible sound bites – without a barrage of caveats. As you move away from the simplicity of the historical line trend it becomes a daunting task to explain patterns, trends, and the nature of crime

overall. The communications challenge, whether you are the collectors or users of the data, continues to pose problems for all of us.

VIII. New frameworks can only be successful through identifying and developing new networks

24. Data are often seen as being readily available, quickly understood, comprehensive and easily obtained -- by those who are not tasked with collecting them. The reality is somewhat different. Data can be illusive to attain and difficult to use and it is primarily the human connections which are made and the networks developed that make the data accessible, relevant and useful.

25. Over the past twenty-five years, the justice system in Canada has been very well served by a partnership of different levels of government that collaborated on a national justice statistics initiative (NJSI). The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics has been the operational base upon which this initiative has flourished. The NJSI has been the driving force of justice data collection which benefited Canadians and played a pivotal role in justice policy research over the past two decades. It remains an important element to good policy research and development. While many of the surveys in this initiative are now mature there is an ongoing need to continue building better links and more partnerships between the data bases and policy research networks to include all partners of the justice system and reflect the shared responsibilities for the justice system in Canada and the impact of world events.

26. This need for networks to grow and evolve has been enhanced by the demands of evidence-based research. While the established network of the NJSI has continued to serve the official statistical and data needs of the country, it is proving to be an important base for the growth of new networks. These new networks are branching off, starting from a common element in the partnership of the initiative but then adapting as required to address specialized data and analytical needs of various partners.

27. An example of such a branch network is something that was established with the policy development work in Justice Canada on the Youth Criminal Justice Act. A policy research and evaluation question arose concerning the short term impact (six months) of recent legislation on the levels of youth in the justice system, particularly the contacts made with police and the number of youth in custody. This data could not be extracted through the regular data bases and sources of the NJSI due to the short time involved. However, a solution was found with a research methodology that included multi-site studies of various partners in the justice system, from police, to crown prosecutors, to court administrators and probation officers. This was an ambitious plan whose success was totally dependent upon the cooperation and involvement of provincial and territorial partners from within the NJSI. A working group of officials from provincial and territorial agencies was created out of the membership of the NJSI. From there, however, the type of participation changed according to the nature of the work and specializations required. This was a network that was very vibrant and effective -- primarily because it originated from the original network of the initiative. From a policy research perspective the outcome of this new network has provided the policy research community with an effective methodology for supplementing data collection work that is not feasible through the established bases. Furthermore, it can be argued that this type of activity contributes to the vibrancy and relevance of the initiative and enhances the utility of the official data by filling in gaps and adding to what we know.

IX. It is not enough to collect data. The challenge is to use them and explain them in ways which are useful and meaningful to the audience for which they are intended

28. Earlier in the paper there was mention made about the need for and challenges of communicating data and statistics effectively to policy makers. To a large extent, the primary receptors in the Department of Justice for any official data beyond basic trends is often the policy research community.

It is often the job of the policy researcher to convert the data into meaningful pieces of information that are useful to the policy development as well as to the senior officials and Parliamentary representatives. There is limited interest or capacity for complex and detailed data bases outside of the community of researchers and evaluators.

29. A policy audience which can access and utilize vast amounts of data will limit the extent to which data sources of any sort are relied upon to feed the demand for evidence-based policy development. The reality of policy research in many departments, although not all, is that there are a limited number of individuals who are capable of dealing with and understanding large volumes of data and then converting it to information that is easily and quickly used for policy information. It is time consuming and expensive to build this capacity. This limited capacity often creates a bottle neck that can prove frustrating and limits the utility of the data.

30. It is unlikely that many government departments in Canada with policy responsibilities will be in a financial position to acquire sufficient policy research resources. The same may be true in other countries as well. Our experience to-date is that there is considerable appetite for the representation of data in ways that are easily placed in a policy context or used for the benefit of elected officials. We continue to try and expand our ability to develop products and analytical frameworks that use data in more detailed but practical ways with appropriate linkages to the policy objectives. At the same time we work with policy colleagues and decision makers to augment their ability to better understand the data they receive and why they are receiving it. At the end of the day we can do better to explain what we do with the data and why. However, there are few short cuts to building capacity to understand the myriad of surveys and how they should be used. As the issues get more complex, as the need for more variables and factors grows and as the need for more direct and simplified communication becomes more pressing, the more difficult the task and the more developed the policy research capacity has to be.

X. A lesson learned from the demands of evidence-based policy research and development

31. Too often, in system or data base design, as in many things, not enough attention is given to how the data will be used and by whom. In Canada, both the amount and quality of data collected and the analytical means applied have increased markedly in recent years. There are considerable strides being made to improve the amount and detail of data even further which will allow for complex and integrated analysis on justice issues. To continue to make data a viable and relevant component of evidence-based policy development and decision making, more strides need to be made to identify new and diverse data sources, to find ways of linking them together and to develop innovative ways to analyze them and to make them increasingly relevant beyond the statistical and research communities.
