

NIJ puts science to work for justice system stakeholders



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Nancy La Vigne PhD, Director of the National Institute of Justice, shares perspectives on how the Institute advances justice across the nation and beyond, strengthening the scientific tools and discoveries that support justice system stakeholders

Evidence-based science lights the path to better, more reliable ways to stop and prevent crime, identify and support its victims, and help build and preserve a more just and equitable society.

The National Institute of Justice's job is to generate the science that advances justice, mostly through research grants it awards to colleges, universities, and research institutes.

As Director, I manage our efforts to ensure that NIJ, firstly, invests in research that addresses today's problems while working toward a safer future and, secondly, disseminates that research widely.

NIJ works closely with state, local, and federal law enforcement, correctional agencies, those who speak for incarcerated individuals or individuals serving community confinement, tribal justice agencies, victims' rights groups and victim service agencies, school safety organizations, the courts, and others.

These collaborations help articulate the needs of justice system stakeholders in ways that can inform evidence-based policy and practice solutions that work.

New research must engage justice system stakeholders in clear, practical terms they understand

We know that products summarizing key findings from rigorous research inquiries can help justice system stakeholders only if presented to them in clear, practical terms that address real-world challenges and opportunities.

To that end, NIJ has embraced a new theme that informs all our research priorities and strategies: Evidence to Action.

Three seminal areas of NIJ research investment highlight the enormous potential of evidence translated into action:

- Advances in DNA technology, which have aided in the identification of suspects and supported case clearances and exonerations for wrongful convictions.
- The development of body armor standards that ensure that the equipment's materials and design meet the highest standards to protect officers' lives.
- Investment in tools, software, and methodologies that support the spatial analysis of factors associated with crime, which have informed both police- and community-based approaches to improving community safety.

All, in their own ways, have transformed public safety and the broader pursuit of justice. Those prime examples of actionable science were a focal point of NIJ's May 2023 National Research Conference for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Yet for more than 50 years, thousands of NIJ-supported research projects have made a meaningful difference for the justice system and its stakeholders.

Other representative, widely impactful NIJ research areas include:

- Studies on the causes, effects, and potential answers to gun violence.
- New social science that informs solutions to domestic terrorism and violent extremism.
- Vital research on violence against women, which has prompted improvements in investigations, prosecutions, and victim services.
- Development of model programming to identify and support a wide array of other types of crime victims and their needs and rights.
- Essential school safety research.
- Investments in research leading to reforms and refinements of law enforcement policy and practice.
- The creation and enhancement of hundreds of forensic tools, methodologies, technologies, and programs to bring justice to victims and their families.

A need for research through an equity lens

As NIJ strives to translate and disseminate sponsored research to justice system stakeholders in the field, we are prioritizing research that approaches issues and problems through an equity lens.

That means that researchers should be intentional in examining potential structural inequalities that may generate disparate outcomes based on an individual's gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or citizenship status, regardless of the research topic.

One recent example of [NIJ-sponsored research](#)¹ discovered that forensic medical examiners who use violet light and yellow goggles are five times more likely to detect bruising on assault victims who have dark skin.

NIJ is Part of the Office of Justice Program's Team of Justice Entities. As the scientific research, technology, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Justice Department, the National Institute of Justice partners with five other agencies under the umbrella of the Department's Office of Justice Programs to advance the Department's mission across multiple subject areas. One key partner is NIJ's sister science agency, the Bureau of Justice Statistics. The other OJP entities are:

- Bureau of Justice Assistance.
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Office for Victims of Crime.
- Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.

Together, OJP and its component agencies work to improve the nation's capacity to prevent and reduce crime, assist victims, and enhance the rule of law.

Putting science to work for justice requires clear communication of practical applications

As it partners with state, local, and federal justice agencies, including its OJP sister agencies, the National Institute of Justice is committed to an Evidence to Action philosophy.

Underlying that mindset is recognizing that when we communicate new science products to justice stakeholders in clear and practical terms, we can extend the justice system's reach in all communities.

References

1. "Detection of inflicted bruises by alternate light: Results of a randomized controlled trial," (July 2020) Scafide, K., Sheridan, D., Downing, M., Hayat, Journal of Forensic Sciences, vol 65, issue 4.