

WHY SOCIAL SCIENCE ?

Because Social Science Drives Smart Investments in Public Safety

By Nancy La Vigne, Ph.D., Chair, Crime & Justice Research Alliance

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When I make a new acquaintance and am asked the inevitable question, “What do you do for a living?,” I’m often tempted to fib and reply that I’m a middle school teacher, a real estate agent, or an accountant – professions that most every member of the public knows and understands with little need for additional explanation. Not so when I answer honestly that I’m a criminologist. That response is often met with, “Oh, so you’re a lawyer?” or “You mean like on CSI?” My reply depends on how much time I have – usually not nearly enough!

The short answer is that criminologists are social scientists. The actors on CSI who collect crime scene evidence are playing the role of criminalists, also known as forensic scientists. They answer questions like, “What evidence exists about who was at the crime scene and what transpired there?” Criminologists answer questions like, “How does the collection of DNA at property crime scenes support investigations and case clearance rates?” (The answer might interest you: DNA evidence collection [doubles the rate of suspect identification](#) compared to traditional methods.)

Criminology is a social science offshoot of sociology, but it draws its ranks from a diverse array of social science disciplines, from demography to psychology and geography. Yes, there are a few lawyers in our ranks, but while traditional lawyers answer questions like, “What are the elements of the criminal code, and how are they applied at sentencing?” Criminologists answer questions like, “What types of community supervision are effective alternatives to incarceration, and for whom?”

Despite our diversity, what unites criminologists is a shared interest in what causes crime and criminal behavior and what policies are effective in promoting safety and justice. Our work as social scientists drives smart investments in public safety, which helps people reintegrate into society, maximizes technologies to prevent crime, and bridges the divide between police and communities of color. From leveraging technological advancements to driving data-driven policy reforms at the state and local level, criminologists have a critical role in promoting the well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

Each year, the United States spends approximately [\\$80 billion](#) to house more than two million people in correctional institutions. Yet nearly four in ten people released from prison [will be back behind bars within three years](#). Criminologists can help policy makers identify which policies and programs help reduce reoffending, which ones don’t, and who can best benefit from them.

Take for example a 2013 [study](#) on the impact of halfway houses on recidivism, which found that halfway houses can

reduce recidivism for those at medium and high risk of reoffending, provided that the homes are operated well and provide services and support to aid in the reintegration process. But the study also found that people at low risk of recidivism were actually more likely to reoffend if placed in a halfway house compared with simply returning to their communities. These types of findings help inform decisions on the part of state policy makers and correctional leaders on how to invest scarce resources to yield the biggest impact on public safety.

Criminologists also inform efforts to leverage technological advancements to improve criminal justice practices. Technology is changing our world at an ever-increasing rate, and social scientists help public policy keep pace with those advancements. Big data and predictive algorithms are now being used to [forecast crime in cities](#). Social scientists both develop these tools and study how they are implemented to ensure that they steer law enforcement resources to the right locations without maligning communities already suffering from high rates of victimization.

Similarly, as tensions between police and communities of color have heightened due to high-profile police shootings of residents, criminologists are studying how technologies such as body cameras and dashboard cameras might discourage potentially dangerous interactions through a "[civilizing effect](#)."

Criminology is especially unique in that our research can have significant and long-lasting impacts on human lives. Our field utilizes data and evidence to reduce the victimization of women and children, discover ways for victims of violent crime to recover, and [give voice to disadvantaged communities](#) of color who are most likely to experience violent crime and biased policing.

Yet despite the tremendous value our discipline offers to society, investment in criminal justice research comes almost exclusively from federal research grants, which are quite modest. The share of the Department of Justice budget devoted to crime and criminal justice research historically hovers around 13 percent, with \$39.5 million [allotted](#) to the National Institute of Justice, the research arm of the Department of Justice, in 2017. By comparison, the [budget](#) for the National Institute of Health's dental research program tops \$400 million. In our evolving world, in which domestic terrorism is on the rise and technological advancements are creating new opportunities for crime, the need for increased support for research in our field has never been greater.

Whether it is reentry programs, policing strategies, or victim services, criminologists are committed to building knowledge that serves victims, promotes justice, and enhances safety. As objective scientists, our work challenges the status quo and helps develop new approaches to the problems facing the criminal justice system and the public at large. In fact, the next time I'm asked what I do for a living, I'm going to try a new response. I'll simply say that I generate knowledge that keeps people safe and promotes justice. Now that's a recognizable profession, right?



Nancy La Vigne is director of the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. She publishes research on prisoner reentry, criminal justice technologies, crime prevention, policing, and the spatial analysis of crime and criminal behavior. La Vigne was executive director for the bipartisan Charles Colson Task Force on Federal Corrections Reform. She chairs the board of the Crime and Justice Research Alliance and serves on the board for the Consortium of Social Science Associations. La Vigne holds a BA in government and economics from Smith College, an MA in public affairs from the LBJ School at the University of Texas at Austin, and a PhD in criminal justice from Rutgers University.



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