

Statement from the Executive Board of the American Society of Criminology to the Obama Transition Team on the Department of Justice

December 12, 2008

The Executive Board of the American Society of Criminology believes that there is an urgent need to strengthen the range, rigor, and openness of research on the nation's problems of crime and the effectiveness of its criminal justice policies. There are four priorities.

1. To guarantee the quality, integrity and timeliness of federal criminal justice statistics

As a consequence of inadequate funding and stagnant managerial practices, federal crime and justice statistics have deteriorated in quality and usefulness. The size of the National Crime Victimization Survey sample has decreased by almost 50%, with the result that some annual estimates of changes in victimization rates are no longer empirically sound. The Uniform Crime Reports are released at least a full year after they are gathered by local jurisdictions, and often about as long after many of the local jurisdictions have already compiled them—a lag that makes timely statistical use for policy development problematic and forces research uses to be consistently dated. As a result of budget cuts faced, the Bureau of Justice Statistics has struggled to keep its current data series up-to-date and has not been able to add new data initiatives to its agenda.

The lagging quality of innovation in crime and justice data handicaps the field's ability to assess current policies and to plan new ones. The deterioration of federal justice data series at a time when other industries in the private and public sector are ever-more emphasizing the importance of expanding their intelligence base is a core problem that impedes crime prevention and control. The nation's crime policy cannot go forward successfully without a firm grounding in data.

2. To support a science-based, open and robust federal research budget for crime and justice

The federal budget for social science research carried out by the National Institute of Justice has declined by over 50% since its peak in 1998. The number of grants awarded has fallen by almost 75% since that time. Nearly half of the total money NIJ has available to award is restricted to dedicated funding topics—program earmarks for funding priorities from Congress. The total general budget for social science research on crime is now less than \$8 million. By comparison, the US spends over \$28 billion dollars on medical research; \$600 million of that on dental care research. The British Home Office spends double the amount the NIJ does on crime research in the United Kingdom, per capita. A result of this underfunding of crime research is that many of the nation's most prominent criminological researchers are now less prone to see the federal government as a funding source for the work they believe is needed in the field, and the nation's top scientific journals related to crime and justice infrequently publish work that has been funded by the federal justice department.

A truly robust research agenda in the crime and justice arena cannot arise merely, or even mostly, from political or programmatic leadership. A priority must be given to the free pursuit of knowledge about crime and justice through a healthy level of investigator-initiated, peer-

reviewed research. While it is useful for the NIJ leadership to select broad areas for funding priorities, free competition for research ideas, vetted by rigorous peer-review from scientists, is a precondition to a vibrantly developing knowledge base about crime and justice. We urge that a significantly larger budget be provided for social science research on crime and justice, with an increased emphasis on support for independent, peer-reviewed studies.

3. To appoint NIJ and BJS directors based on professional qualifications and standing

Scientists uniformly accept that there is a certain minimum level of training and accomplishment required to affirm a person's standing as a qualified researcher, especially as regards survey research and scientific study of social phenomena. These minimum standards for proposing and carrying out research have too often not applied to the selection of the top directors of the agencies that gather basic survey research data, develop research priorities and select research projects for support. A consequence has been that matters tangential to scientific standards too often influence research priorities and research awards, to the detriment of the knowledge infrastructure of crime and justice policy, nationally. The directors of the scientific programs that seek to advance our knowledge in matters of crime and justice--the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Institute of Justice--should have the requisite credentials and experience that would give them high standing among other scientists in the field.

4. To locate research, statistics and justice technology functions in the Department of Justice in a way that would strengthen its independence and vigorous integrity

The rationale for locating the federal research functions within the Office of Justice Programs has been to promote a strong link between program initiatives of the justice department and its research priorities. Too often, shifting program priorities with the OJP have dominated these research priorities, producing a research mission that is overly-concerned with short term studies and insufficiently concerned with a need to advance the nation's long-term intelligence about crime and justice.

We believe the strength and utility of crime and justice research will be elevated by establishing a separate office or research and statistics. Therefore, the ASC Board supports the establishment of a new Office of Justice Research and Statistics, headed an Assistant Attorney General with suitable background and expertise. Such an office would house all justice statistical series, research, evaluation, and other forms of policy study, now conducted within the National Institute of Justice, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. It would also contain the justice technology research functions.

This reorganization of federally-supported crime and justice research would reestablish the justice research enterprise in ways similar to other high priority social research areas, in particular education, drug abuse, mental health, and medicine. To promote policy relevance of the research agenda of this office, we recommend the establishment of a research advisory board, comprised of leading scientists and nationally prominent practitioners, to advise the new OJRS on research priorities.