

16 Research and Evaluation

Introduction

- 16.1** The capacity for research and evaluation is indispensable in a criminal justice system that aspires to be responsive, effective and forward looking. Research into crime levels and trends informs Ministers and policymakers about the effectiveness of the system and assists them in devising new and innovative approaches for the future. It helps them target programmes on types of crime and geographical areas where the need is greatest. Of equal importance is the use of evaluation to assess the impact of policies, programmes and schemes and their value for money so that decisions can be taken on whether to continue with them and also as a basis for spreading best practice. Research has a crucial part to play in accountability mechanisms, through providing tools for the monitoring of outcomes against performance.
- 16.2** Research and evaluation are essential tools for assessing the effectiveness of the criminal justice system and provide the basis for making improvements. In Chapter 3 we have set out the principles and values that we believe should inform decisions taken about the criminal justice system. In this chapter we look at the function of research and the structures that are necessary to provide adequate research and evaluation.
- 16.3** The need for adequate evaluation of criminal justice programmes is recognised in international human rights instruments. For example, Article 9(d) of the *United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency* (the Riyadh Guidelines), Rule 30 of the United Nations *Standard Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice* (the Beijing Rules) and Rule 20 of the *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-Custodial Measures* (the Tokyo Rules) all emphasise the need for policies, programmes and strategies to be based on monitoring and evaluation.
- 16.4** The value of research has been demonstrated to us from many perspectives in the course of our review, and it is relevant that we have chosen to publish 18 research papers alongside our report. In the remainder of this chapter, we examine the research capacity in Northern Ireland and its organisation.

Current Arrangements in Northern Ireland

- 16.5** In Northern Ireland, the two main sources of research experience and expertise on criminal justice matters and crime prevention matters lie within government and the universities.
- 16.6** Within government, responsibility for social research in all departments lies with the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), which is an executive agency within the Department of Finance and Personnel. It provides research and statistical services directly and purchases services from outside in order to assist policy makers and inform debate. In the criminal justice system, NISRA staff are based in the Northern Ireland Court Service, Probation Service, Police Authority for Northern Ireland, the RUC and the Criminal Justice Directorate of the Northern Ireland Office. In addition, we should note that the Forensic Science Agency for Northern Ireland and the State Pathology Department carry out research within their own specialities.
- 16.7** The Northern Ireland Office has seven NISRA researchers and statisticians, together with support staff, in its Statistics and Research Branch. They are responsible for producing a variety of publications including a *Commentary on Northern Ireland Crime Statistics* each year and a bi-annual *Digest of Information on Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System*, which are widely used and well received. The table opposite indicates some of the most recent publications.¹
- 16.8** The Northern Ireland Court Service produces annual judicial statistics and a variety of data is published in the annual reports of the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Northern Ireland Prison Service.
- 16.9** The University of Ulster and Queen's University both have criminal justice research capacities, including the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice within the School of Law at Queen's University, and researchers from both institutions have assisted us in our research programme. The number of experienced criminologists and researchers on crime prevention and criminal justice within Northern Ireland, however, is relatively limited.

1 The last three documents listed are available at <http://www.nics.gov.uk/nio>. The other documents are available from Statistics and Research Branch, Northern Ireland Office, Massey House, Stoney Road, Belfast.

Statistics and Research Branch Publications

Title	Last Published
<i>A Commentary on Northern Ireland Crime Statistics 1997</i>	May 1998
<i>Gender and the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System</i>	December 1997
<i>Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland – Key Statistics 1997</i>	October 1998
<i>Digest of Information on the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System – 3</i>	April 1998
<i>Juveniles and the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System</i>	February 1997
<i>Northern Ireland Statistics on the Operation of the Prevention of Terrorism Act</i>	Quarterly Publication
<i>Sexual Offending in Northern Ireland</i>	May 1997
<i>Statistics on the Operation of the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act</i>	Quarterly Publication
<i>Drugs in Northern Ireland – Some Key Facts 1992-1998</i>	November 1998
<i>Preliminary Research Findings from the 1994/5 Northern Ireland Crime Survey Research Findings 1/96</i>	June 1996
<i>Fear of Crime and Likelihood of Victimisation in Northern Ireland – Research Findings 2/96</i>	November 1996
<i>Changing Patterns of Drug Use in Northern Ireland – Some Recent Survey Findings – Research Findings 1/97</i>	June 1997
<i>Use of Bail and Levels of Offending on Bail in Northern Ireland – Research Findings 1/98</i>	March 1998
<i>The Northern Ireland Prison Population in 1998 – NIO Statistical Bulletin 1/99.</i>	December 1999
<i>Fear of Crime and Victimisation in Northern Ireland – NIO Research Findings 1/99</i>	December 1999

16.10 The voluntary sector has also been a source of expertise, for example through the Centre for Independent Research and Analysis of Crime established in 1988 by the Extern Organisation. Some examples of the work for which the independent sector and universities have received funding include: reviews of prosecution process; legislation relating to changes to the “right of silence”; delay in the Northern Ireland criminal justice system; evaluation of prison programmes; a community crime survey; a study of self-reported delinquency; and an analysis of long-term trends in crime in Ireland. Current projects in receipt of funding include the evaluation of projects that aim to address the offending patterns of persistent young offenders and a pilot scheme to divert mentally disordered offenders from the formal criminal justice system.²

16.11 Given the relatively small size of Northern Ireland’s jurisdiction, NISRA staff and policy makers have been alive to the importance of drawing lessons from research carried out elsewhere and in this context Home Office research and statistical reports have been particularly helpful. Also, when putting research work out to tender, agencies are well aware of the need to attract interest from academic institutions and others outside Northern Ireland, while at the same time doing all they can to support and enhance the local research base.

² For details of this research contact the Statistics and Research Branch at the Northern Ireland Office.

Views Expressed During the Consultation Process

- 16.12** During our consultation exercise a number of references were made to research. It was seen as a necessity if we were to:
- assess the levels and impact of crime and its causes, so that strategies and policies could be properly directed to where they would have the most effect;
 - provide the tools to enable evaluation to take place;
 - measure the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in meeting its aims and objectives therefore constituting an important means of providing accountability; and
 - support equity monitoring.
- 16.13** Another theme that emerged was the desire for a strong independent research capacity in Northern Ireland. This was seen as of value not only to enable government to buy in research but also because it made for a healthy environment if academic institutions and the voluntary sector were able independently to initiate research. Some commented on the need for considered and informed interpretation of research data.
- 16.14** Some pointed to the danger that raw data, taken in isolation or out of context, could mislead or produce over-simplistic results. This was not presented as an argument against research, but rather in support of the view that publications of statistics should be accompanied by informed commentary.
- 16.15** Submissions from a number of groups highlighted specific areas where there was a need for research. These included research into the impact of the current law on domestic violence, the operation of the juvenile justice centres, women and children's experience of the criminal justice system and the effectiveness of early interventions for mentally disordered offenders.
- 16.16** As we have noted in Chapter 3 the argument was also advanced for the collection of data on the background of people working in the criminal justice system and of the people being processed through it. It was argued that the aims of the criminal justice system set out in the Belfast Agreement emphasised equal treatment for all. Therefore, gathering data on the experience of different groups, whether defined through religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, class or disability, was one way in which the system could be held accountable.

Experience in Other Jurisdictions

- 16.17** A particularly useful aspect of the visits we undertook to other jurisdictions was the opportunity to talk directly with people who were involved in the latest research into criminal justice issues. For example, Canada has a commitment to developing policy from a solid research base and their emphasis on the reintegration of offenders emerged following research into the effectiveness of various strategies of intervention. In the Netherlands there has been a policy for several years of evaluating its crime prevention initiatives and a proportion of the funding for these initiatives has been set aside in order to support evaluation. Similarly in New Zealand and Australia restorative justice programmes are the subject of long-term evaluation by independent, university-based researchers.
- 16.18** Internationally, the most striking trend that we identified in this area was the focus on evaluation. In Canada and New Zealand service providers, whether statutory or voluntary sector, would be expected to include evaluation in their business plans supporting any bid for project funding.³ The same approach is being adopted in England and Wales where 10% of the £250 million being invested by the Home Office in its three year crime reduction programme (see Chapter 11) is to be devoted to research and evaluation.

Evaluation and Recommendations

- 16.19** In undertaking this review we felt it was essential to have a full range of up to date research on the issues facing Northern Ireland in addressing crime. For that reason we conducted an audit of existing research and where gaps were identified we commissioned additional work. We have published our research that we hope will be a useful tool for academics, policymakers, voluntary agencies and others with an interest in this area.
- 16.20** The Government and the public need accurate and up-to-date statistics and research data in order to be able to gauge trends in crime and the effectiveness of the system as a whole and of particular types of intervention. This is essential if policies are to be well directed and if proper accountability is to be secured. An effective research strategy requires co-operation between the criminal justice agencies in sharing of information and there is a need for a common approach to classifying and recording data. Individual agencies have their own research needs, but it should be clearly understood that agencies do not “own” information which, subject to the requirements of confidentiality in the interests of justice or to protect individuals, should be in the public domain. We tend to agree with the report of the cross-cutting comprehensive spending review on criminal justice which concluded that the Criminal Justice Board should co-ordinate the criminal justice research programme annually

³ In Canada, www.merx.cebra.com lists all available Government funds.

and ensure proper access to its products. **We recommend that the Criminal Justice Board should be tasked with taking forward further work on the harmonisation of statistical categories across the criminal justice system and ensuring co-operation between agencies in sharing information. In all planning and framework documents, a duty should be placed on agencies to share information, provided that protocols are in place to ensure that this does not harm the interests of justice or enable individuals to be publicly identified.**

16.21 In Chapter 3 we examined the need for a set of guiding aims and principles for the criminal justice system and the need for an appropriate range of indicators was noted. For example, if work is being directed towards reducing the fear of crime it is important to develop meaningful indicators of the level of fear and whether that level is changing. Similarly the aim of a fair and equitable system requires equity monitoring. We have explained our approach to equity monitoring in Chapter 3. This will require the development of an information technology system capable of tracking cases and disposals to support research and evaluation in the future.

16.22 We see an ever-increasing need for well presented research and statistical information for the following reasons:

- to enable policy decisions and funding to be targeted on the basis of identified need;
- the policy of linking funding to evaluation;
- the need to monitor a range of indicators to assess how far the system is meeting its aims;
- the likelihood of an increased focus on crimes that are not related to terrorism; and
- the changes recommended in our report will need evaluation.

16.23 This last point is particularly important. As a result of our recommendations we expect major change and innovation in several areas, such as approaches to juvenile offending, community safety and prosecution processes. In principle, any major change in criminal justice practice requires evaluation. Funding is vital to sustain research. We note that the Home Office is setting aside major sums for evaluation of its Crime Reduction Programme. **We recommend that evaluation should be an integral part of business planning for the development of new policies and programmes and that provision for evaluation should be included in the funding of crime reduction projects. Such evaluation will need to be addressed in a proportionate manner and, especially where small sums are involved, it might not necessarily always involve the use of academic researchers or consultants. However, we have no doubt that if evaluation and the other drivers for research identified above are to be taken seriously, then there will be a need to increase the criminal justice research capacity in Northern Ireland.**

16.24 The existing Statistics and Research Branch within the Northern Ireland Office provides a variety of services to the NIO and the rest of the criminal justice system through:

- the provision of statistics and statistical analysis;
- undertaking research;
- co-operating with other organisations in providing research; and
- commissioning research and evaluation.

We recommend that the Statistics and Research Branch of the Northern Ireland Office should have responsibility for the collation of statistical information across the criminal justice system.

16.25 The challenge will be maintaining a pool of expertise in Northern Ireland that will be available to undertake research for both the Government and universities and colleges. Research capacity is currently underdeveloped, the size of the jurisdiction making it difficult to sustain a range of expertise. Researchers working for NISRA tend to move between departments and specialisms. While this may be necessary from a career development perspective, it can militate against the development of in-depth expertise in such areas as criminal justice. We note the efforts made by NISRA to ensure that a level of experience on criminal justice matters is sustained amongst their staff working within the NIO and the criminal justice agencies and hope that they will pay particular attention to this in the future. **In order to enhance the critical mass of criminal justice research expertise within government and to build on links with outside research institutions, we recommend the use of secondments and staff exchanges between government and outside research institutions. Further, we recommend that government and outside researchers should work together to build up the pool of research capabilities, and work collaboratively on such matters as research projects, seminars, conferences and training.** In adopting such an approach, government and the universities would be building on the efforts already being made by a number of individuals amongst their own statistics and research staff. Funding for research bursaries would be an option worth pursuing further.

16.26 We have already noted the importance of a small jurisdiction making use of research promoted and undertaken by its larger neighbours. **We recommend that some funding be targeted towards fostering co-operation between researchers through joint conferences and seminars, and suggest that specific research projects might be undertaken on an all-island basis.**⁴

16.27 There are clearly resource implications in some of this, and they are extremely difficult to assess. **We recommend that discussions take place between those in government responsible for justice matters, NISRA, the Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment and the universities with a view to developing a costed research strategy.**

⁴ See chapter 17.