

Making Research Count

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It's great to be back again: this is the third time I've been asked to speak before this group—twice here and once in Sacramento—and I'm honored, and it's always a pleasure. (Of course, it may simply mean that you're a bunch of masochists, but I won't go there).

I'm very pleased also to see that you are giving out the Sheldon **Messinger** award today—I didn't know until now that you had established it. Shelly Messinger was one of my own mentors—one of the most important, and most missed, of them. And he had a special respect for this organization. Shelly was not a guy who much liked going to meetings. He tended to think that most of that was a waste of precious time. And wasting time, I think, was very high on his list of unforgivable sins. But he LIKED coming to the ACJR meetings, and told me so more than once. He thought that this organization, unlike many, actually did important stuff and served an important function. And I think he was very pleased whenever I spoke here—he thought that here I was making good use of my time—something that he was not invariably sure about when it came to all of my activities.

So I hope that he would feel that what I'll talk about today is a good use of everyone's time.

My subject is "Making research count"-- so let me be clear what I mean by that.

Obviously research can "count" in lots of different ways, but what I want to talk about today is making it count in the **public arena**—the world of policy and legislation and social action.

That's not the **only** place where research might count. It can count **within** the world of the professional research disciplines in many ways. It can count in getting ahead in academic departments or moving up the ladder in public agencies. It can count, very importantly, as an intellectually challenging endeavor that is intrinsically rewarding. But it can also "count" in the sense of affecting the world beyond those arenas—shaping public policy and social action in ways that affect our lives. And here is where I think we need to do some work.

And I say this with a certain sense of urgency as well as frustration, because I think if we look at the thrust of our policies toward crime and criminal justice in recent years we can't help but be struck by how often, and how fatefully, our research has in fact **NOT** counted just when it mattered most.

That isn't always true, of course, and we can probably all think of times when criminal justice research affected policy in ways that were for the good of the justice system and the public as a whole.

But too often our research has been ignored in the making of policy, even when we've accumulated a formidable body of evidence that could make a strong case for or against certain kinds of action or intervention. Our findings—in fact the accumulated wisdom of generations that came before us—all too often get swept aside (if they're considered at all), and overwhelmed by other views—often ones that have **no research base** to support them whatever.

Want a list? Three strikes: Proposition 21: more generally, the reliance, for the past thirty-plus years, on a theoretically and empirically problematic strategy of deterrence and incapacitation as our first—and sometimes almost ONLY—line of attack against crime.

I could extend that list, but the bottom line is that the criminal justice system, both here in California and in the nation as a whole, is **not at all like the one that would** have resulted had the public and the legislatures been heeding the findings of criminological research. Things that most of us are pretty sure **won't work** well are hugely invested in, while things that we think might work rather well, or at least better than what we do now, are starved or dismissed altogether.

So the justice system we see today doesn't begin to **resemble the one we would have created** had we been calling the shots. Indeed, I've sometimes said in my less cheerful moments that if someone had set up a committee of criminologists to **design, on purpose**, the least effective and most

counterproductive approach to crime we could think of, it would look uncomfortably like what we are actually mostly doing right now.

And a lot of us feel this, and we grumble about it, but we can't do much about it—or so we think—and so we don't usually get much past the grumbling stage.

But that's not good enough, because we **really are in a mess** when it comes to the state of many of the issues that we study.

I won't dwell on this, because I think we all know the general outlines. We have a **prison system that is swollen** to the point where it is not only breaking the bank in many states but is having what are by now well-documented **adverse effects on entire communities**. We have vast populations of **offenders returning to communities** without much, if any, preparation. We have large and growing numbers of **kids growing up in families broken** and stressed by indiscriminate incarceration.

And on the other side, we have **promising programs** that flicker briefly and then wink out because nobody invests to sustain them.

So I think it's urgent that we try to figure out how to make our work count more than it now does in that world outside the disciplines--outside our own immediate and familiar turf. I'm hardly the first to say this, but what I want to convey to you today is both the urgency of that task and some thoughts about what stands in the way of "counting" more than we now do, and what we might do about it...

I'm going to talk mostly from the perspective of the **research university**, since that's where I work and the place I know best--and also the place where, not surprisingly, a lot of research in our field gets done, including much that is very good but that has approximately zero effect on public policy. But some of what I'll say has, I think, equal application to criminology and criminal justice research wherever they're practiced.

The hard reality is that there are many ways in which the culture and conventions of the research university **militate** against research "counting" in the ways I'm talking about. I say this as a generally happy employee of a major research university and a strong believer in the great value of such institutions. But the more I get to know what goes on in them—and after many years of being associated with them I have to say I'm still often **surprised** at what goes on in them—the more I think that they harbor some truly self-defeating policies, some of which are subtle, and some of which are unspoken, but all of which work together to make research less consequential than it could be.

Part of the problem involves a much too **narrow definition of what we mean by the research enterprise**—the job of research—and a tendency to **privilege some parts** of that job over others that are extremely important. Too often, we privilege what we think of as "original" research--especially that which can get us published in peer-reviewed research journals—at the expense of two other things that I think are essential parts of that enterprise: making **sense** of the mass of research we generate, through analytical and

synthetic work, and **disseminating** that work to a broader and potentially more efficacious audience than ourselves.

In other words, we spend a great deal of time generating “findings,” but we spend altogether **too little** time talking about what we think those findings **mean**—even among ourselves, much less to a wider and more diverse set of publics. And the incentive structures of the university often enforce that unfortunate imbalance.

It would be difficult to exaggerate how much the emphasis on publishing in peer-reviewed journals **drives the inner culture** of many universities today. Sure, not all of them, and the differences among them, even the few that I’ve taught in, can be great. But in many universities, and in many individual departments within them, if you do work that doesn’t wind up—and pretty darn quick—in the major journals in your discipline you won’t get very far. And indeed if you try to make deliberate efforts to move what is now often hidden research into the public arena, you may even get in trouble: not only do you not get the points you need to advance your career, but what you do can **count against you**.

This is not of course a **new complaint**, but my sense is that we have lately gotten worse, rather than better, in this respect.

Let me give you some examples—they’re illustrative, not exhaustive: just a few among many.

One comes from my own experience as someone who enjoys writing books about what I take to be big issues and then trying to get lots of people—both inside and outside of academia--to read them. I remember being interviewed for a job once at a university that shall remain nameless. It was in a sociology department. The first faculty member who interviewed me said that he really LIKED a book I'd recently published because, among other things, it was, he believed, written in such a way that it brought a lot of complicated research findings to a broader audience--that it made technical matters accessible to people for whom they usually were not.

Having said that, however, he went on to add that this same quality would probably torpedo my chances of an appointment in his department, because it meant that they were unsure how to categorize me. The fundamental problem, he said, was that the department wasn't sure if I was a sociologist or a "social analyst."

I, being rather slow on such matters, scratched my head and said I wasn't sure I understood the distinction, since if sociologists didn't DO social analysis, who would? But the distinction mattered a great deal to my interviewer, even though he was hard pressed to **define** this distinction very precisely. He didn't think it was BAD to be a social analyst--he really **did** like the book: he just thought that that kind of work didn't quite fit in a sociology department—which raised of course the thorny question of where it DID fit, institutionally speaking, if in fact it fit it all.

Another kind of example: More recently I was talking with a colleague about a junior faculty member in a noted department of criminology in a

major research university. We were agreeing that this young scholar was very capable, very hardworking, a smart guy. But my colleague said rather sadly “but you know, he’s never going to get tenure: he wastes all his time writing REPORTS”—that is, writing reports for various outside agencies with whom he worked in partnership to grapple with a variety of real world issues. In other words, if he JUST wrote a report that helped some major justice system institution change its practices, in ways that might make for more justice or less crime, that would not, my colleague was certain, help toward his tenure, and would probably hurt, since it would certainly take away time and energy from the things that WOULD help get tenure.

I once had a foreign colleague who was internationally known for the cogency and importance of his policy analyses. Once he applied for a job teaching at a major research university—not mine! Some of his potential future colleagues there complained that even though he was surely a smart fellow, he “**doesn’t do his own research.**” He didn’t get the job. As long as that kind of mentality holds sway—as long as we continue to hold analysis and theory in mild contempt—we’ll always be hobbled in making the research we do count, because some of the people who could do the best job of making it count are marginalized. Or unemployed.

It can get worse. In some academic departments and university personnel committees, books written for “**trade**” **publications**—books that are published by presses other than specifically academic ones--may not be counted as major publications at all. They get counted as something called “other professional activity”—or some such name--which labels that work as something less than fully significant in evaluating one’s value to the

university and the profession. Again, there is a systemic discounting of work that stands a better chance of disseminating the findings of research beyond academic and narrowly professional circles.

Going out and **speaking** before non-professional audiences—which I think is absolutely essential if we want to make research “count” in the ways I’m talking about—in some places gets counted, likewise, under the rubric of something like “community service”—it’s not on the same level, or even close, as writing yet another article for the journal of something or other, even if the journal is read by 47 people. In a good year.

Again, **it’s not that these activities don’t count at all** in the research institution, but that they don’t count **much**. And to the extent that this is true, then realistically, research won’t count...outside the boundaries we’ve institutionally constructed. So the process is **self-defeating**. The overly narrow institutional focus on certain kinds of technical research almost ensures that the findings of such research, no matter how useful, will be like trees falling in the forest with nobody to hear them.

The bias against synthesis and public dissemination is especially troublesome because so much of the research that now gets done is highly technical and often dauntingly quantitative, and also so closely shaped by what’s gone before—by the questions we’ve already asked and the (partial) answers we’ve already found. This means that realistically very few people outside the discipline will be able to understand it even in the most basic sense, **much less be able to contextualize it**—to understand what it **means** to them, to grasp what one of my professors used to call the “so what”

question—to be able to act intelligently as a practitioner, or a citizen, on the basis of those findings, unless they have help. But where is that help going to come from, if not from us?

In fact, I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that some areas of criminological research have become so specialized, so technical, and so driven by what's gone before that even many people **WITHIN the discipline** can't really meaningfully follow it, without help. So what this means is that the need for people who can do the work of synthesis and contextualization of research has become ever greater. Yet just as it has, that work has simultaneously become marginalized within the academic research community.

The kind of work I'm talking about is more, by the way, than just “popularization”—which is one of the terms by which such work gets trivialized and denigrated in some circles. The work of analytical synthesis and of public policy theorizing is **hard** work. Not everybody is equipped to do it. It takes a certain kind of wide-ranging intellect, plus a large dose of patience. Not to mention the capacity to stick your neck out. It is as necessary a part of the scientific enterprise as any other. And it is arguably **THE most important part** of that enterprise if our goal is to make research count beyond the boundaries of the discipline.

And the bottom line question is—again--**if WE don't do this work, who will?** Rest assured, if people like us don't interpret the world of crime and criminal justice for a broader public on the basis of what we know,

somebody else will—on the basis of something altogether different—and probably a lot less honest.

I hope I don't need to assure you that this doesn't mean I think technical research isn't important. Of course it's important. I couldn't do without it. But I think **the balance is off**--the balance between the production of technical findings and the analysis, synthesizing, and dissemination of them.

The result of that imbalance is that a very crucial **middle ground** disappears—the middle between technical research on one hand, and uninformed (but consequential) public discourse on the other. It's the middle ground where real “social analysis” that pulls together what we know and makes it accessible to nonprofessionals exists. Or should exist. But since it doesn't much exist, the result is that what we know generally **stays** in the journals, and in the professional conferences, and nobody but us knows about it. Our students may know about it. But the rest of the world, including policy makers and just plain voters and an awful lot of justice practitioners, does not. And so they go their own way, making important decisions that are enormously fateful for the justice system and much else in our collective life, while we mostly gnash our teeth and bemoan the wretched state of things. And, correctly, feel powerless and ignored.

There are, of course, counterexamples--there are **some channels** by which research does indeed get into the public arena—through, for example, news releases, or the patient work of some individual journalist. And in some places, at some times, there have been useful collaborations established between researchers and public agencies, that have opened pretty significant

channels, at least for a while. But most of those have been relatively short-lived. And few of them have involved a very broad chunk of the potential public. So it remains true that whether research gets out effectively to a wider world of policy and action, or not, is now almost random—**distressingly hit and miss**. And indeed much important work never, for all practical purposes, gets out there at all.

(I have to say with all respect that there are times when I'm in some legislative or public setting, or talking to a journalist, when I'm taken aback by **how little folks really know**—even people in positions of considerable authority or influence, and even about things that many of us would assume that “everybody” knows).

So to summarize this: the modern research university (and the professional disciplines which increasingly drive the university's conception of what it's job is) often institutionally rewards research that (a) is narrowly tailored to the publication imperatives of the key journals in its discipline, that (b) focuses on the generation of new, even if narrow, research findings, usually ones that address questions within already well furrowed fields, as opposed to analyses of the meaning or import of those findings, and that (c) often actively penalizes work that is explicitly designed to broaden and deepen the audience, and hence the impact, of what we do.

Let me repeat, so I won't be thought to be **exaggerating** or painting with too broad a brush, that there are **variations** in all this—the issues I'm pointing to are expressed differently at different institutions, and there are examples of programs and institutions where the mentality I'm criticizing is much less

evident. But I'd argue that the problems I'm talking about are common enough to constitute an important set of obstacles to making our work count.

So what might we do about it?

I think we can attack this problem on two related levels: getting rid of some of the **negative** incentives that block the social impact of research, and increasing the **positive opportunities** to broaden that impact. Let me just offer a couple of thoughts for now.

Within the universities, we need to start rewarding the kinds of scholarly work that we now, too often, **don't reward**: dissemination, synthesis, public presentation of findings and issues, engagement with agencies and institutions and audiences beyond the professions; writing for a wider public--rewarding, in short, the development a new kind of "**public criminology**" and providing incentives for our colleagues and students to do that work.

We should set up **training programs** to groom students to do this kind of work, and in the work of "public" criminology generally--which, again, is hard and demanding work and really **REQUIRES** more serious preparation than we now give it. Then we need to ensure that it gets acknowledged in the nitty-gritty arenas of hiring and promotion.

And we should approach **funding sources** with the idea of getting them to invest in that kind of training. As it is now, we have funding for original

research—not, of course, as much as we'd like, but we have it—but virtually none for analysis and dissemination. That, again, is a recipe for marginality.

We need, in the same vein, to create more **institutional settings** where researchers, policy makers, journalists, the general public, community leaders and nonprofit organizations can come together. Not merely to **share the results** of research, though that's important, but to fashion a more deeply “public” approach to how we decide what research gets done in the first place.

We should, in other words, develop more and deeper partnerships, but our notion of “partnership” should also **expand**--to include not only public agencies, or legislatures, but also communities and the nonprofit organizations that serve them, as well as shapers of public opinion. And we should regard them **not just as consumers** of research but **as partners** in a **real** sense—actively involved in framing the questions we ask as well as just listening to what we have to say about our findings.

And though this may be a little more controversial, I think we also need to develop more effective **advocacy** organizations through which the collective knowledge of the field is brought to the public table—organizations that will allow us to be more assertive about social policy than we've let ourselves be up to now. There are a couple of ways we could do this. Either the criminological organizations we already have now need to get more actively engaged in the public arena, or there need to be **new** organizations through which researchers and scholars in this field collectively make their voice heard.

Now, I know that many people in our field **worry** about having our professional organizations enter the public fray in this sense. I've had lots of conversations about this issue, for a long time. And what I hear from some of my colleagues is the **fear** that if we as a profession—or several related professions—join together to produce collective opinions on matters of legislation or public policy, we will lose our image—maybe even our reality--as disinterested, objective researchers and theorists, and we'll be seen as just another bunch of political actors—just more folks with an axe to grind--just another “special interest.”

Our job, in this view, is to do the empirical work which (we hope) others will use to shape their decisions--and that's it. Thinking about—much less **talking** about—the moral, social and political implications of public policy is **somebody else's job description**. And, in this view, we blur that division of labor at our peril.

I understand that position, but—**with all respect**—I don't agree with it.

Even if we leave aside a lot of cogent questions about whether it's really **possible** for social science research to achieve the sort of neutral objectivity that this position assumes, I think it fails to comprehend the full nature—the full seriousness--of the threat to truth in our time. Underlying this view, I think, is the sense that truth is a fragile thing—that it's easily **contaminated** by coming into too much contact with the gritty and dirty world outside of the research enterprise. Well, maybe so. But that's only part of the problem. The other part of the problem is that **truth can easily be overwhelmed** in

the real world by untruth, and indeed historically that has probably been the case more often than not. The definitions of social reality are always the object of **struggle and contest**. Staying OUT of that struggle doesn't mean that everyone out there will graciously and judiciously wait for the results of further research before they make their own definitions of that reality and act upon them accordingly.

Truth doesn't thrive unless it is assertively promoted and nurtured; we can rest assured that if it is not, it will be simply shoved aside by interests that do not share our own laudable concern for the requirements of evidence and careful analysis. Truth needs advocates, truth needs defenders.

And my own feeling is that truth has never needed advocates and defenders **more than it does today**. That's of course not only true for the issues we study. I think that if we look around ourselves today, both globally and here at home in the United States, we find ourselves in a situation in which the values of honest science are under question—make that under **siege**—as they've never before been in my lifetime (and folks, **my lifetime** is becoming a disconcertingly large chunk of years).

We've got the principles of **evolution** coming under attack with no more evidence than there was back at the time of the Scopes trial. We've got bought and paid for researchers still telling us that there's no such thing as **global warming** and that if there were it wouldn't matter anyway--when all around us nature is starting to go nuts, with terrifying and tragic consequences.

But **our own field**, too, has never been insulated from that kind of assault: and today we may be witnessing an escalation of the politicization of research in criminology and criminal justice—a politicization that takes both subtle and quite blatant forms. We have, for example, the spectacle of Justice Department officials doing their best to quietly bury the relatively innocuous finding that police do indeed use racial and ethnic cues in searching motorists—and then firing the research official who protests.

So even when we DO try to stay out of the political fray, we get pulled into it willy-nilly by the other side. If we don't want to see our work—and the values that sustain it-- slowly but steadily chipped away, or neutered, we'll have to fight for it. And more positively, if we want our work to guide the way justice gets done in this country more than it has so far, we need to stop being shy about putting that work out there in the public arena and, if necessary, fighting for it. And this means putting up a much bigger fuss than we usually do when we see policies being promoted that fly in the face of everything we believe to be true.

Does that mean we **abandon our longstanding standards** for the proper conduct of research? Of course not. Does it mean we should become involved, as a profession, in **party politics**? Hardly: after all, the massive tendency in recent years for policymakers to ignore the findings of criminal justice research is, unhappily, a bipartisan phenomenon. I do think it means that we need to become **louder, more effective, more consistent and more visible advocates** for the truth—for scholarship versus nonsense in the shaping of crime policy. And to do that we need organizations that are specifically designed to take on that job.

We need our own versions of Physicians for Social Responsibility—our own versions of The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.

So consider this an invitation to talk more about how we might do this—anytime.