MAKING RESEARCH USEFUL TO POLICYMAKERS

Barbara R. Williams

October 1987
The RAND Corporation

Papers are issued by The RAND Corporation as a service to its professional staff. Their purpose is to facilitate the exchange of ideas among those who share the author’s research interests; Papers are not reports prepared in fulfillment of RAND’s contracts or grants. Views expressed in a Paper are the author’s own and are not necessarily shared by RAND or its research sponsors.

The RAND Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90406-2138
This paper was the basis for a keynote address, given at the September 1987 annual meeting of the Criminal Justice Statistics Association in San Francisco. The leadership of CJSA thought members might benefit from learning how RAND tries to make its research useful to policymakers. Hopefully, a broader audience of research colleagues and policymakers will also find the discussion of some interest.

The original audience will remember a less formal presentation, punctuated by one-liners that are missing here. That was how I sought to reward the courageous folks who listened so attentively after a large dinner on the fourth evening of meetings. Readers who can choose their time and place receive the more solemn presentation herein.
I have written this paper in response to a request from the Criminal Justice Statistics Association to describe for their members how The RAND Corporation brings its research to exert influence on policy. To provide a context for this discussion, I first describe a bit about how RAND is organized and how it "works."

The RAND Corporation is a private, nonprofit organization whose overall mission is to conduct research in the public interest. RAND staunchly defends the independence of its research findings by refusing to undertake proprietary research or to undertake research for sponsors who will not agree at the inception of projects to open publication of the research findings they yield. About 25 percent of RAND's publications are classified; even these documents are distributed as widely as possible to those at appropriate clearance levels and "need-to-know" status. RAND has a research staff of about 550 people and annual revenues of approximately $75 million. While the main corporate office is in Santa Monica, California, RAND also has an office in Washington, D.C., with about 65 research staff.

RAND is a matrix organization, containing both research departments and research programs. There are six research departments: Behavioral Sciences, Economics and Statistics, Engineering and Applied Sciences, Information Sciences, Political Science, and System Sciences. The major functions of the departments are hiring and overseeing the professional development of staff; evaluating their performance; and overseeing the final peer review of RAND publications. Separate from the departments, but fed by their staff, are 22 research programs at RAND, six of them in the Domestic Research Division, and the remainder in RAND's three National Security Divisions. The six domestic programs are Civil Technology, Criminal Justice, Education, Health Policy, Labor and Population, and Regulatory Policy. The three National Security Divisions encompass a broad array of substantive areas of analysis ranging from International Economics to Defense Resource Management. It is the job of RAND's program managers and staff to establish research agendas, get support for them, put project teams together, execute the research, and assure its quality.
In addition to its departments and programs, RAND has created, over the last several years, numerous centers and institutes--in health, education, Soviet studies, and civil justice. Finally, RAND is a degree-granting institution, offering a Ph.D. in policy studies to students in the RAND Graduate School. Students work half-time on RAND research projects and spend half-time in graduate classes, most of which are taught by RAND staff.

With this introduction to RAND's organizational parts and substantive breadth, let me proceed to the real questions I have been asked to address: How does RAND decide on the work it undertakes and bring its research results to bear on, influence, and inform public policy?

The norms that govern whether or not we undertake a particular research project or enter a new substantive area are fairly simple and easy to remember. First, we prefer to work on issues that we believe have long-term importance. We're not very good at making policy-worthy conclusions about a new area of inquiry in a short time, and we're not interested in getting better at that. In this way, we differ significantly from consulting firms. However, we don't always eschew short-term, intensive-effort projects. Indeed, in some areas, projects like that represent us at our best, but only when the work pulls on experience and expertise built up over a long period of time. Second, we consciously choose work that our staff can and want to contribute to. RAND is very much a "bottom up" organization. Our research agendas grow mostly out of the staff's research interests, not management's. To be sure, RAND managers propose new research areas or new projects in existing areas from time to time, but they don't--and can't--force staff interest. Finally, RAND prefers to undertake work on topics where we have something unique to offer. When we believe that others can provide the same expertise we would, or do the work even better than we might, we try to stay out of the area. When we do work on the same issues that others do, we have usually concluded that our competitive edge lies in the ability to put together large, multidisciplinary teams of researchers for long time commitments.

Of course, deciding on the areas of research we want to undertake is closely related to acquiring support for them. We receive support in several different ways. It may be surprising to many that the most common
way of acquiring support for particular projects at RAND is through negotiating a research agenda each year with sponsors under a five-year umbrella contract that stipulates a multimillion dollar level of annual support. This is possible because in RAND are three federally funded research and development centers (FFRDCs) reporting to three parts of the government: the Air Force, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the Army. About two-thirds of our work is developed in this framework, which provides the arena for a sustained "back and forth" between RAND staff and sponsors about what is important, what is doable, why, and how much it should cost. No doubt influenced by RAND's normal way of doing business, staff not working in the FFRDCs nevertheless operate similarly. That is, we try to encourage existing or potential sponsors to put money into efforts that we believe are important and that we want to work on. Sometimes this requires competing for work that we have suggested; sometimes our qualifications are sufficiently unique to allow sole source support. But important to our ultimate influence on policy, this manner of developing support requires sustained contact with potential and actual sponsors so that a mutually recognized set of problems and hence research topics can be developed. Of course we also bid on Requests for Proposals and solicitations that accord with our interests and strengths. About 10 percent of our total revenues are generated that way.

Finally, people—often quite unexpectedly—come and ask us to help them. One of the most vivid of these experiences for me (because it affected my research program) happened about five years ago, when our president received a phone call from the president of the Conrad Hilton Foundation, asking whether RAND could help that Foundation figure out what it might do to reduce drug abuse among adolescents. That call marked the beginning of a sustained relationship between RAND and the Foundation from which has issued a research effort that will soon yield evidence of national significance about adolescent drug use and its prevention. In this instance, as in many others in RAND's history, our sponsors strongly influence our research agenda, and we hope always to be able to recognize the coincidence of their interests and our capabilities.
Having decided on the issues we want to pursue with appropriate sponsors,* and having accomplished the work, what further steps do we take to assure the influence of our research on policy? Over the years, I have gleaned three important lessons from working at RAND which, if not sufficient to guarantee policy impact, are certainly necessary. First, **know your audience.** There is simply no substitute for a deep understanding of the people and organizations you are trying to affect. One should know the mission of the relevant agency or agencies; the principal players in that policy arena; their major constraints and aspirations. More specifically, one should know the backgrounds and career paths of the relevant decisionmakers, how they justify their budgets, from whom and over what they receive the most grief and who are their constituents. For much of RAND's research, the sponsors are also the audience for the findings. But some areas, e.g., criminal justice, are different. The major policy-making domain for the type of criminal justice research we do at RAND is at the state and local level, even though research funds come from the federal level. Those of us in RAND's Criminal Justice Program must therefore seek to establish with our sponsors a research agenda that includes issues we want to work on, but we must attend equally to the practitioners whose work should be most affected by our research. Let me stress that the needs, questions, and concerns of our sponsors and audience are of great interest and importance to us but not because they are necessarily the ones they should have. RAND reserves the right to give bad news, to refuse to answer questions as posed, and to suggest other priorities to our sponsors and potential sponsors. I doubt that there is any long-established RAND sponsor who has not received a report from us or a suggestion for project focus that has brought grief to established expectations. To behave that way (and win acceptance) requires credibility and plausibility. Those qualities, in turn, call for the judgment and sensitivity that derive from a sound understanding of our audience.

Another extremely important lesson, often difficult for our staff to accept, is that facts don't speak for themselves. I fear that university

---

*RAND's funding comes primarily from the federal government, but we also receive support from private foundations and private industry. RAND's Criminal Justice Program draws its annual revenues of about $2.5 million almost equally from the federal government and private foundations.
training, wittingly or unwittingly, transmits the opposite impression—that factual displays will reveal "the obvious." Certainly, few graduate schools urge the same attention to the implications of one's research as to the research itself. This training gap manifests itself in the most common problem with first drafts at RAND, which is the typically small paragraph called "policy implications" at the end of a frightfully long and detailed research document. That paragraph usually reads just as expected—as if it were written at the last minute by an exhausted analyst who has come close to forgetting any audience but his or her closest colleagues. At this point, RAND tends to interject its more seasoned analysts. They, in turn, demand more serious attention to the questions, "Why should anyone care about these conclusions, and if they do care, what should they do about them?" These questions cannot be answered well without a thorough understanding of the intended audience, nor can it be assumed that the audience will "see" how interesting and useful the research actually is. The analyst must do that work for decisionmakers. Sometimes the research really doesn't clarify things enough to provide options or advice. (We tend not to issue press releases under those circumstances.) More often it turns out that the analysts need to spend more time and hear more reactions from people to grasp the significance of their findings.

The reactions of the policy audience itself are particularly important, as well, at this point. We consistently find the pre-publication reactions of people in our intended audience revealing and helpful. For example, comments from our sponsors and practitioners recently led us to contrast uses of predictions about individual behavior with predictions about groups with different risk profiles. Prior to their input, we had stressed only the issues surrounding individual prediction. Over time, we have found that the risk of upset, anger, and premature defensiveness from potentially unhappy sponsors and audiences is usually outweighed by the benefits of mutual exchange and discussion before our work becomes public. Long discussions between chief probation officers and RAND project staff changed our first study of felony probationers from a draft document which infuriated and upset practitioners to a final one they saw as helpful. The conclusions remained unchanged.
Finally, **timing is everything**. Not surprisingly, the impact of research is most certain when a policymaker asks a question and someone has the answer. But good research of the type RAND seeks takes a long time. Beginning the research when the question is asked almost assures that the answer will be produced long after the interested audience has moved on. Thus we try to anticipate the next generation of issues years before they grow salient to decisionmakers. This is the trickiest aspect of assuring that research will influence policy, and at RAND we rely on the norms that govern what we work on, and luck, to be successful. It does help to work over long periods of time on issues that have sustained social importance. It helps to pay close attention to staff interests and concerns. It helps to stay in contact with the changing agendas of foundations and government agencies.

Four of RAND's major areas of criminal justice research today reflect "bets" that we made between 1975 and 1982 on what would have long-term importance in the field. Those are: research on career criminals in which we continue attempts to improve the identification of high rate offenders; research on community crime control where we are just beginning to measure the effectiveness of various attempts to prevent or diminish the criminal activity of offenders outside of prison and jail; research on the effectiveness of private sector attempts to rehabilitate serious, chronic juvenile offenders and the effectiveness of new "aftercare" initiatives with those same types of offenders; research on drug enforcement and a school-based prevention program. The drug prevention research will yield results beginning in the next year, but results from the other studies are two to five years away. If our bets have been correct, we will still find an interested policy audience.

Continued progress in criminal justice, however, means that we should now be anticipating the next set of issues that will need funding in the late 1980s and early 1990s so that results can issue late in the next decade. As my concluding "highwire" act, I'll share with you my best judgment about some of the important issues of the next decade. I believe that the individual choice model by which criminal behavior has been most rigorously "explained" in the last decade or so will be broadened to include the behavioral effects of certain physiological processes and social environments. Be clear, I do not foresee a return to a belief in "criminal"
genes. Rather, I have in mind the growing scientific literature on the effects that hormones and other chemicals, including drugs, have on perception, learning, and behavior in every human being starting with the fetus. Harmful physiological conditions, variously induced, contribute to many forms of chronic problem behavior of which actions that defy social mores (and are defined as delinquent or criminal) are one type. I believe that, in time, and with better evidence than we have now, both the diagnosis and treatment of chronic problem behavior will include serious attention to the physiological bases of behavior.

Common sense has long proclaimed and social scientists long agreed that the three institutions which exert the most powerful influence over their members are the family, peers, and "neighborhood."* However powerful as an influencer of behavior, the family has never been a comfortable "target" of intervention for governments, whether federal, state, or local. Nor is the well-recognized power of peers and neighborhood given much beyond verbal recognition in rehabilitation attempts that, in reality, are usually directed at individuals when they are away from their accustomed settings. I believe these current tendencies will shift in the 1990s. Our society is being forced more and more to recognize and protect the rights of individuals to decent treatment by their closest kin. And our society is being forced more and more to recognize its dependence on the benefits produced by well-functioning families. One of those benefits is children who can learn, work, and contribute to the social good. I believe that the next generation of social programs will seek to target families as their point of intervention. Finally, we have witnessed in this decade a monumental behavioral change: the transformation of cigarette smoking from a custom of the popular to the mark of a pariah. Mounting social pressure against smoking adds powerful persuasion to stop (or not to start) even to weakly motivated individuals. In like manner, I believe that programs which attempt to reduce or contain the addictive-like criminality of serious, chronic offenders will be looking for explicit ways to counteract the implicit acceptance those behaviors find in some neighborhoods.

*Although neighborhood has a vaguer identity in today's urban flux of transitory, disorganized, hard-core poor, I use it to mean the shared experience of a large group of people who may live contiguously without knowing one another very well.
For us at RAND, anticipating these shifts impels us to try to interest sponsors in funding research that will improve our understanding of the interplay of physiological, psychological, and sociological influences that, together, create and sustain chronic problem behavior. Right now, we have just fractionated glimpses. Further, someone needs to pull together and synthesize what is already known about interventions that require family, instead of individual, participation. Such interventions sound incredibly expensive and perhaps impossible to the struggling taxpayer. But their costs cannot be fairly assessed until we can calculate their benefits.

For you who assemble state criminal justice statistics, these shifts should lead toward more cooperation with your fellow data collectors in education, welfare, health, and human resources. If I am right about new directions in the 1990s, then questions about the connections among all these areas of a human being's life will one day bombard you. If you can put together the numbers and understand what they mean for your state policy-makers, believe me, you'll affect their decisions.