Building a Research and Policy Lab in a Prosecutor's Office

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Introduction

Since 2018, the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office (DAO) has centered evidence-based practice by creating an internal research and policy lab. The District Attorney's Transparency Analytics (DATA) Lab conducts and facilitates research into traditionally-opaque areas. Complementing measures such as recidivism and length of prison sentences, we apply a public health lens to the criminal legal system, endeavoring to study the impact of our policies on social welfare outcomes including access to services, income, and economic distress.

Study Design and Methods

Here we describe how building a research and policy lab in a prosecutor's office positions us to better measure the effects of drug policy and enforcement on health. Using a research project we supported in early 2018 to study the prior criminal legal contacts of people who fatally overdosed in Philadelphia as an example, we compare and contrast how that work was performed then with how it could be performed now. After describing the methods used in 2018, we highlight key areas of data development pursued since to leverage the wealth of criminal legal administrative data available to the DAO – and how the same study would be accomplished today. The key areas include 1) making data researchable by exploring, cleaning, linking, and organizing, 2) facilitating data sharing by creating a data dictionary and de-identification tools, and 3) becoming experts in data and privacy laws. We then describe how a process that required hundreds of hours of manual data work in 2018 could be done in a fraction of the time today. This case study demonstrates the potential of creating a researchable office in the prosecution space. Additional examples of research we are currently supporting at the nexus of public safety and public health are provided, followed by a discussion of challenges and opportunities going forward.

Challenges and Opportunities

Six interrelated challenges and opportunities are highlighted:

1. Lack of a case management system (CMS): While our office has access to police and court data, the lack of a robust internal CMS is a limitation, but also an opportunity – we are working to build a new one.
2. Data-driven systemic change while protecting individual privacy: Systemic problems require system solutions, but integrating data among agencies makes protecting individual privacy all the more imperative.
3. Ameliorating pain points for research: e.g., the case study.
4. Expanding data library, de-siloing data from a legal and technical standpoint: what data to acquire, how to acquire and share data with various restrictions.
5. Automating and internally reproducing research partner's work: Consistently translating research into policy and practice as gold standard.

6. Evolution of what is possible: We are a new unit making rapid progress, expanding the range of research questions our data can help answer.

Discussion Questions

1. In your experiences, what has made it easier or more difficult to form collaborations between government agencies and external collaborators to study policy changes, conduct interventions, or engage in research? Please include specific examples of agencies or think tanks have you worked with that you felt went about research, data sharing, and partnering in the right way (e.g., Agency X has a great data request form, Agency Y has lots of data available online, Agency Z uses research to inform policy).
2. What are some metrics you keep track of to show the efficacy of your work beyond criminal legal outcomes?
3. How can government make rich data sets widely available without compromising either privacy or researchability? Deidentification, k-anonymization, and adding statistical noise all have drawbacks, but generating custom datasets regularly is also difficult and time consuming.