

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/feds-fund-justice-innovation>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Yesterday was the deadline for public and private agencies in the U.S. to submit proposals for the federal government to fund field-generated innovative strategies to address crime and justice problems. This [grant program](#) contrasts with the vast majority of government solicitations these days, which fund replication of evidence-based programs that have already been evaluated and shown to work. This federal initiative is a much-needed recognition that we don't have proven solutions to all of our problems and that we have to continue to innovate. It's a good start; let's hope the government's investment is big enough and sustained long enough to match the need for new solutions.

The government's relatively recent focus on evidence-based practices is a good thing (so long as there is funding to create the evidence base). Tax dollars should be invested in strategies that have been shown to be effective. The problem is, there are still many crime and justice problems that we don't have proven models to address. For example, recidivism rates remain above 50 percent, domestic violence persists, and many teenagers with low literacy end up in the criminal justice system. We need to develop new solutions to those problems.

The thing is, developing innovations costs money. Ideally, innovations should be based in empirical research about the problem and evaluations of related programs. They should take into account the experiences of communities around the country and the world that have developed their own solutions. And they should incorporate the perspectives of government agencies that administer the justice system, individuals who go through the system, and other stakeholders. Once developed, they should be tested in carefully planned experiments where their impact is evaluated.

Some say that foundations, which are often enticed by innovative programs, should fund the development of innovations and the government should pick them up once they're proven. However, foundation giving to justice issues is tiny compared to what is required. Only a small number of foundations nationally fund criminal justice at all, and the largest among them, the JEHT Foundation, just went out of business, a casualty of the Madoff scandal.

This solicitation is a recognition by the Obama Justice Department that the government should support the development of innovations and not just proven strategies. This is an appropriate, and necessary, use of taxpayer funds if we want our government to address problems of crime and justice fairly and cost-effectively and to evolve as our society advances. It remains to be seen how much the Justice Department will invest and how long this investment will be sustained.

How much should the government invest? Maybe we should come up with a percentage of expenditures that is reasonable to spend on innovation. According to the Administration's 2010 budget proposal on the OMB website, more than 14 percent of the military budget is spent on research and development. The U.S. spends about six percent of its health care dollars on medical research. With the federal government and states spending about \$68 billion a year on the correction system alone, and much more on policing, courts, and probation, even 6 percent would amount to a lot of money. I think it would be money well spent.

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