



Transcript: Evidence-Based Justice— The Role of Statistical Analysis Centers: An Interview with Phil Stevenson

The Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Justice Podcast Series is designed to provide the latest information in justice innovations, practices, and perspectives from the field of criminal justice. In this edition, BJA Acting Director Jim Burch talks with Director Phillip Stevenson of the Arizona Statistical Analysis Center about the role of statistical analysis centers, the services they provide at the state and local levels, and their involvement with state administering agencies.

Jim Burch: Hello friends and colleagues. I'm Jim Burch for the Bureau of Justice Assistance, and welcome to another edition of BJA's Justice Podcast Series. Today, we invite you to join in our conversation with Phil Stevenson, the Director of the Arizona Statistical Analysis Center, as we discuss with him the role of the statistical analysis centers [SACs] generally and how they can play an important role within the state in partnering together with the administering agencies that handle the Justice Assistance Grant [JAG] funding, as well as partnering with state and local agencies to implement evidence-based practices within the justice field. I've learned in my role here at BJA that the statistical analysis centers do some excellent work and can provide a lot of information to all of us in helping to guide our efforts to improve justice systems and to improve safety in our communities.

So, it is a great pleasure to be with you here today, Phil, and [I] look forward to asking you just a few questions about the roles of the statistical analysis center. If we could, Phil, I'd like to start off a little bit, just tell us a little bit about what the statistical analysis center is and, if you would, just tell us a little bit about yourself as well so that we have an idea about who the statistical analysis centers are as well as what they do.

Phil Stevenson: Good morning. Sure, I'll start with just a little bit about myself. I've been working in statistical analysis centers in both Illinois and Arizona for 13 years, since 1997. In both states, the statistical analysis center is co-located with the state administering agency [SAA]: in Illinois, the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority; and in Arizona, the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission. More generally, statistical analysis centers are state-based data and research centers. All 50 states have a statistical analysis center, two territories (Puerto Rico and the Northern Mariana Islands), and the District of Columbia also has a statistical analysis center.

In terms of the statistical analysis center's role, it is to some degree dependent upon the agency that houses the center. For those of us that work in state administering agencies—and

there are about 36 statistical analysis centers that are housed in state administering agencies—that role includes providing data and research support to the state administering agencies. Other SACs' roles are dependent on the agency that houses them. For example, many SACs are in the state police agency and therefore have responsibilities connected to that agency's responsibilities (for example, criminal history repository information and state police operational support).

Jim Burch: Well, that's great. And when you say SAC, we're referring to the statistical analysis center. And it—as it was pointed out and helped me understand earlier, when a lot of us hear the word SAC, we think we're talking about a position within a local federal enforcement agency. When we say SAC here in this conversation, we are talking about a statistical analysis center, and for those who are listening to this conversation today and wondering what a state administering agency is, these are agencies that are designated by the governors to administer the Justice Assistance Grant funding, as well as other federal funding that comes to the states and is then administered within the state by a single agency. So that is what we mean by a state administering agency, or an SAA.

Now, Phil, you and I had a chance just to talk for a couple of minutes this morning before we began this discussion, and one of the things that I mentioned was how interested we are in the work that your office has done; in particular, you have done a couple of reports that I think are fascinating that others around the country should hear about. One of them is a report called *Homicide in Arizona*; I think the latest one may have been released on December 2009. But the other one is called the *Fill the Gap Report*, and this looks at some of the overall processing issues within our justice system, organizational issues, I believe, in expenditures. If you could maybe just take a minute to tell us about what those reports are and how they—if they are representative of what you do overall within Arizona.

Phil Stevenson: Sure. In fact I think those are two great illustrations of the types of work that statistical analysis centers can do. The *Homicide in Arizona* report was really driven by our constituents' interest in better understanding violence, particularly homicide, in Arizona. As you know, UCR [Uniform Crime Reports] has basic information on the frequency of homicide and the distribution of homicide across the state, but we don't really know as much about those contexts, those characteristics of victims and offenders that may or may not have contributed to homicide. And homicide is a very

significant issue—an act of extreme violence—and research can inform the practice to prevent and reduce the frequency of homicide. That was the motivation behind the report. This is an example of where research, I think, can inform potentially policy and practice.

The other example, the *Fill the Gap Report*, I think, is an illustration of how we can—when I say we, I mean statistical analysis centers and our staffs—can inform state administering agencies in the administration of grant funds. Fill the Gap is not a federal grant program; it is a state grant program that was created through the legislature that was used to fill the gap in the case processing, in the barriers to case processing, kind of working on making the system more efficient. And so, the statistical analysis center monitors the administration of those grant funds in partnership with the program that it administers. And, I think, that is a very good example of the collaboration that can occur between statistical analysis centers and state administering agencies. And, even as importantly, not just with the federal funds, but the local funds that many SAAs also administer.

Jim Burch: Well, that's fascinating. So the *Fill the Gap Report* is actually a report of a program that your office administers then, if I understand correctly. And so you look at where the funding gaps are within the states?

Phil Stevenson: Well, we look at—these are—it's a funding formula that provides funds to both prosecutors' offices and defense attorneys' offices. The intention is to provide them resources so they can lessen the gap, if you will, in case processing times. One of the principles of our criminal justice system is the efficient processing of our cases. That fund was directed to improve case processing times in Arizona, and the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, and by association the statistical analysis center, was tasked with monitoring the use, the expenditure, and the contribution those funds made to reducing those case processing times.

Jim Burch: Well, that's great and, as you point out, this is a program and a funding effort of the Arizona state legislature, not federal funding, which is important to know. And now we have mentioned a couple of times the Arizona state administering agency, which happens to be the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, where our good friend and great partner, J.R. Blackburn, has run that office for quite a while. So [do] you work closely with J.R. and his office as they administer the JAG money?

Phil Stevenson: We do. One of the primary supports that we provide to our program—our Drug and Violent Crime Program is the specific program within the Commission that administers the funds—we provide them with both data support as well as primarily performance measures support. As you know, and as our audience knows, we are now required to submit performance measure information to the Bureau of Justice Assistance on how effective our administration of grant funds has been. One of the great resources, I think, that statistical analysis centers can provide to SAAs is that research-based support for those performance measures. I think that is a critical role that statistical analysis centers can play, but

we also play a critical role in just providing data. One of the things that we're pushing our grantees to do is really get a better idea of, and doing a better job of, identifying the scope of the problem. And I think that's where data comes in, and with data, you can better identify the scope of the problem; you can better target those resources to address the problem.

Jim Burch: Fantastic. Well, it's great to hear about, and I think your work on this is really stellar, and it fits right in with J.R.'s reputation as always doing cutting-edge work in how they administer the dollars there in Arizona, so we appreciate hearing about that.

Now, you talked about data a little bit and how data can be important to our programming. It really made me think about the Obama Administration's emphasis, as well Attorney General Holder and [Assistant Attorney General] Laurie Robinson's emphasis, on evidence-based programming and using science to drive what we do. And I think, as you probably know, we've been talking to the state administering agencies with the JAG funding about how to make sure that we are infusing evidence-based practice in everything that we do and really sort of recommitting to a process of state-wide justice planning. Is there a role for the SACs, or the statistical analysis centers, in that process of bringing evidence-based practice to the table?

Phil Stevenson: I think there is a significant role that statistical analysis centers can play in SAA's implementation of evidence-based practices. Some of it will depend upon where the state administering agency and the statistical analysis center are in their evolution as an organization, but I think that SACs can be a resource in many different ways. And let me sort of briefly describe them. And for me it really starts with data. I'm a researcher; I'm an applied criminal justice researcher. It is not surprising that I begin with data—and for me, it is about using data to better understand the scope of the problem, identifying the problem that a funded program is intended to address. What I believe is that not every criminal justice problem has an evidence-based practice. And when I think about evidence-based practices, I think about those rigorous studies that evaluated programs, that have replicated those programs, [and] that have identified consistent change over time when those programs are implemented. We know a lot about evidence-based practices. We have a lot of good information about what programs can be used to address specific criminal justice problems, but I don't think we have an evidence-based practice for every single criminal justice problem that's out there. And so that's where data starts—that [is], using data to do data-driven planning.

But I think that we can also provide another set of services to the SAA beyond data, and that is using us as researchers. Again, the network of statistical analysis centers around the country, we are trained professional criminal justice researchers, and so we can be that research support to identify those promising practices, those programs and policies and projects that really have—there has been some evidence—that have made a great impact but have not been thoroughly evaluated yet. And I think that's another role that

statistical analysis centers can play, not only in providing that research support to identify those promising practices, but continuing to evaluate those promising practices so that we can elevate some of our good work that's going on in the states to an evidence-based practice.

You know I think that there are other opportunities here as well. There has been a lot of good work to identify critical elements of programs, and I am referring specifically to the Lipsey's work, Mark Lipsey's¹ work, around meta-analysis and identifying those critical elements that are needed in order to move programs forward and to have great impacts. And then, of course, we can assist SAAs in identifying those very specific evidence-based practices that we should be implementing when we have an opportunity because there is good evidence—very strong evidence—that if we implement those programs, we will have the success that we want in those jurisdictions.

Jim Burch: Well, this is great, and we've focused a lot thus far in the conversation about how the statistical analysis centers are working together with the state administering agencies, in particular, your case in Arizona, but I'm wondering, how can local communities take advantage of your resources or make use of the information that the SACs put out?

Phil Stevenson: You know, it is one of my favorite things to do, is to work with the local agencies. One of the things that—I'm going to start again with the data. Statistical analysis centers around the country, many of them take the responsibility to be a data clearinghouse, to be a central point where a whole host of data can be available, everything from law enforcement data through corrections data and everything in between—but also the, kind of, community-context data. And those community-context data—and that data, when you can drill down to the very local level, can have a great benefit for local jurisdictions who are challenging themselves to address their public safety issues.

The other thing I think we recognize is that crime and delinquency and associated problems are not randomly distributed throughout the state, and so that local information that we can provide to those jurisdictions, those neighborhoods, those communities, those municipalities really can assist them in moving their initiative forward. In fact, one of my—next week I have a very exciting opportunity to work with the City of Peoria, Arizona, to just provide them with local data about their youth population and some of the challenges that are facing their youth populations, so the City of Peoria can implement programs that will prevent kids from getting involved in delinquency, that they can use these data to better identify where afterschool programs may be needed. This is very exciting to me because, at the local level, we as statistical analysis centers can have a great impact on those communities and the citizens that live in those communities.

Jim Burch: That's because you are really providing a technical assistance in addition to research support and data collection.

Phil Stevenson: That's absolutely right.

Jim Burch: How can, generally speaking, how are the SACs funded? Where does the funding come from?

Phil Stevenson: Well, the Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS] provides us with a consistent source of funding through their State Justice Statistics Program. It's an incredible opportunity for statistical analysis centers to, on an annual basis, tap into those federal funds that will allow us to do the work that matters to our state. And this is what I think is one of the hallmarks of the State Justice Statistics Program: it's not about doing research or funding research that benefits the federal government, it's about funding programs, funding staff, and funding projects that can have an impact in our state. That to me, I think, is an incredible opportunity, and I am very grateful for the support of the Bureau of Justice Statistics for providing that.

In some states though, and in my time in Illinois, the statistical analysis center was funded through Byrne JAG funds, through an internal grant that was used to build that research support, to build that data clearinghouse function, to provide those technical assistance activities to the grant program to assist them with performance measurement to really work with the state administering agencies side of the house, if you will, to improve the administration, enhance the administration of federal grant funds.

Jim Burch: Well, that is encouraging to hear. So you mentioned the Bureau of Justice Statistics and, for those listening, the Bureau of Justice Statistics is a component, just like BJA, in the Office of Justice Programs; and we've worked very closely with our good friend, Jim Lynch, who is the Director of BJS, and I've really begun, I think, to expand our partnerships to bring together the resources that BJS provides in data collection and analysis together with program development. So, it's good to hear that it's been happening at the state level and now it's happening at the federal level as well.

Well, this has been extremely helpful, and we certainly do appreciate your time here with us today. I also want to point out that it is my understanding [that] the Justice Research and Statistics Association, as an association of SAC directors, provides support as well and is a source of additional information.

Phil Stevenson: That's right. I think it's a great source of information. If you are interested in finding out who the statistical analysis center is, who the director is, you can go straight to the Justice Research and Statistics Association web site (www.jrsa.org), and on the very front page, there is a map of the United States that you can click on and you can identify

¹ Mark W. Lipsey is the Director of the Peabody Research Institute, and a Research Professor, at the Peabody College of Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University. His professional interests are in the areas of public policy, program evaluation research, social intervention, field research methodology, and research synthesis (meta-analysis). Obtained on February 9, 2011, from <http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/Documents/pdf/faculty/vita/Lipsey%20CV%2009.pdf> and <http://peabody.vanderbilt.edu/x9291.xml?show=NewsNavigation#faculty>.

who your statistical analysis center is, where it's housed, and who the director is and their contact information.

I think another great resource that the Justice Research and Statistics Association provides is an annotated, electronic annotated bibliography that they publish on a semi-annual basis of SAC publications from around the country, which gives access to anyone in any one state to a host of research information that's being done across the country by this network of criminal justice researchers.

Jim Burch: Great. Well, Phil, thank you so much for your time today and for sharing this great information with our listeners and our audience.

Phil Stevenson: You're very welcome. Great, thank you very much.

Jim Burch: Thank you for taking the time to join us for this conversation. If you found the discussion interesting, we encourage you to visit the BJA web site for more innovative ideas and best practices at www.ojp.gov/BJA.

From all of us here at BJA, thank you for tuning in to today's podcast. We hope you will join us again for another edition of BJA's Justice Podcast Series.

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