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## THE RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER PARTNERSHIP STUDY (RPPS): EXPERIENCES FROM CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM COLLABORATIONS STUDYING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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### Abstract

The benefits of researcher-practitioner (R-P) collaborations focused on violence against women (VAW) are many. Such projects support researchers and practitioners working together to create uniquely comprehensive projects that have the potential to change practices, policies, and services. Extant literature is limited in that it has (1) focused on the experiences of a very limited number of collaborations, (2) ignored collaborations conducted in the context of the criminal justice system, and (3) excluded as a focus the products that result from the collaborations and their dissemination. Therefore, the goal of this qualitative study is to identify the essential elements to consider for successful R-P collaborations on VAW research in the criminal justice system.

### Keywords

Collaborations; Researcher-Practitioner; Criminal Justice System

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Literature on the promise of collaborative research on violence against women (VAW) issues was abundant in the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Carolyn Block, Engel, Naureckas, & Riordan, 1999; Edleson & Bible, 2001; Gondolf, Yllo, & Campbell, 1997; National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center, May 2001; Renzetti, 1997; Riger, 1999). A majority of this work (1) highlighted individual researcher-practitioner (R-P) collaborations,<sup>1</sup> and (2) provided an overview of specific collaborations and suggested guidelines, best practices, or conditions for optimal collaboration. This scholarly work was critical as it emphasized the importance of collaborating to conduct research on VAW and informed the development of future collaborations. However, three limitations of this work warrant further study. First, this body of literature is focused on describing the experiences of a very limited number of collaborations (e.g., single case studies); there is a dearth of literature based on systematic inquiry. Second, much of the existing scholarly work focuses on collaborations of researchers with victim services practitioners, namely advocates (e.g., Gondolf et al., 1997; Riger, 1999; Williams, 2004), or service recipients, namely victims

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<sup>1</sup>“collaborations” and “partnerships” are used interchangeably.

(Edleson & Bible, 2001). While it is impossible to overstate the importance of these collaborations in the advancement of practice, policy, and research, there are additional collaborations that can benefit the field but have yet to be explored. Collaborations between researchers and practitioners in the criminal justice (CJ) system are one example. CJ system practitioners can have responsibilities that aim to address VAW but are not advocacy or victim-focused – such as responsibilities that support, develop, or examine offender services. Third, this body of scholarly work rarely addresses the outcomes of collaboration or products that result and their dissemination; the focus tends to be on the process of collaborating and, on occasion, includes anecdotal reports of a select outcome (Gondolf et al., 1997; Riger, 1999). Arguably, utilizing the outcomes of collaborations to inform services and scholarly pursuits, and developing products and attending to their dissemination, are at least as important as, if not more important than, the process of collaborating itself. Given (1) the potential for R-P collaborations in the CJ system to influence practice and policy regarding VAW issues, and (2) funder interest in projects conducted collaboratively [e.g., the National Institute of Justice; (Auchter & Backes, 2013)], additional systematic research is needed on R-P collaborations focused on VAW issues in the CJ system that has as a focus all stages of collaboration. Therefore, the purpose of this study, the Researcher-Practitioner Partnership Study (RPPS), is to expand on previous work by documenting lessons learned from researchers and practitioners who partnered successfully on VAW research in the CJ system through the entire spectrum of collaboration: from identifying collaborators and developing strong relationships to developing useful products and disseminating them to targeted audiences.

## Models of collaboration

Multiple conceptual models and theories have guided the work of R-P collaborations focused on VAW issues. Edelson and Bible (2001), Renzetti (1997), and Gondolf, Yo, and Campbell (1997) summarized and highlighted many of these, which included action research (Lewin, 1946), feminist participatory research (Renzetti, 1997), and community action research (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). More recently, collaborative research models have expanded to include those more broadly focused on university-community partnerships (Jordan, 2011). Models of collaborative research emphasize, among other elements, power distributed equally among collaborators so that the researcher is not “the expert” but, rather, a partner. The researcher(s) and other collaborators, who may be practitioners or service recipients, work as a team to develop and conduct research and interpret results.

## Considerations for R-P partnerships that may (or may not) be unique to the CJ system.

Like much of the scholarship on R-P collaborations specifically focused on VAW issues, scholarship on R-P collaborations in the CJ system (not necessarily focused on VAW) is limited (e.g., Feder, Jolin, & Feyerherm, 2000; Gondolf, 2010; Jurik, Blumenthal, Smith, & Portillos, 2000; Kelling et al., 1998). In the VAW literature specifically, two issues are consistently noted as critical considerations for R-P collaborations – trust and time (e.g.,

Davidson & Bowen, 2011; Edleson & Bible, 1999; Gondolf et al., 1997; Mouradian, Mechanic, & Williams, 2001; Riger, 1999; Williams, 2004). Regarding trust, scholars have documented and emphasized that there exists a legacy of *mistrust* of researchers among many practitioners. Terms like “drive by,” which have been used to describe both researchers and the data collection “method” they employ, reflect this mistrust (Edleson & Bible, 2001; Riger, 1999). Regarding time, scholars noted challenges related to both time perspective and time demand (Edleson & Bible, 1999; Gondolf et al., 1997; Riger, 1999). Practitioner’s “time perspective may sharply contrast with that of researchers,” (Riger, 1999, p. 1106) such that practitioners expect that the project will be completed in less time than researchers believe to be realistic. Related to time demand, both researchers and practitioners underestimate how much time it takes to conduct research collaboratively. These two critical considerations – trust and time – also surfaced in the CJ literature (Feder et al., 2000; Gondolf, 2010; Jurik et al., 2000; Kelling et al., 1998). However, a third consideration for collaborations in the CJ system compared to other systems emerged; the centralized hierarchical structure that exists within CJ systems can pose challenges for R-P collaborations as collaborations are ideally conducted with partners who share decision making power and responsibilities (Jurik et al., 2000). This challenge is also partly related to the level of organizational commitment to the collaborative project, such that greater commitment from individuals across the hierarchy results in fewer challenges for the collaboration. Despite this challenge, which may be unique to the CJ system, successful R-P collaborations in the CJ system are documented in the literature (Feder et al., 2000; Gondolf, 2010; Kelling et al., 1998). Given that differences emerged in comparing the little R-P literature that exists within the CJ system compared to other systems, it is critical to systematically study R-P partnerships focused on VAW specifically within the CJ system to learn about considerations for collaborating that may (or may not) be unique to the system.

### **Scholarship on collaborating: Inclusive of all stages?**

The limited scholarship on R-P collaborations that exists primarily focuses on developing and sustaining relationships and successfully completing the project: it often falls short of including a specific focus on outcomes, developing products based on the project’s results, and disseminating products and findings. Some scholarly work briefly mentions factors related to outcomes, products and dissemination, such as challenges in interpreting findings; data ownership and the right to publish; science in service of social change, practice and public policy; and the development of products that have practical utility (e.g., Gondolf et al., 1997; Renzetti, 1997; Riger, 1999). Others make no mention of these issues (e.g., Davidson & Bowen, 2011; Williams, 2004). The one exception is Edleson and Bible’s work (2001). These authors address the spectrum of collaboration and include a specific focus on outcomes, products and dissemination. They also describe, in detail, multiple outcomes of four case studies in collaboration. However, there is an absence of systematic inquiry and no work in this regard specific to collaborations within the CJ system.

Though there has been an abundance of literature on R-P collaborations, systematic research on the topic has not advanced at the same pace as actual collaborations. In other words, methods for studying collaborations have advanced little and coverage of the spectrum of issues that impact collaboration has not grown. Further, very limited literature has focused

on projects conducted collaboratively and specifically within the CJ system, and none have considered the development of products and their dissemination. Therefore, the goal of the RPPS is to identify the essential elements to consider for successful R-P collaborations on VAW research in the CJ system from identifying collaborators through disseminating findings and products. In this article, we report RPPS results and provide guidelines for successful collaborations.

## METHODS

### Participants

**Individual Participants.**—Eleven key informants (referred to as participants from here forward) were recruited to participate at the outset of the study. These participants were selected because of their known experience and expertise in R-P partnerships in the CJ system. Beyond this initial group, the majority of participants were recruited through materials distributed to registrants of CJ- and VAW-related conferences in the United States and Canada. Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants via individual e-mail invitations from the investigators based on suggestions of RPPS participants. Materials distributed to conference registrants explained the purpose of the study and provided contact information for the investigators. The recruitment materials read:

“We are delighted that you will be attending this year’s [*conference name*]. While you are there, you have the opportunity to participate in an individual interview or focus group to discuss experiences you may have had – either as a practitioner or researcher – conducting collaborative research on the topic of violence against women within the criminal justice system. This could include any cooperative effort between researchers and practitioners to try to better understand or improve criminal justice *or* community response to violence against women (e.g. studies of the criminal justice system, studies with perpetrators and/or victims, studies of interventions, etc.).”

Researchers and practitioners interested in participating contacted the investigators via e-mail. Only those who had self-evaluated successful R-P partnerships in the CJ system were eligible to participate.<sup>2</sup> Recruitment efforts were focused on conferences largely attended by CJ and VAW researchers and/or practitioners (e.g., American Society of Criminology, Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, International Family Violence and Child Victimization Research, End Violence Against Women International, and Ending Domestic and Sexual Violence). In addition, practitioners employed within government-system state administrative agencies (SAAs) were recruited. In all, 29 researchers and 20 practitioners (8 of whom were employed by SAAs) participated in individual interviews. Researchers identified as criminologists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, and epidemiologists. Practitioners identified as being employed within the CJ system, departments of corrections, community organizations, and crime victim services. Participants were offered compensation for their time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Practitioners, as defined by the National Institute of Justice for the purpose of this study, were CJ system employees (including administrators of CJ state administrative agencies, SAAs) and those who provide services to CJ system clients. Researchers were those who conducted research but were not CJ system employees.

**Focus Group Participants.**—Five focus groups, with an average of four to six participants per group, for a total of 28 participants, were conducted. All groups were conducted at the aforementioned national conferences/meetings. Focus group participants were recruited and compensated in the same manner as individual interview participants.

## Procedures

Semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups were conducted by the RPPS investigators (i.e., Sullivan and Fisher) at the aforementioned conferences or the home institutions of the participants or investigators. In a few cases where participants were unable to coordinate a face-to face interview, a phone interview was conducted. Face-to-face interviews were video recorded. Phone interviews were audio recorded. Participants provided written informed consent. To cover the spectrum of collaboration from developing R-P partnerships to disseminating findings, five domains were assessed: 1) the need for partnerships; 2) issues in developing partnerships, including barriers to and facilitators of partnering; 3) balancing the needs of researchers and practitioners throughout the partnership; 4) understanding products that resulted and methods for disseminating products; and 5) sustaining relationships.

Interviews began with the participant providing information about her or his background and experience and a brief description of the collaborative research project(s) s/he had worked on in the CJ system. In addition to participants describing successful collaborations, many also described unsuccessful ones in contrast. The interviewer asked the participant to, “Please describe the highlights and lowlights of the collaboration(s).” This open-ended question was followed by prompts if the participant’s response did not address the domains that the study intended to assess. The interview ended with the participant being asked to share advice for researchers and practitioners new to collaboration about how to do so successfully. The duration of interviews was 60 to 90 minutes.

One RPPS investigator facilitated each focus group utilizing the same five domains assessed during the interviews. The main differences between the interviews and focus groups were that, in the focus groups, (1) a description of highlights and lowlights of each collaboration was not asked, and instead (2) to ensure that each domain was covered in the time allotted for the group (i.e., 90 minutes), the facilitator explicitly asked about each of the five domains by using the specific questions intended to be probes for the individual interviews.

## Measures

In conjunction with CJ practitioners, RPPS investigators developed the interview and focus group questions to address the aims of the funder’s grant solicitation (i.e., National Institute of Justice) based on existing information about R-P partnerships in general and partnerships within the CJ system in particular (e.g., Baker, Homan, Schonhoff, & Kreuter, 1999; Carolyn Block, 2000; Carolyn Block et al., 1999; Lane, Turner, & Flores, 2004; Mouradian et al., 2001; National Violence Against Women Prevention Research Center, May 2001;

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<sup>3</sup>All participants were offered compensation though not all participants accepted it. Some participants were prohibited to accepting compensation by their employer (e.g., government employee). Others simply preferred not to accept compensation.

Riger, 1999). The domains assessed and the specific questions used to probe are included in Table 1.

### Data analysis

Content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to examine all information obtained from interviews and focus groups, which were transcribed verbatim. Transcript data were coded into the five preexisting domains (i.e., nodes) using NVivo software (QSR International, 2013). Nodes were added or expanded to accommodate emerging themes and patterns. For brevity's sake, it is not possible to present all themes and patterns that emerged from the experiences of RPPS participants. Quotes provided in the next section were selected based on clarity and their ability to illustrate lessons learned and critical concerns regarding collaboration at all stages from identifying collaborators through disseminating findings/products.

## RESULTS and CONCLUSIONS

Integrated results and conclusions, though atypical in format, are presented below. This format was selected because it most effectively communicates the themes that emerged from the experiences of RPPS participants and associates these themes with their implications and guidelines for successful future collaborations. Relatedly, this section is not entirely written in past tense as is conventional given that the results were informed by past experiences of participants *and* their advice for researchers and practitioners interested in future collaborations. The results are organized by general stages of collaboration: identifying a collaborator, developing and maintaining a strong collaboration, and developing and disseminating products.

### Identifying a Good Collaborator

Preexisting relationships were characteristic of many successful collaborations reported by RPPS participants. They explained that having a collaborative relationship established before the need for one arises was optimal. Being able to develop a relationship with potential collaborators over time and prior to project implementation (without the constraints of deadlines etc.) may be invaluable when the need for a collaborative research project arises in the future. This is especially true when the project has a tight timeline, such as a grant submission deadline. If the need for collaboration does arise, a well-established relationship can strengthen the study design and consequently, impact its findings. Just as importantly, the relationship can lead to the development of new research questions or potential projects for which funding can be sought together.

Finding the right collaborator—one who is committed and genuinely invested in integrating the knowledge and skills of both parties involved—was identified as an important component of a successful collaboration. For researchers and practitioners who are new to collaborating, connecting with a senior colleague who can act as a mentor throughout the process can be beneficial. Becoming a part of or shadowing an existing collaboration is helpful to learning the process. Researchers can connect with local CJ system agencies and related nonprofit organizations to build relationships. Doing so can contribute to a deeper

level of insight into the cultural environment, language, daily responsibilities and barriers faced by practitioners, and obstacles confronting the clients served. Reaching out allows researchers and practitioners to build trust and respect, gain a new perspective on partnerships, and ultimately, build a more positive view of researchers and their intent, and of practitioners and their assets.

“See what the organization does. Sit with people who work there, talk to them about what their work is like, what their clientele [are] like. And get to know who they are ... hopefully they’ll be able to trust you a bit more. And in that way you will have a better handle on what it is that they need, and what they do so that you can think about that when you’re developing the research project...”

—Researcher-Practitioner/Former Police Officer

One consideration unique to the CJ system, the influence of which cannot be underestimated, is the limitation of some SAAs to collaborate with the research partner of their choosing.

“Because we’re a state agency, we’re limited in terms of which research partner we can work with. ... the way our procurement process works, it’s such that it has hindered us in a lot of ways.”

– CJ System SAA Practitioner/Division Director

“We welcome the opportunity to participate in collaborative research but often run into logistical snags between public and private-sector administrative differences in how data can be accessed, released, etc.”

— CJ System SAA Practitioner/Executive Director

Given that the obstacles to collaborating with CJ system SAA’s – and ways to overcome those obstacles – tend to be unique to each administrative agency, potential collaborators are in the best position to successfully develop a research partnership when they explore these limitations at the outset.

### Developing and Maintaining a Strong Collaboration

**Building trust in the relationship.**—Nearly unanimously, both practitioner and researcher participants identified a strong relationship based on trust as the most critical element of a successful collaboration—namely, having positive experiences during the collaboration regardless of the results. In the face of timelines and deadlines, it can be easy to move quickly through the early stages of developing a relationship and beginning a project and therefore, miss the opportunity to lay the foundation of trust. The trust that a relationship engenders between practitioners and researchers is worth the time commitment.

“It’s not all about counting and numbers; it is all about your relationship.” [...] “I found [the researcher] ethical, I found her thoughtful, I found her listening.”

— Victim and Offender Services Practitioner/Assistant Executive Director describing how trust was established with a Researcher

“You don’t get to know people in day-to-day life over a night, so why would you expect it with professionals?”

– Academic Researcher

Taking the time to develop the relationship can help the practitioner learn whether the researcher is respectful of practitioners and the work they do, and knowledgeable about the constraints of conducting research in the practitioner’s system, or if s/he contributes to the legacy of mistrust of researchers and research.

Some of the researcher participants in the RPPS described the development of collaborations as similar to a dating/courting process in which both the researcher and practitioner were attempting to determine if they were a match for one another and the likelihood of their relationships’ success:

“The dating story—This was kind of a joke in our relationship about when we first started to meet and talk about this project. ‘Okay, we’ve agreed to date for a little while, and we’re just going to see where this goes.’ And that was the pilot process of this, and we just kind of continued to talk about ‘How is this going? Are we going in the direction that’s going to meet your needs?’”

“But then, you know, I felt like [the practitioner also] really appreciated what I bring as the researcher in terms of ... understanding the [research] method and what you can and cannot look at. And as the relationship and the pilot work continued to progress and we got to the point of writing a grant to [the National Institute of Justice], I remember calling [the practitioner] and saying ‘Ok, this is the next step in our relationship. We’re moving from dating into a longer-term commitment here—and are you ready for that?’”

—Academic Researcher

Study participants identified the following additional conditions as necessary for practitioners to develop trust in researchers: researchers’ genuine respect for practitioners’ work and the clients they serve (which is built cumulatively); researchers’ presence and accessibility (rather than the presence of a study team member like a project coordinator or graduate student); and researchers’ willingness to consider modifications to the study design based on practitioners’ input.

**Setting and documenting goals and expectations.**—Communicating expectations and mutually agreeing on project goals are necessary for a collaboration to be successful. At times, the researcher and practitioner have shared goals, i.e., they both desire the same outcomes. At other times, they have different goals but agree to work toward the goals that are articulated by and important to each other. RPPS participants underscored the importance of documenting expectations about roles and responsibilities as well as expected outcomes of the research in a formal agreement such as a memorandum of understanding (MOU) at the outset of the project. CJ system administrators acknowledged the challenges associated with collaborating with government agencies particularly in regard to the MOU:

“All those memorandum agreements and memorandums of understanding... So there’s bureaucratic challenges to this from a researcher’s standpoint. [Researchers]



have their design, if you will, and they have a map, a plan. Overlaying that into a state structure is not always easy. I think another challenge that researchers' face, in particular, working with us [CJ system SAAs] is a lot of the confidentiality clauses, a lot of the statutes that can initially look like a hurdle. My advice is not to be discouraged by that."

– CJ System SAA Practitioner/Executive Director

Specifically, RPPS participants described needing clarity at the outset about (a) the roles of practitioners and researchers and (b) expected outcomes of the research. From the beginning to the end of the collaboration, clear communication and documentation are necessary to define who is responsible for which tasks, including data collection and cleaning, analysis, interpretation, write-up, and dissemination. Related to this, RPPS participants stressed the necessity of establishing and documenting guidelines to ensure client confidentiality and safety. Additional topics include: (a) how to proceed if there are unexpected findings (particularly those that may not reflect favorably on the organization, staff, or clients), (b) how to disseminate products so that they have the desired impact and (c) financial/budget considerations. Consider budgeting for: personnel, including both practitioners and researcher(s); equipment (e.g., computers); software (e.g., data entry and analysis); travel reimbursement; printing and copying; and time. For many participants, communication about these topics and their documentation at the outset substantially reduced challenges.

"Look at what's really going on and deal with that. Not an idealized version. Not what the literature says. Not what you promised [the funder]; you can make a change, but you have to make it within the confines of how the agency actually operates and have respect for current practices in place."

—Academic Researcher

**Seeking and valuing practitioners' involvement.**—According to RPPS participants, successful collaborations are those in which researchers actively seek and value practitioners' involvement. For example, while researchers typically have a better understanding of study design and rigorous methods, practitioners tend to have more experience working directly with clients and a better understanding of the system in which the research is conducted. Additionally, practitioners can enhance researchers' understanding and correct misconceptions, thereby enhancing the study's credibility and the findings' utility. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to enter a collaboration seeking practitioners' involvement in the development of the study rather than with a firm plan in place.

As one academic researcher explains, "*Just because we have PhDs doesn't mean that we have all the answers.*"

"If your practitioner that you're working with is giving you compelling information about why something that you have built your research project on is off or not okay, don't go on to the next practitioner. That's the drive-by researcher."

— Victim and Offender Services Practitioner/Assistant  
Executive Director

Practitioners may be resistant or unwilling to collaborate because of negative experiences with researchers in the past. Negative experiences can be avoided when researchers and practitioners are given the opportunity to commit to a study that meets both partners' needs, by facilitating balanced contribution from each partner, open communication, and respect for each other's professionalism, expertise, and trust. The collaboration can have a chance to succeed if the researcher and practitioners are committed to integrating their complementary strengths.

**Understanding the system and “walking in the practitioners’ shoes”.**—A highlight of successful collaborations reported by RPPS participants was when the researcher was knowledgeable about the practitioner’s system or organization, “lived in the trenches,” and was “a fly on the wall.” This led to a greater understanding of the system/organization and increased practitioners’ confidence and trust in the researcher, which translated to more effective partnering.

Several collaborators encouraged researchers to visit the practitioners’ sites, preferably multiple times, to learn about the inner workings of CJ system and practitioners’ roles . Although researchers may be well informed about the system in which the practitioners work or the clients they serve, there is no substitute for gaining direct experience in the practitioners’ unique settings. By observing and asking questions, researchers can better understand all that their collaborating practitioners do and better structure the project to make it most useful. One caveat to learning from practitioners is that it is best to be an enthusiastic learner, not an overwhelming one. One practitioner suggested that an effective way to learn about practitioners’ work without becoming burdensome is to request training manuals, policy documents and related materials.

“[Researchers] need to really spend some time thinking about what it is like to walk a mile in the shoes of these practitioners and to understand that their daily lives are a lot more about going from like one fire to the next and trying to put out those fires.”

—Academic Researcher

“That’s what [the researcher] said to us, ‘I need to see your context, I need to understand this,’ and so we sent him to an urban site, to a rural site, to a mid-urban site, and when he realized the pressure that the [CJ system] family relations counselors faced to process those cases, it became clear that we are not going to ask 37 questions—that’s just not practical.”

—CJ System SAA Practitioner/Executive Director

**Explaining the research process.**—For collaborations to be as successful as possible, all collaborators should understand the project and rationale for its design. This can occur most naturally and effectively when the study is designed collaboratively. Yet, even when designed collaboratively, certain aspects of the study may not be clear to everyone involved.

Researchers should recognize that most practitioners are not being unreasonable if they resist a component of the research. Practitioners’ concerns may be due to a genuine

misunderstanding. In this circumstance, researchers should attempt to correct the misunderstanding with a clear, non-condescending explanation of why a particular component of the study is appropriate and necessary, and how it will ultimately help practitioners improve their services or policies. Further, researchers should be willing to compromise and modify the study design to better fit practitioners' needs and capabilities. Doing so can contribute to an open learning environment that helps practitioners understand the conduct of research and interpretation of its findings. One CJ System SAA practitioner responsible for the research conducted within the SAA explained his approach to empowering his staff in the research process:

“I wanted to do some seminars on research ethics, not only for my department but for the entire organization, specifically the people who were involved in our research review committee. So we [the practitioner and researcher] set up a half-day [training] on research ethics and how to look at research proposals, confidentiality, human subjects, and stuff like that. I think [the training] has been our biggest success because it has provided us [the CJ system SAA] with a lot of flexibility, and I think it is the example of the true researcher-practitioner collaboration because it's an entire department of a state organization and an entire department at a university. And it's been nice because we got to know [the researchers] outside of work, and it's been a really good relationship-building piece. And, we've been able to utilize them in so many different ways because of this agreement; it's open ended.”

Seasoned practitioners who participated in the RPPS emphasized the importance of training staff in the basics of research methods. Staff trained in the basic concepts and workings of the research process are better able to understand the limitations of conducting research and rationale for decisions made, and therefore, are more active in the research process. Training can be done individually by an experienced practitioner or researcher (ideally the one in the collaboration) or done jointly by the collaborators and in some cases, it may be appropriate to include the entire spectrum of organizational staff, from high-level administrators, mid-level managers, and supervisors, to direct service staff. Training can focus on the basics of conducting a research study; developing questions that are pertinent to the organization and clients' needs; analyzing data with basic statistics, quantitative or qualitative techniques; accessing/collecting and managing data; and interpreting, writing up, and disseminating findings. Training can foster an environment where everyone's input is valued and all parties are invested in and accountable for the research conducted and its outcomes.

**Budgeting for time.**—Collaborating can be rewarding and effective, but also time intensive. Research takes longer than practitioners imagine. One researcher describes collaborative research as a marathon, and non-collaborative research as a 100-yard dash. Budgeting for additional time, which often is synonymous with the need for additional funds, will help circumvent frustration.

Collaborations, by nature, require substantial time since participants have distinct viewpoints that must be discussed. Two examples of frequently occurring issues that affect the time it takes to complete a collaborative research project are: (1) Practitioners leave their positions,

and new staff is hired and need to be trained; frequent staff “turnover” was emphasized as a lowlight of collaborations. To overcome this, study participants gave the advice to (a) be prepared for this to happen and (b) engage practitioners across the spectrum of direct service staff to high-level administrators. (2) Researchers may have to wait for data from practitioners whose schedule and priorities are likely not centered on the research.

Researchers must be prepared to immerse themselves in all aspects of collaboration, the good and the bad. This involves a fair amount of professional (and sometimes personal) time. Clearly, R-P collaborations have considerable time demands, but these can be moderated by committed collaborators, which can yield considerable benefits.

“And from the practitioner’s point of view, this is a project that needs to be done in the next month and can be done in the next month. And in my view, nothing gets done in a month; nothing gets done really in three months, or sometimes a year.”

—Academic Researcher/Department Chair

“Things are always going to take longer than we expect them to take, no matter what.”

—Practitioner/Coordinator of a Non-profit Victim  
Advocacy Organization

As stated by one academic researcher, “*You can’t staff this out. You need to show up.*”

“This project went on for ages—I don’t know, seven years? Something like that. A long time. And we only ended up with a sample of like 145 people.”

—Academic Researcher

**Gaining organizational commitment.**—Having concrete and practical resources already in place at the practitioner’s organization before the research project began was identified as a benefit to collaborating—though having established resources available was not consistently the case for RPPS participants. The startup process was easier and moved along more quickly when practitioners and other organizational staff were knowledgeable about and generally committed to collaboration. Similarly, researchers who had previous experience working with practitioners and CJ organizations were more prepared to meet the challenges that arose. Related to this, organizations that were familiar with institutional review board (IRB) processes were able to formulate an appropriate plan to protect study participants and provide input into the IRB application process. This is often a challenge given the substantial amount of time it can take to obtain IRB approval from an academic institution or research approval from the CJ system internal research committee.

According to RPPS participants, encouraging investment among administrators, supervisors, and front-line staff and obtaining formal organizational commitment to the project strongly contributed to the successful completion of collaborative projects. Participants talked about getting administrators and staff invested by explaining the need for the project and how the outcomes could benefit the organization, its clients, and staff.

“If you can get people at the top to think what you’re doing is important and to want to do it, they can convince everybody else.”

– Academic Researcher

“That becomes our job as administrators to frankly sell the importance of these efforts to the legislature, to the chief court administrator, that these are key – that this [research collaboration] is key for us to maintain the quality of our work.”

— CJ System SAA Practitioner/Executive Director

### **Developing and Disseminating Products and Their Outcomes.**

**Planning for products, their impact, and dissemination at the outset.** Briefly mentioned earlier in this section was the need to plan for products and their dissemination during the initial/planning stages of the project and to include this plan in formal written documents such as an MOU. Participants emphasized the importance of planning in facilitating communication, clarifying expectations, contributing to designing a project that can answer the questions being asked, and reducing challenges related to the dissemination of unexpected (and potentially unfavorable) findings. Participants emphasized benefits to be gained when this plan is reviewed and approved by high-level administrators.

**Maximizing the usefulness of products as well as targeting and disseminating them to those who can influence change.** Researchers and practitioners alike emphasized the need to ensure that products are developed specifically for the people who have the greatest potential to impact change. RPPS participants suggested that the researcher and practitioner should decide together which person, or more likely, which people, have such influence.

One CJ System SAA Practitioner focused on sexual assault prevention described the need for research to drive changes in policy and practice, as well as what resulted from the findings and their dissemination, *“[to the researcher] How do you feel about doing some research on this? ... And she [did] the research. She’s gotten the answers. She has gone to the legislature, presented it to them and told them this is what’s going on. And, from those two things we’ve got a stalking law; we’ve got a human trafficking law.”*

A brief list to consider when targeting products and their dissemination include: organizational administrators, front-line staff, policy makers, funders, and researchers. Given the different backgrounds and perspectives of the aforementioned people, it is likely that multiple products will need to be developed to achieve their purpose across audiences.

Products relevant to practitioners, organizations, policy makers, and the community include program development, trainings, manuals, and curriculum; fact sheets; jointly written papers in “trade” newsletters or journals; Web content; provisions for services or interventions; assessment tools or measures; conference presentations; and briefs. One academic researcher discussed writing 1- to 2-page summaries for advocates that were targeted and focused on specific issues so that readers could quickly absorb the information. Another academic researcher developed a toolkit with products for multiple audiences that included DVDs, modules targeted toward specific providers, such as rape crisis centers and disability providers, a general module on collaboration that provided educational materials, as well as a multimedia module. Products relevant to researchers include scholarly journal articles, conference presentations, books, reports, white papers, and Web content.

**Developing useful products.:** Beginning with the development of the project, researchers should aim to develop products targeted to practitioners and other audiences in a form that will be of greatest utility to them. Doing so increases the likelihood that the information will be used to affect practice and policy. Specifically, products should be relatively brief and straightforward, clearly communicate the real-world relevance, provide clear recommendations, and use non-technical language. RPPS participants suggested collaboratively writing materials, where the researcher and practitioner both contribute to the content, and having draft and final products reviewed by both researcher and practitioner peers to ensure that the intended meaning is clearly communicated and findings are appropriately interpreted.

“Practitioners do not have time to sit down and read stuff, nor do they want to. ... They just want to know: what is it and where do I go from here?”

– Academic Researcher-Practitioner/Former Police Officer

“Take the research and distribute it to the people who are doing the work and do it in a way that they can see it. Go ‘Here are practical, concrete things that [you] can do in [your] everyday job that comes from this research.’”

—Academic Researcher-Practitioner

Researchers and practitioners shared the following guidelines when planning for and disseminating findings: (1) involve high-level administrators in discussions to obtain their approval and their input on avenues for dissemination; (2) determine if the practitioner organization will permit the dissemination of unexpected findings—particularly those that will not reflect favorably on them; (3) determine who will be responsible for the dissemination of each product: the researcher and practitioner jointly or one party independently; (4) explore the possibility of press releases and other media campaigns; (5) consider historically nontraditional methods of dissemination, including targeted email distribution, listserves, and social media (e.g., blogs, Twitter, Facebook); (6) if possible, make full-text documents available for free downloading.

“When I think of products now, I think ... everything on the Internet can be downloaded. It, to me, seems almost not terribly useful to do anything other than the Internet for getting [research findings] out to people.”

– Victim and Offender Services Practitioner/Assistant Executive Director

“We sent it to community based agencies, we basically sent it to any- and everybody we thought would have contact with victims of sexual violence who were Latino women, which this study was about. And we did it with a specific purpose of getting the information to people who actually had contact with victims either because of the court system or had contact with victims through probation or advocacy agencies... three years, 150 page NIJ report and sucked it down to 8 pages and 7 bullet points.”

– Academic Researcher

**Outcomes and impact.:** Both researchers and practitioners were able to see changes result from their collaborative efforts—and this was true regardless of the reason for the collaboration. Participants described the production of knowledge and the impact they were making on the lives of others as “amazing results.”

“Seeing the outcome of research and the impact that it can make in your local community and beyond; I don’t even have words to describe how great of a feeling that is. So I highly encourage researcher-practitioner partnerships, but with the caveat that for some it may not come naturally..., you may have to work on that a little bit more in terms of making this work.”

– Academic Researcher/Senior University Administrator

“The research is meaningful and is making a difference. And by meaningful I mean that it’s usable by practitioners. Practitioners care about it because they’ve been invested in the process of defining what those questions are, and they’re now using it to change practices either at local levels or implementing state policy changes and practices at those levels.”

— Academic Researcher

## SUMMARY

This systematic study identified essential elements for researchers and practitioners to consider for successfully collaborating on VAW research in the CJ system. Results focused on the entire partnership process from identifying good collaborators to developing and disseminating products. Each stage of collaboration elicited themes that can be used to build new and/or strengthen existing R-P collaborations. Several themes were in line with prior research on R-P collaborations. Additionally, new insight was gained regarding R-P collaborations in the CJ system.

A number of key considerations emerged from this systematic study that are consistent with select scholarship on VAW-focused R-P collaborations (e.g., Edleson & Bible, 2001). Considerations include the intense time demands of collaborating; the need to build trust cumulatively; the importance of communicating – from the initial stages of the project – about roles, responsibilities, and outcomes; the need to be exposed to each other’s area of work/expertise; and the need to create useful products. Results of this study extend existing scholarship by providing significant details about the above considerations and providing guidelines based on systematic inquiry to fill critical gaps in the field. Further, results revealed additional considerations for VAW-focused collaborations including identifying a good collaborator, documenting goals and expectations in a formal written agreement, and developing and disseminating products to have the greatest impact.

Critical considerations for collaborations specific to the CJ system were revealed for each stage of collaboration. Regarding identifying a good collaborator, RPPS participants reported that in some states/regions there are limitations to entering a collaboration with a partner of their choosing – noting the CJ procurement process and data access and sharing agreements as key considerations. Regarding developing and maintaining a strong

collaboration, participants reported considerations unique to the CJ system regarding developing a formal written agreement and getting it authorized, obtaining IRB and other research approval, and obtaining buy-in from high-level administrators as among the tantamount considerations – all of which impact the time it takes to complete a project and its likelihood of successful completion. Regarding developing and disseminating products, RPPS participants described considerations related to revealing findings different from what was anticipated at the outset, particularly those that may not reflect favorably on the CJ system/partner.

Though a fair number of challenges were identified unique to collaborations within the CJ system – almost all of which are associated with its centralized hierarchical structure – it is important to restate that *all* participants reported successful collaborations within the CJ system focused on VAW issues. These successes (as well as participants' failures) provide unique insight into effective strategies for partnering successfully, which includes strategies to identify and address CJ-specific challenges.

Study limitations are worth of note. The interview protocol did not include prompts for the theoretical approach to collaborating or the extent to which service recipients (i.e., victims or offenders) were part of the partnerships. Therefore, this information was obtained only when the participant offered it, which was rarely. Future research should specifically examine the role of service recipients in VAW partnerships, especially partnerships within the CJ system given the unique challenges of victims or offenders participating in research. This study was designed only to include individuals who had self-defined successful partnerships. Though concerns may exist that this inclusion criterion produces a biased sample, it was purposeful. By including individuals who had at least one successful VAW partnership in the CJ system we were able to gather data about how participants overcame barriers and challenges – perspectives we likely would not have gained by omitting this criterion. Finally, though the protocol began with an open ended question about highlights and lowlights of collaborating, we did aim to assess five predetermined domains and prompted for information regarding these domains if participants did not freely share this information. It is likely that our prompts influenced information shared by participants. We believe that this process enhanced rather than detracted from the findings given that this is the first systematic study of collaborations focused on VAW issues in the CJ system and a great level of detail was obtained and reported here.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature by systematically studying R-P collaborations within the CJ system, for which little to no prior research exists. Its findings can be useful to a range of individuals who have the ability to partner in the future and perhaps, to do so with greater success than would have been possible if this study was not conducted and its findings not disseminated. Therefore, results have strong potential to reduce barriers and challenges in the design and conduct of future collaborative research on VAW, and ultimately, to influence changes in policy, practice and research.

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Carolina Price, B.S., has served victims of intimate partner violence for over six years in the areas of research and clinical services. As a research assistant in the Department of Psychiatry, the Yale University, School of Medicine she utilizes her bi-lingual skills to work with bicultural populations, translate study protocol and administer interviews in Spanish. Ms. Price is completing a Master’s in Public Administration at the University of Connecticut with a concentration in Public Policy and Nonprofit Management. Her interests include intimate partner violence, criminal justice issues, self-sufficiency and housing policies, and advocacy program development and evaluation.

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Bronwyn A. Hunter, PhD, is an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Dr. Hunter focuses on individual and community-based interventions that promote health and well-being for individuals transitioning from criminal justice systems to the community. In this context, she is interested in how stigma impacts health outcomes as well as capacity building, program development and evaluation for gender-responsive, trauma-informed and strengths-based treatment programs for women who have been involved in the criminal justice system.

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**Table 1**

Qualitative Guide and Domains for Assessment

**Description of the VAW Collaboration in the CJ System**

Can you describe your experiences with VAW researcher-practitioner collaborations in the CJ system, including describing the highlights and lowlights?

**1 Assessing the need for partnerships.**

Describe why a criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnership was needed to do the project you were involved in?

What were the main benefits of criminal justice researcher-practitioner partnerships?

What characteristics/qualifications did you look for when looking for a researcher/practitioner to collaborate with on a project? In an agency/organization?

**2 Issues in the development of partnerships including barriers to and facilitators of partnering.**

Describe what characteristics define the development of a successful partnership. What facilitates a successful partnership?

Describe the greatest barriers or challenges to developing a successful partnership.

**3 Needs of the researchers and practitioners and balancing these needs throughout the process.**

What were the needs of researchers and practitioners? Are they same? Different?

How was balancing the needs of both parties achieved?

Who do you think it benefited the most? Who benefited the least? Describe why

**4 Methods for disseminating and translating results that are useful and beneficial to both parties.**

What products/results were produced from the collaboration?

How useful were these products?

**5 Sustainability of the partnership**

What happened to the partnership once the work was completed?

Did you do sustainability planning for this partnership?

**Advice for researchers and practitioners new to collaborating**

What advice do you have for researchers who might be interested in developing their first partnership/maintaining a lasting partnership/ending on a positive note with a practitioner in the criminal justice system?

What advice do you have for practitioners who might be interested in developing their first partnership/maintaining a lasting partnership/ending on a positive note with a researcher in the criminal justice system?