

**RESEARCHING JUSTICE: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES INVOLVED IN DOING
JUSTICE RESEARCH IN A RURAL COUNTY**

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- 1 Two large-scale research projects are underway in a rural county in western New York. Both projects involve multiple constituencies in the justice community. As researchers, we have made (or were given) a number of “trade-offs” in designing and implementing this research that deserve closer attention. Our purpose in this paper is to identify the trade-offs we have made and to consider the consequences for both the quality of the data and the quality of life for our respondents.
- 2 The project setting is a county in western New York with approximately 50,000 residents. The largest community in the county has a population of 5,200; in fact, most of the people who live here are spread out in many smaller (in most cases, much smaller) villages and towns. On average, the county as a whole is more rural, less dense with respect to population, and poorer than the average county in NY, but there are differences on all these measures between the villages and towns within the county as well.
- 3 In 1996, Hall was awarded a NIJ grant to investigate the feasibility of adopting community policing strategies in the county; the next year, Hall and Porter began a study of local domestic violence victim services. The projects involve multiple data sets:
 - community forum of criminal justice practitioners
 - focus groups with police officers
 - survey of law enforcement personnel
 - survey of community members’ attitudes toward police
 - survey of client case files maintained by victim services and advocacy program
- 4 Sampling and representativeness: The problem of “accountability
Were the samples Hall obtained “representative”? Probably not, but the techniques normally applied to ensure representativeness were not allowed, namely random sampling

5 Privacy and protection: The problem of “being found out”

- The closest we’ve gotten to domestic violence victims and collecting their stories is through the client case files maintained by the victims’ services and advocacy program. These case files are under extremely tight security. Victims are guaranteed confidentiality when they first begin working with the advocacy program, and the program’s success is based in part on how safe and secure the participants feel in the program. Researchers necessarily threaten the safety and security of the programs’ participants because the results of the research are meant to be shared with a larger community that could conceivably include the batterers, individuals who could retaliate against their victims and victims’ families.
- In conversations with agency personnel, we debated the risks involved in interviewing victims. The victims had been interviewed once at “intake,” wouldn’t a subsequent interview by researchers be redundant, we were asked. Not having trained the agency’s workers on proper interviewing techniques, we explained that relying on the agency’s data collection techniques meant we had no say in quality control issues. What’s more, we had no personal experiences ourselves with any victims. Clearly we were performing “secondary data analysis” without the benefit of methodological explanations and/or disclaimers.
- Presentation of the data also proved problematic. We were not allowed to present any case study material. Case studies we argued are useful for getting a sense of the “whole story” and for understanding the process by which domestic violence cases handled in the county, but we were not allowed to present even carefully disguised case studies because of the risk of violating confidentiality and putting victims at risk for being found out.

6 Political context and multiple roles: The problem of “trust” and “rapport”

- Some of the agency supervisors were interested in collecting information but were unwilling to relinquish control to the researcher. Roadblocks were thrown up by numerous CEO of law enforcement agencies: scheduling constraints, requests denied to meet with officers to explain the project, chiefs taking it upon themselves to make pronouncements about the study
- Police officers were unwilling to divulge any demographic data about themselves because they didn’t trust that the information would remain with only the researcher.

7 Discussion: Researchers regularly face the problem of making “trade-offs”: we assume that needing to compromise the “textbook” approaches to sampling and data collection efforts happens in virtually all studies. What consequences are involved in doing justice

research and experiencing roadblocks/pitfalls like the kind we've encountered? Are the data valid and reliable? Do our samples represent the larger population? Are our results unbiased?

- 8 From a scientific standpoint, our results might seem questionable by conventional guidelines/standards. However, despite these numerous obstacles, the "triangulation" built into these projects has allowed us to "see" the justice institution from different angles and to document meaningful findings.
- 9 Indeed, what we've actually observed about the justice institution in the course of collecting data is as compelling as the data we thought we would collect originally. Politics in the justice community coupled with a rural setting presented these various issues. In this a rural setting we found a lack of anonymity for practitioners, politicians, victims, and suspects; a propensity for community leaders to fill multiple roles whose duties may conflict; lower funding levels and fewer economic resources; and an overall climate less hospitable to research giving rise to these various methodological issues.