

Conversation with Mark Steinmeyer about criminal justice, September 10, 2013

Participants

- Mark Steinmeyer – Senior Program Officer, Smith Richardson Foundation
- Holden Karnofsky – Co-Founder, Co-Executive Director, GiveWell
- Howie Lempel – Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Mark Steinmeyer.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Mark Steinmeyer of the Smith Richardson Foundation (SRF) as part of its investigation of criminal justice reform. The conversation covered the research that SRF has funded on criminal justice, as well as SRF's experience working with Mark Kleiman, a UCLA professor of public policy whose work on criminal justice has been influential to GiveWell's investigation thus far.

About the Smith Richardson Foundation

The Smith Richardson Foundation (SRF) exclusively funds research on policy-relevant topics, such as social welfare, education and criminal justice.

SRF's domestic policy budget is \$7.5 million/year, of which about 20% funds work on criminal justice.

SRF's work on criminal justice

Prisoner reentry

SRF has funded two research projects on prisoner reentry: a program in San Diego that placed former prisoners in group homes and encouraged them to access services such as job training, and a program in Milwaukee in which local employers agreed to hire people while still in prison, so that they would have a job upon their release. The San Diego project did not find a positive effect. The Milwaukee project was delayed due to slower-than-expected intake of participants in the experiment. Preliminary results do not show strong positive effects but the analysis still needs to be finalized and written up. The recession and weak labor market might have proven to be too big of a hurdle to clear in terms of linking ex-offenders with jobs.

Probation practices

SRF funded the randomized controlled trial of Hawaii's Opportunity Probation with Enforcement (HOPE) program, partially due to an interest based on Mark Kleiman's writings on changing sentencing practices. This trial had very promising findings, and the Department of Justice is now conducting replications in other places. In the original HOPE trial, the judge overseeing the program was very innovative and passionate about the program. There is a concern that the results of HOPE won't replicate because not all jurisdictions have similar leadership. Washington State adopted a version of HOPE across the whole state before the replications have been completed.

California realignment

A California court decision that the state's prisons were overcrowded led to the CA legislature changing some of its sentencing rules so that non-violent, non-sex offenders would no longer be sent to state prisons, but would fall under the jurisdiction of county jails and probation officers. The process of shifting the jurisdictional authority over offenders is called "realignment." Because imprisoning people in county jails is costly, counties have become more experimental with sanctions (for example, by implementing new models for probation). This presents a great opportunity to fund research that evaluates these experiments.

California realignment is SRF's largest area of work in criminal justice. Steinmeyer noted that efforts to rethink sentencing and punishment are probably the most fruitful topics for research in criminal justice right now. SRF is currently funding two projects on California realignment:

1. Public Policy Institute of California researchers are tracking crime and incarceration data at the county level.
2. Stanford University researchers are documenting the programs that counties put in place in response to realignment, aiming to identify promising models that are worthy of further study.

Opportunities for further work in criminal justice

The HOPE trial happened because there was a judge trying something new and researchers with funding to study it. There are likely many more cases where people are experimenting with approaches to criminal justice, but they may not realize that there are researchers who want to evaluate the work and foundations with funding for studies. It would be useful for someone to catalogue all of the new strategies being implemented. This would help to identify projects for further study. It is important to be

able to talk about new approaches while being agnostic as to whether or not they are effective – one of the problems in this field is that people assume the program that they put in place is working.

About five years ago there was a lot of interest in "community reinvestment." The goal was to control crime at lower cost, by reducing spending on incarceration and investing in community-based strategies to lessen crime. It was a nice idea, but there was not enough information about where to reinvest funds, because very little is known about which community-based strategies are effective.

An issue in policy research more broadly is that the evidence gathered does not always reach policy makers. There are some intermediary organizations that aim to promote research findings to the mainstream, such as the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, but it's not clear if lawmakers are paying attention.

SRF's approach to funding

SRF applies a lot of rigor to its application process and submits proposals for external reviews, but once grants have been made, it does not micro-manage the projects. While some funders have very proscribed areas and interests and don't invite unsolicited proposals, SRF feels it is important to be flexible and opportunistic. This must be balanced with not spreading SRF's capacity too thin.

SRF funds research that is relevant to public policy. Some of these projects are led by professors, whose university salaries cover their research time, but additional funding is needed, for example, for costs of procuring data or hiring research assistants. SRF also funds research projects that are smaller scale or more unconventional than those a larger funder might consider.

SRF's work with Mark Kleiman

SRF gave Mark Kleiman a \$40,000 grant about 8 years ago to expand a report he had written for the Department of Justice into a book called *When Brute Force Fails*. SRF has been influenced by Kleiman's writings on criminal justice, and Kleiman helped connect SRF to Angela Hawken, the researcher who led the HOPE trial.

Steinmeyer said that Kleiman has a unique ability to interpret research findings and apply them to how policy should be designed. Whereas other researchers specialize in conducting rigorous studies of individual policies or programs, Steinmeyer noted, Kleiman is good at looking at the big picture.

People for GiveWell to talk to

- Mark Schmidt – Director, Political Reform Program, New America Foundation
- The Joyce Foundation (<http://www.joycefdn.org/>) – funds a mix of research and public education/advocacy in the Great Lakes states

All GiveWell conversations are available at <http://www.givewell.org/conversations>