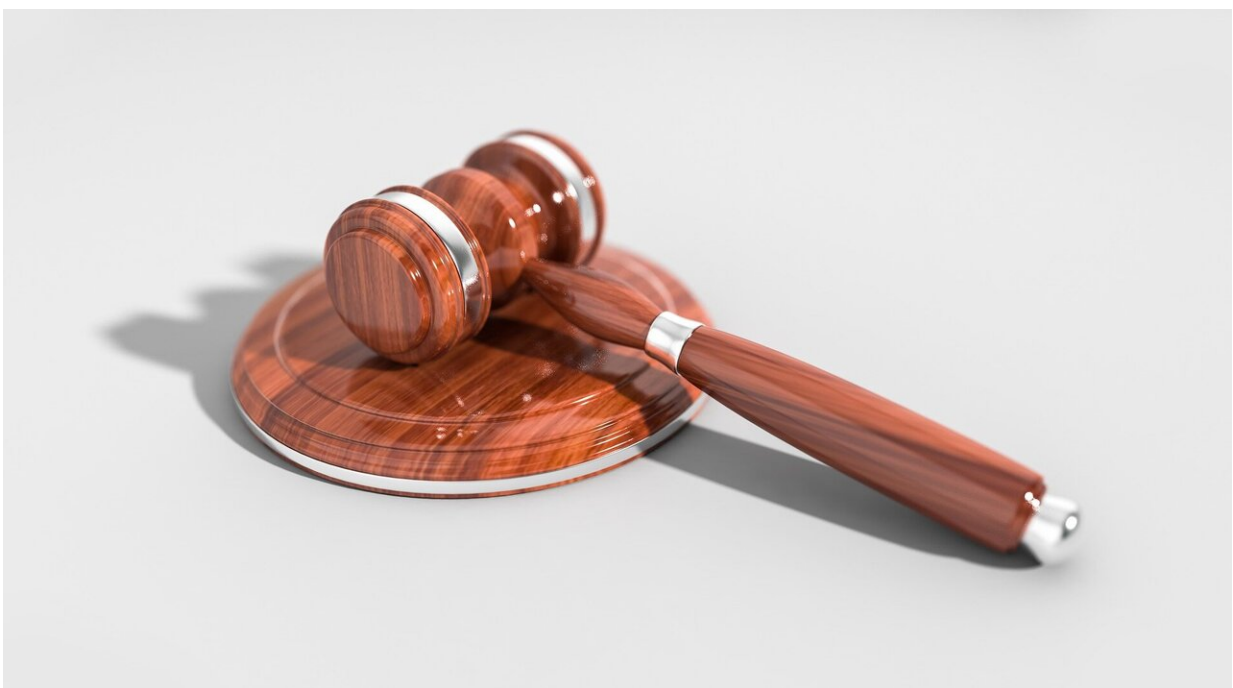


Criminal justice staff must view reforms as legitimate for them to be sustained, study shows

April 28 2021, by Mike Krings



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Researchers commonly work with the criminal justice system to implement reforms, bringing with them the latest science and data pointing to why a certain practice will help improve outcomes. New research from the University of Kansas shows if community corrections

agencies are to sustain evidence-based reforms, they need to view them as legitimate.

Researchers worked with eight federal community corrections agencies to implement Contingency Management, an evidence-based practice used to help people convicted of drug offenses set and achieve goals to end addiction, avoid repeat offenses and increase pro-social behavior. Such evidence-based practices and reforms are frequently put in place across the criminal justice system.

"We've seen millions of dollars spent by institutions on evidence-based practices in community corrections settings, but there is very little research on if the reforms stick after researchers leave," said Shannon Portillo, associate professor of public affairs & administration at KU and co-author of the study. "We followed up after our original study with community corrections agencies, and we found reform only sticks when staff viewed the reform as legitimate. It is not enough to show that reforms are effective or efficient. Workers must view them as legitimate and aligned with their organization's goals."

The study, co-written with Danielle Rudes and Faye Taxman of George Mason University, was published in the *British Journal of Criminology*.

The researchers returned to the eight community corrections sites five years after implementing Contingency Management. While all sites saw the reformed practices as legitimate enough to initially consider adoption, two sites never adopted them, four sites experimented with reform, and two sites continued to use the reform after the study was over. The research team evaluated the legitimacy of the reform on three levels: Pragmatic, or if staff recognized that the practice could fit with their [site](#) routines and operations; moral, or if it was viewed as the right thing to do to help their clients; and cognitive, or if they could understand how this reform was different from current practices and was

a shift in behaviors that could fit their agency.

Results showed that sites that sustained Contingency Management rated it moderately or strongly in all three areas but that it had to be viewed strongly in terms of cognitive legitimacy. Sites in which it was not sustained gave various reasons for scoring it lower; for example, one employee did not use the software provided to keep track of data, instead logging it manually and reporting it was additional work, resulting in a low score in pragmatic legitimacy. Leadership was key in implementing reforms but could not make others view them as legitimate simply by requiring staff to implement the new practice. In fact, leadership views of legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness of the measure was not a key factor at all, compared to staff views of legitimacy.

"This shows it really had to be the workers who saw this change as worthwhile and saw how the reform was worth their time to change their behaviors and workplace practices," Portillo said.

In some of the sites where the evidence-based practice was not sustained, workers and management discussed the reform, but they indicated they were not sure exactly what it meant or how they could find a way to make it fit in their operations, meaning it did not score well in cognitive or pragmatic legitimacy. Contingency management works by helping individuals set goals for recovery, meet requirements set in terms of their probation or by courts and rewarding them with gift cards or points toward purchases when certain benchmarks are met.

"It sounds simple, but this is a huge shift in mindset for the criminal justice system, because the system is so punishment-oriented. So, it was not always viewed as legitimate," Portillo said.

Presenting such a fundamental change in operations shows that reform

cannot be implemented or sustained without demonstrating to those tasked with carrying it out of its value. Demonstrating the efficacy or leadership simply telling workers it is something they have to do was not enough. While much effort and money have been invested in criminal justice reform, a deeper understanding of what reforms work as well as how to make them stick is vital to improving the [criminal justice system](#) and helping individuals successfully transition back to society.

"This is definitely an area that needs more research, as the federal government invests a lot, and individual organizations invest a lot of time and resources in reforms and evidence-based practices," Portillo said.

"We need to know more about how reform can be successful and how it is sustained for the long term."

More information: Danielle S Rudes et al. The Legitimacy of Change: Adopting/Adapting, Implementing and Sustaining Reforms within Community Corrections Agencies, *The British Journal of Criminology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/bjc/azab020](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab020)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Criminal justice staff must view reforms as legitimate for them to be sustained, study shows (2021, April 28) retrieved 5 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-04-criminal-justice-staff-view-reforms.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.