

BETA Gov Briefing—December 2015

Most policies and practices pertaining to criminal justice—such as how we manage or rehabilitate convicted offenders—have one thing in common: they have never been methodically tested. Conducting rigorous evaluations has traditionally involved academia-based researchers, government funders, and miles of red tape that delay research and inhibit dissemination of findings. As a result, many conventional policies intended to make society safer, healthier, and smarter are based more on intuition than on empirical data, and the resulting practices persist without support of actual evidence for their effectiveness. Another problem is that an "evidence"-based practice (even one based on good evidence) that works well in one setting might fail to work in another setting. Lacking trustworthy research focused on these practices, policymakers cannot make sound decisions and sensible resource allocations. The consequence is a social policy landscape littered with inefficient and unproductive (often expensive) programs.

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are the gold standard of research but the prevailing academic-based approach to experimental research is expensive and slow. Exorbitant costs and slow processes may be justifiable for a full-scale randomized controlled trial, but they are also factors that inhibit conduct of more exploratory research on the majority of innovations and existing practices that need to be tested. The traditional emphasis on academia-led projects also limits opportunities for front-line staff and clients of the system (inmates, recipients of social services, etc.) to provide input regarding policies or practices that might improve outcomes.

An efficient, low-cost approach for gathering experimental evidence at the *pilot* level is needed to cast a wider net in soliciting ideas, thereby expanding the universe from which innovations are collected and rapidly identifying areas that show promise, or do not, at the *local* level. Rapidly implemented and completed trials that test innovative practices at local levels and show promising results that may generalize across other jurisdictions can provide pilot data to guide researchers interested in implementing traditional large-scale RCTs. Without pilot data to justify their development and implementation costs in time and resources, the Cadillac-style RCTs are potentially wasteful; with more reliable data emerging from pilot-style trials that explore more practices and policies, research resources can be more efficiently allocated to achieve more relevant findings.

GoodVentures/GiveWell provided the initial core funding to the creators of BetaGov, which has grown into a 12-person interdisciplinary research team (PhD-level policy analysts, economists, psychologists, statisticians, a professional communications analyst/writer, and support staff; see BetaGov.org). The team works with practitioners in the field and remotely, providing expertise in RCT development and conduct to help practitioners bring the scientific process into their world in order to improve processes and practices in their agencies.

During the initial proof-of-concept period of approximately two years, BetaGov has worked to change the method and rate of knowledge creation in the public sector by moving research from traditional academic settings into the field. BetaGov motivates and supports *practitioner*-led RCTs that explore (at the pilot level) policies that have been inadequately investigated. All support services are provided at no cost to end users (even a modest cost can create a barrier to innovation and testing, given state contracting requirements). The influence of BetaGov activities extends across dozens of jurisdictions in 12 states, with more BetaGov-affiliated projects coming on board every week. BetaGov's efforts are escalating and the national impact is notable in the team's presence at conferences and practitioner meetings attended by federal decisionmakers as well as state-level agency personnel. BetaGov has developed a good reputation and the team is sought as speakers in formal and informal settings around the nation and in other countries.

GoodVentures/GiveWell funding has been crucial in supporting BetaGov's work in several ways:

Phase 1: Assembling an interdisciplinary team

To begin, BetaGov worked to attract seasoned researchers who are RCT experts and enthusiasts, have experience implementing trials, and *enjoy* collaborating with individuals who work on the front lines of social service agencies (this included recruiting several senior researchers from other universities).

Phase 2: Learning how practitioners learn

Since its inception, the BetaGov team understood it would need to rely on practitioner advisors to identify the tools practitioners needed most, and to learn how best to provide support to practitioner-led research. The team's strategy initially focused on identifying web-based tools, but it became clear that no technology could substitute for the human touch; interpersonal contact is essential. This has had important implications for the staffing of the team; the need for ongoing hands-on support is the primary reason the team has grown to include 12 researchers.

Phase 3: Developing ideas and conceptualizing trials

BetaGov works with partner agencies to solicit ideas for policies, practices, and innovations to be tested. BetaGov helps agencies gather ideas from their staff, their clients (recipients of social services, inmates, etc.), and other stakeholder groups (including families of service recipients) to first understand *their* ideas about what works, what doesn't work, and what might work. Stimulating a taste for research among non-researcher agency personnel and service providers is a major component of the BetaGov approach. Without developing the "culture" of research, an organization or agency cannot expect its personnel to embrace innovations, even when demonstrated by research. BetaGov helps agencies to proactively solicit ideas from all levels of personnel, cutting through the agency's chain of command and enabling front-line staff to have a meaningful voice in suggesting innovations and identifying problems and potential solutions. BetaGov has learned a great deal through personal contact with front-line staff in social service agencies and with personnel in prisons, jails, and in the community. By getting into the field and engaging the practitioners and the populations affected by policies, BetaGov has opened a floodgate of ideas that emerge from all levels of personnel and stakeholder groups, including inmates. All proposed trials are vetted by agency leadership. The result is a list (usually dozens) of agency-approved ideas that BetaGov then reviews for feasibility. Those that are suitable for testing using an RCT progress to the next phase. There is no shortage of good ideas. The biggest challenge, given the need for hands-on support, has been keeping up with demand, prompting the team to make several additional senior-level hires. As of this writing, there are almost 100 BetaGov-affiliated trials in progress, in pre-implementation/approval stages, or in process of refinement, all occurring across a dozen states.

Phase 4: Training practitioners and planning trials

Every trial submitted to BetaGov has a designated point of contact (POC) person within the submitting agency. Trial POCs participate in BetaGov "Pracademia" webinars that train "pracademics" on key issues involved in designing, implementing, and overseeing an RCT. BetaGov encourages an appreciation for the importance of improving the knowledge base. The key message to practitioner partners is that they are responsible for implementing a rigorous, good trial; they are *not* responsible for finding a "good" outcome and should be

agnostic about trial results. Training includes a brief history of RCTs, a review of ethical issues and oversight requirements, why RCTs are important in assessing programs within criminal justice, and research methods. POCs review eligibility criteria, the method and timing of randomization (e.g., use of batch randomization or a trickle-in design, how to ensure balance of participant characteristics in study conditions), using an intent-to-treat design, and how to provide clear descriptions of intervention and control conditions. BetaGov responds to queries from practitioner researchers, helping them in a range of RCT issues, from identifying key outcome variables and existing administrative data sources for measuring outcomes, to the means of monitoring fidelity to condition assignment. Reporting procedures are described, including adherence to the CONSORT statement. Each trial is assigned a professional statistician through BetaGov (the BetaGov team includes two dedicated statisticians). BetaGov statisticians work with sites to calculate an appropriate sample size (balancing statistical and practical considerations) and an appropriate follow-up period (most BetaGov trials have a follow-up of 6 months or less). Each trial idea is converted into a short planning document (templates are provided by BetaGov and BetaGov is closely involved with the agencies in preparing these).

Phase 5: Supporting trials from implementation to trial reporting

BetaGov is a one-stop shop that provides comprehensive trial support. Every trial receives attention from at least one BetaGov PhD-degreed researcher experienced in designing and implementing RCTs. BetaGov personnel work with the practitioner in overseeing all aspects of the trial and coordinate the efforts of other members of the BetaGov team. While some agencies have dedicated research teams that can perform their own calculations, others rely more heavily on the BetaGov team for technical support; therefore, every trial also has a designated statistician to assist with (or advise on) sample size calculations and analysis issues, and a BetaGov staff member dedicated to data management and quality control. BetaGov personnel work closely with practitioner partners throughout the conduct of the trial, monitoring fidelity to study conditions, assuring complete and correct data collection (or in many cases data extraction from administrative records). The BetaGov team includes a communication analyst/writer who works with practitioners to prepare final reports and other dissemination products (our goal is practitioner-friendly reports of approximately five pages).

The BetaGov repository has grown to nearly 100 approved RCTs (in planning, underway, and complete). BetaGov brings private sector speed to public sector problems, and it does so at a low cost, both of which are crucial in producing findings that are timely and relevant. Rapid turnaround is important; for example, directors of public agencies usually hold their positions for 18-24 months, so their tenure concludes far more quickly than does the conventional academic-based RCT. BetaGov has proven to be uniquely nimble and responsive to the needs of practitioners who express interest in conducting research, thereby promoting efficient RCTs in jurisdictions that otherwise have not engaged in such research. BetaGov's most rapidly conceived and completed trial to date took only two months (from the initial call between the agency and BetaGov to having findings in hand). It's now labeled the *\$4 Trial*. The entire trial (text message reminders for appointments were sent to 100 probationers assigned to the "intervention" condition) cost the agency \$4 beyond their normal operating budget. Outcomes drew from routinely collected administrative data. The trial yielded statistically and practically meaningful outcomes (and reliable indication of a massive benefit-cost ratio). Within two months, the county probation department had identified a practice demonstrated to improve outcomes that was relevant to *their* caseload. Furthermore, the BetaGov point of contact (a frontline employee in the probation

department who had no prior research experience), is now a BetaGov “pracademic” who will soon oversee several additional trials developed on her own initiative.

Phase 6: Disseminating findings and lessons learned

The recently launched website, BetaGov.org, will be the primary platform to spread information about RCTs, to solicit new innovations to be tested, and to present findings. The BetaGov website is still being refined, as is the BetaGov repository of findings. BetaGov works closely with sites to ensure that outcome data are consistently collected and analyzed to allow for cross-jurisdiction comparisons. Trials that show promise will be expanded to tests of larger scope within an agency, and BetaGov then solicits practitioner partners in other states to test a similar strategy to assess whether the original finding generalizes beyond the original trial and its setting. The repository in development will be posted to the BetaGov website. The BetaGov team continues to travel extensively around the country to extoll the value of practitioner-conceived trials that delve into local problems that may need local solutions. Such trials are notably efficient because they are designed by the people who are most aware of their local issues and needs, with BetaGov helping at all stages as requested or as required. BetaGov is becoming a significant force in research-driven policy reform and we will continue to expand its efforts.

Next Steps

Demand for BetaGov services has greatly exceeded initial expectations. Three additional employees will be necessary in the relatively near term to help manage the next generation of BetaGov-supported trials. BetaGov achieved a great deal with initial seed funding, but there is much more to be done. BetaGov will now launch a fundraising campaign to secure the funding needed to continue the support of public agencies using a no-cost-for-services model. The BetaGov approach ensures greater utilization of RCTs to test innovations as well as existing programs, leading to greater application of reliable knowledge in planning and implementing social policies and resultant practices.