

BUILDING REGIONAL RESILIENCE: RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS IN A RURAL BORDER AREA

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ABSTRACT

Research-to-practice partnerships (RPPs) play a significant role in helping community agencies respond to regional resilience issues. Responding to high drug-trafficking activity in a rural border area, the San Diego State University Regional Resilience Center partnered with the City of Brawley, California Police Department to secure a Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance's grant addressing three regional challenges: fentanyl use and overdoses, community perspectives on safety and the police, and changes to crime rates and patterns. This study highlights the benefits of RPPs in bridging the gap between academic research and practitioner application while illustrating how evidence-based practices and data-driven decision-making enhance agencies' capabilities and capacity to confront complex social issues in vulnerable areas.

Keywords: research-to-practice partnerships, regional resilience, community engagement, program evaluation, homeland security

This paper examines the research-to-practice paradigm in homeland security, focusing on the role of community-based research-to-practice partnerships (RRPs) in a rural border region. By leveraging the strengths of both academic and practitioner perspectives, these partnerships can address challenges more effectively and provide evidence-based practices for policy development and implementation. The benefits of RPPs are illustrated through a case study example involving a grant-funded partnership between San Diego State University's Regional Resilience (R²) Center and the City of Brawley, California, Police Department.

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The authors hold dual faculty appointments with the School of Public Affairs at San Diego State University (SDSU) and SDSU Imperial Valley, a college within the University functioning as a branch campus in the rural border region comprising Imperial County, California (colloquially known as Imperial Valley). The SDSU Criminal Justice program and Graduate Program in Homeland Security operate at SDSU Imperial Valley and specialize in preparing students to become regional public service practitioners. An essential aspect of teaching in these programs is

demonstrating to students the crucial role of research in practice and policy development. The value of creating research-practice partnerships to aid agencies in their activities is not just theoretical; RPPs have a tangible impact on the communities they serve, contributing to regional resilience in an area with some of the highest concentrations of poverty, unemployment, and border activity in California (Department of Transportation, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2024; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

SDSU is the southernmost institution among the 23 universities that comprise the California State University system. It was founded in 1897 and is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission. The University has over 36,000 students (4,500 enrolled in graduate programs).¹ SDSU is recognized as a Hispanic-serving institute, with approximately 34% of the student population being Hispanic/Latino. It is also an Asian American and Native-American Pacific Islander-serving institution.

The SDSU Imperial Valley campus has approximately 1,100 students, 89% of whom are Hispanic/Latino and 71% of whom identify as female.² Both authors' primary teaching activities are on the SDSU Imperial Valley campus, focusing on courses in three SDSU programs: a master of science program in homeland security, a bachelor of science program in criminal justice, and a bachelor of arts program in public administration.

RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS

Research-to-practice partnerships (RPPs) are collaborations between researchers and practitioners that focus on addressing practical challenges and real-world issues in mutually beneficial ways. For example, researchers can contribute to their scholarly work by collecting data and publishing their research findings, while practice-oriented partners can enhance their ability to address specific agency problems (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Melton et al., 2022; Sjölund et al., 2021, 2022; Welsh, 2021). Unlike traditional academic research projects that are more researcher-driven, RPPs allow non-researchers to have a more significant role in planning and goal creation. As highlighted in Coburn and Penuel (2016), key characteristics of RPPs include long-term commitments between project partners, a focus on problems of practice rather than theory or gaps in research, mutualistic relationships and shared authority, intentional strategies when forming new relationships, and data collection and analysis.

Teaching in public service-related programs such as criminal justice, homeland security, and public administration requires emphasizing to students the need to develop partnerships across organizations and community stakeholders. For instance, an all-hazards approach to homeland security requires strategic interagency collaboration and public support (Comiskey, 2021). In this regard, RPPs offer several potential strengths by generating research aimed at addressing specific

¹ General student enrollment and ethnicity data are from Fall 2023.

² SDSU Imperial Valley student gender and program size data is from Spring 2024.

real-world problems and practice; extending reciprocal benefits to researchers and practitioners; closing the gap between academics and practitioners, helping ensure evidence-based practices in policy development; and building capacity and capability to conduct research and improve practice (Alonzo et al., 2021; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Melton et al., 2022).

Students learning about RPPs must know the potential challenges in establishing and maintaining collaborations. Establishing and sustaining trust, managing expectations and time commitments, navigating different organizational cultures, addressing power imbalances, and dealing with the impact of evaluation results are complex features of RPPs (Alonzo et al., 2021; Booker et al., 2019; Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Gamoran, 2023). Booker et al. (2019) offer several ways to avoid these common pitfalls, such as engaging in early and continuous agenda setting, being flexible when necessary, cultivating stakeholder buy-in, prioritizing timely communication, identifying key personnel on both sides of the partnership, and demonstrating shared values related to the project. As students prepare to enter the service field, these tips may aid in establishing successful partnerships with a variety of organizations.

THE SDSU REGIONAL RESILIENCE (R²) CENTER

The SDSU Regional Resilience (R²) Center was created to implement the research-to-practice concept for the Imperial Valley region. The center hosts a transdisciplinary group of faculty researchers who utilize quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods methodologies to examine issues impacting resilience in Imperial County. Active R² Center researchers include tenured and tenure-track faculty from criminal justice, environmental health, homeland security, mathematics, and public administration disciplines.

The R² Center's primary goal is to create tangible research projects for faculty and community agencies that address the region's needs. The center provides a dedicated space for faculty to conduct evidence-based student-aided research and functions as a meeting location to collaborate with community partners on regional research projects. Overall, the center leverages existing resources to foster RPPs with externally funded community organizations, aiming to significantly contribute to scholarly research and the well-being of the greater Imperial Valley community. Figure 1 illustrates the core features of the R² Center.

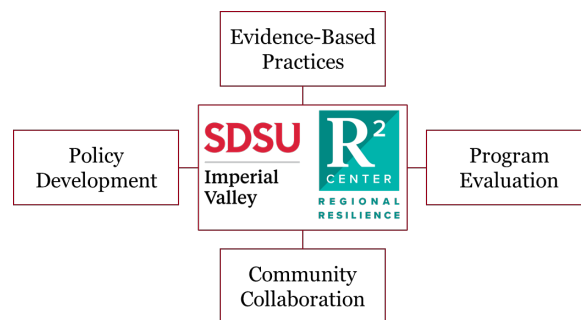


Figure 1. SDSU R² Center Key Actions

An example of the R² Center’s focus on helping regional agencies address resilience issues is its partnership with the BPD through a grant funded by the Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance. The three-year project is multifaceted, including three core activities: (a) enhancing community awareness of the dangers associated with fentanyl use; (b) measuring community perspectives regarding crime and the police; and (c) identifying crime patterns (with particular emphasis on violent and juvenile-related offenses). In addressing these issues, the RPP boosts community engagement, promotes youth programs, and leverages data-driven strategies to increase the agency’s capacity and capability to prevent crime. It is important to note that a multi-agency seizure of cocaine, fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamines, and firearms in the Brawley area during the summer of 2024 produced 14 indictments that charged 47 alleged members of the Sinaloa Cartel with drug trafficking, firearms, and money laundering (Department of Homeland Security, 2024).

RPP projects are founded on evidence-based practices, using data and observable information rather than experience and intuition in decision-making, policy creation, and program selection (Ratcliffe, 2019, 2023). Program evaluation is often necessary to determine if a policy has the expected impact. Two general types of program evaluations help organizations determine if they are efficiently using their resources: an assessment of program fidelity (“Are we doing what we set out to?”) and an evaluation of program effectiveness (“Do we have the results that we expected?”) (Miller & Miller, 2015). Through program evaluation, agencies can adopt data-driven decision-making to help increase their in-house capacity and capability. This process is illustrated in Figure 2.

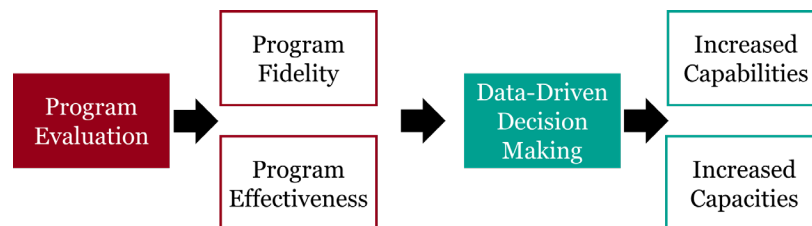


Figure 2. Applying Evidence-Based Practices to Enhance Agency Performance

R² Center personnel are engaged in multiple research activities to assist BPD in achieving its goals of educating the public on the dangers of fentanyl and reducing crime rates. To evaluate an ongoing fentanyl awareness campaign, the R² Center created a pre-/post-test survey protocol to employ during workshops with community members. The pre-test survey, taken before fentanyl information workshops, collects participants’ baseline knowledge of fentanyl. The survey is then repeated following the completion of the session to ascertain how knowledge has increased and identify ways to enhance the workshop’s effectiveness. Preliminary results indicate that community members lack general knowledge regarding the level of danger associated with fentanyl and that awareness workshops significantly increase participants’ knowledge base, at least in the short term. Being able to present data demonstrating the positive impacts of BPD’s fentanyl awareness campaign will be valuable when requesting future funding after the initial

grant expires, as intractable problems require long-term actions to maintain any level of improvement.

To assess community opinion regarding regional crime and the BPD, the R² Center created a community climate survey by contextually adapting the Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (2014) *Community Survey on Public Safety and Law Enforcement* guidance. The R² Center survey is web-based and asks questions about the BPD's reputation, significant public safety concerns, police youth programs, fentanyl awareness, interactions with law enforcement, and participant demographics. The survey allows community members to voice their opinions on issues impacting their quality of life. This information, in return, helps inform local law enforcement of whether their actions and priorities align with the community they serve.

A third branch of R² Center activity is crime pattern analysis, which helps the BPD develop crime prevention programs specific to crime types (e.g., after-school youth offenses). Crime is not randomly distributed in time or space; therefore, identifying patterns of its occurrence can be a powerful tool for law enforcement (Brantingham et al., 2017; Wortley & Townsley, 2017). This quantitative activity of analyzing crime location and timing details is structured around the SARA Model (Clarke & Eck, 2016; Rennison & Dodge, 2022), which requires crime analysts to follow a four-step plan: scanning to identify problems and patterns; analyzing data to identify potential causes; responding to a problem by enacting policy based on analysis; and assessing the impact of the intervention. Through this quantitative research, it is possible to identify "hot spots" and "hot times" for different types of offenses, which allows for creating specific crime prevention responses. Thus, the research activities performed by the R² Center can directly impact the practices of its partnering organization.

The R² Center activities are discussed in courses spanning multiple disciplines, supplementing and contextualizing student learning and development. Course lectures highlight research activities, community partners participate as guest speakers, and students serve as research assistants. The R² Center and RPPs contribute to the SDSU teacher-scholar model, wherein faculty maintain research agendas and provide opportunities for students to obtain critical thinking skills, apply knowledge, and gain professional development experience.

CONCLUSION

The SDSU R² Center BPD example case highlights the significant impact of RPPs on bolstering community resilience and public safety. Through collaboration with local agencies, the R² Center demonstrates how RPPs help address critical issues, such as crime prevention and fentanyl overdoses, in a rural border region. Not only do these partnerships contribute to scholarly research, but the findings can be linked to tangible benefits for the community. As students and public service professionals learn about the value of RPPs, they become better equipped to establish future collaborations that enhance organizational capacity and capabilities.

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