

# MISSING LINKS: HOW DESCRIPTIVE VALIDITY IMPACTS THE POLICY RELEVANCE OF RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIALS IN CRIMINOLOGY

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## SUMMARY

The randomized controlled trial (RCT) has been held up as the “gold standard” research design for maximizing internal validity—the extent to which causal inferences about program effectiveness may be drawn from a given study. Along with external validity—the applicability of program outcomes to other settings and populations—internal validity is crucial to methodological quality. However, even well-designed studies can suffer from implementation issues that reduce their validity. In the context of evidence-based policy, this creates uncertainty for decision-makers who need to be confident in the results of experimental research. While implementation problems are difficult to overcome in practice, researchers can assist decision-makers by providing full details about their results and technical issues in study reports. High-quality, transparent reporting, or *descriptive validity*, is therefore strongly related to internal and external validity. The present study assesses the quality of reporting of issues that may affect internal and external validity in criminological RCTs, and explores its impact on the policy relevance of rigorous research.

## DATA AND METHODS

Reporting indicators based on CONSORT standards from the health sciences are constructed to provide study readers with information on trial details that may affect the internal and external validity of the study. The reporting indicators are applied to a sample of 38 RCTs, covering a range of criminal justice interventions, published in high-profile journals between 2002 and 2008. A Descriptive Validity Matrix is constructed to visually convey information about reporting quality across a group of studies, based on the reporting indicators, to decision-makers.

## RESULTS

Information about internal and external validity is moderately well-reported in criminological RCTs. The sample of studies show medium descriptive validity in reporting on elements relevant to internal validity, and high descriptive validity for items relevant to external validity. However, there was considerable variation in the quality of reporting on key issues, especially those related to implementation of the random assignment sequence, deviations from the planned study, and attrition of participants.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study and the Descriptive Validity Matrix provide a useful framework for assessing descriptive validity. Although the indicators developed were not specific to criminology, and the analysis was limited to a small number of studies published in academic journals, this study is an important starting point for continued research and discussion on the relationship between implementation of field experimentation, reporting quality, and policymaking. The Descriptive Validity Matrix could be adapted for use in research reviews, such as those produced by the Campbell Collaboration, to convey the extent to which decision-makers can be confident in the quality of the trials summarized. The ability to report research clearly is as important as choosing the most rigorous research design for enhancing the objectives of evidence-based crime policy.

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