

Hannah Farrell

Library Research Award Reflective Essay

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For Winter Quarter, I moved down to Olympia to intern full-time for State Senator Patty Kuderer. Not only did I get paid for this position, but I also got college credit. I was graded on a single piece of writing: a fifteen- to twenty-page research paper about a policy issue or about some aspect of lawmaking. This paper was intended to build upon something I worked on as an intern so that I could take advantage of available resources.

As soon as I stepped into Senator Kuderer's office, I was thrown into the drama surrounding her numerous bills. One especially contentious bill was Senate Bill 6160, a proposed overhaul of Washington's juvenile justice system. This bill would direct children to the juvenile system instead of the adult system and increase sentences for certain offenses. SB 6160 also extended the age limit for confinement in a juvenile rehabilitation institution from 21 to 25. As a Law, Societies, and Justice major at UW who studies the complexities of the criminal justice system, I was intrigued by this bill. In particular, I was fascinated by the reasoning that underpinned the policy: that rehabilitation works best when kids have more time to get the services they need. In essence, SB 6160 reflects the belief that longer sentences for juveniles will ultimately decrease recidivism rates. This matters because criminal justice policy reform is increasingly relying on accurate research. Academic research can change legislation, which impacts people's lives. I was quite skeptical of the theory that longer sentences ultimately lead to lower recidivism rates, so I decided to explore it for my research paper.

I quickly narrowed my focus to Washington's juvenile justice system. After all, SB 6160 affected Washington youth, so it seemed logical that my research should reflect the population at stake. I started my search by consulting the UW Library's law research guide, which encouraged me to visit Google Scholar and HeinOnline. Within a few searches, I found a WSIPP study that confirmed the necessity of my proposed research. Elizabeth Drake, the principal investigator, found that children recidivate far less when housed in juvenile facilities than adult facilities. It became clear that the juvenile system is best for kids, which supports some of the reasoning

behind SB 6160. However, Drake did not investigate how various aspects of juvenile incarceration affect post-release outcomes. I saw a need for such research in order to fully understand the predicted effects of SB 6160 on not only crime, but also on children's lives.

Soon I began digging for research on sentence length and recidivism rates. I tried interviewing people at the Legislature, including Senator Kuderer. She told me that she had conversations with prosecutors and referred me to Senate Caucus staff. I then reached out to an expert who was involved in SB 6160 and worked for the Senate Committee on Human Services and Corrections. While he was very helpful in explaining the bill, he didn't know of any empirical data that supported it.

After these conversations, my primary sources information became peer-reviewed academic articles found on Google Scholar. I discovered that there was no pertinent research for Washington State, but I found research on Florida, Philadelphia, Phoenix, and New Brunswick, Canada. These jurisdictions were as close as I was going to get.

Because I couldn't find data on Washington, I tried to find a well-accepted way to compare justice systems by jurisdiction. I searched extensively for comparison methods but had no luck. Then I systematically examined the academic articles on various states to identify how researchers analyzed justice systems. I saw that Dr. Kristin Winokour found inconsistent patterns between intervention programs and recidivism in Florida that depended on how treatment was measured. Winokour attributed her inconclusive findings to several factors, including offender differences. Thus, I reasoned that it was important to analyze offender differences by state. I decided that race, age, gender, type of offense, and type of offender (i.e. violent or nonviolent offender) were adequate factors to quantify and compare offender differences.

When finding data to compare for each system, I had difficulty finding relevant information in academic articles. Instead I tried a different strategy: systematically consulting the official information put out by each jurisdiction. Often this information was insufficient for my purposes. Thus, I decided to consult outside sources. I found data on offender and offense differences through Juvenile Justice Geography, Policy, Practice, & Statistics, which referenced reputable gray literature. Similarly, I used information from the Burns Institute for Justice Fairness & Equity on racial disparities that was based off the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and

Delinquency Prevention data. I thought this added uniformity to my research because I used the same information sources for each state. Consequently, I decided to exclude data from New Brunswick. My sources only analyzed the United States, and I thought that throwing Canada into the mix would lack consistency since I wouldn't be using a uniform source of data.

I am a tutor at the Odegaard Writing and Research Center, and I talked with one of my coworkers about acceptable methodologies for social science. I was concerned that it was too simplistic to rate each aspect of a state's juvenile justice system as "similar" or "dissimilar" to Washington's. But my coworker reaffirmed that my methods of comparison were acceptable, since there was no established way to compare systems and assigning a percentage comparison to factors would be somewhat arbitrary. My coworker also told me about a citation resource called Zotero, which proved to be a helpful tool throughout the writing process.

Overall, I'm proud of this paper. I worked over forty-five hours a week last quarter, and I researched to the best of my abilities within my given timeframe. In retrospect, I would have included more comparison factors, including public education, dropout rates, and treatment programs within juvenile institutions, all of which could affect recidivism rates. However, investigating this topic has confirmed the necessity of empirical research in policy reform, which has direct impacts on people's lives.