

# Research Glossary for Police



This Glossary is for people working in the police and is part of the work supported by the CSE & Policing Knowledge hub. The CSE & Policing Knowledge hub aims to promote knowledge exchange and learning between academia and the police at national and local levels. The Glossary is for people who are interested in learning more about Social Research and want to use research to inform their work. The Glossary gives brief definitions of common terms used in Social Research, showing how some of these common terms have different meanings in police work and in Social Research. The Glossary has been written by Hub partners who are experienced researchers, in consultation with Debra Allnock, Project Manager, and Brian Rose, Police Coordinator of the Knowledge hub.

## 1. WHAT IS RESEARCH?

It is important to know the difference between 'research', 'evaluation' and 'audit'.

**Research** – in policing the term 'research' is commonly understood to mean searching an intelligence system or records for information on a suspect. In Social Research, research refers to the systematic application of accepted Social Science methods (qualitative and quantitative) to investigate a topic of interest, such as the problem of child sexual exploitation, to produce and share new or original knowledge. 'Research' includes desk based scholarship (reading and synthesising findings from a number of research studies to create a systematic review for example), the secondary analysis of existing research findings (further analysis of crime statistics for instance) and primary research based on information gained from people through surveys, focus groups, interviews or observations.

**Evaluation** – in policing this term is often used to refer to personal performance. In Social Research, evaluation is a type of research that focuses on the utility or the usefulness of the research findings for practice or for services. It involves gathering and assessing information with the purpose of providing useful feedback to enhance practices and decision making. It aims to explain how different methods of working in practice may achieve different

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outcomes. An example of an evaluation study would be a study that compared two different methods of working with sexually exploited girls, exploring the approach in a specialist outreach service with a non-specialist health care service and looking at whether the health outcomes for girls with similar conditions at the start were better after treatment in one service compared with the other.

**Audit** – looks at compliance with policies and procedures and may often use similar methods as researchers use to gather data (such as interviews and case file analysis for example) but the main aim is to inform the management and internal working practices in an organisation. The focus is on practice and procedures and compliance to these in the organisation rather than primarily on producing and sharing new and original knowledge within a wider external learning environment.

**Primary research** – involves gathering new and original *research data* in a particular field of study. For example conducting and analysing interviews with young people on a topic that has not previously been explored.

**Secondary research** – is a method for gathering new information by analysing sources of data that already exist on a particular topic or area of research interest. For example, analysing Home Office datasets collected for Crime Surveys.

## 2. RESEARCH DATA, ANALYSIS AND ‘EVIDENCE’

**Research data** – data are distinct pieces of information formatted in a special way and used as a basis for drawing inferences. Research data is data that is collected or created for analysis to produce new, original knowledge. Examples of research data include spreadsheets, fieldwork notes, visual/audio records, interview transcripts, survey results, documents, case files.

**Evidence** – in policing is a term usually used to refer to materials that can be legally presented in court. In Social Research, evidence does not have this legal element. Evidence refers to an outcome or number of findings from rigorous and extensive data collection and analysis that can be used to inform a conclusion. Research evidence is underpinned by sound and robust methodology, rather than personal opinion or theory. Reliability and validity are often the benchmarks used to assess the value of research evidence rather than forensic ‘truth’ or falsehood as in the evaluation of evidence in criminal justice.

**Analysis** – is a process for organising, exploring, examining and interpreting research data to inform conclusions. The purpose of analysis is to answer research questions or rigorously explore subjects of interest. There are various methods of analysis used in research, the two main differences being between *quantitative* and *qualitative* methods of data analysis.

**Validity and reliability-** The validity of research is judged by how accurately it measures what it sets out to do, how well founded the conclusions are that are drawn from the research conducted and how well these correspond to the real world. Reliability is one aspect of validity. Research evidence is seen as more reliable where findings are repeated, supported by a number of different, independent research studies. For example, there is evidence from numerous research studies to suggest a link between childhood sexual abuse and later engagement in high-risk sexual behavior. However, reliability is not sufficient as it

is possible to have consistently similar results from several studies that could be consistently and reliably wrong. Assessing the overall validity and reliability of the research is necessary.

### **3. RESEARCH STUDIES USE DIFFERENT METHODS TO GATHER AND ANALYSE DATA. THERE IS A MAJOR DISTINCTION OFTEN MADE BETWEEN 'QUANTITATIVE' AND 'QUALITATIVE' METHODS**

**Quantitative Research** - uses measurable data to identify similarities, differences or patterns with the aim of being able to describe features of a population or to generalise results from a sub group to the larger population (draw inferences). Quantitative research is numerical and employs robust statistical methods of analysis. Quantitative data collection methods include distribution and analysis of surveys (paper, online, mobile), case records, observations and longitudinal studies.

**Qualitative research** – is primarily exploratory research, used to gain in depth insight into underlying reasons around beliefs, opinions, attitudes and motivations. It can provide a richer understanding of a particular problem, or it can help to develop ideas or theories. Qualitative data collection methods vary but unlike quantitative research, methods are not numerical and can include unstructured or semi-structured techniques. Some of the most commonly used data collection methods are one-to-one interviews, group discussions (focus groups), case studies and participant observations.

Many researchers may use both quantitative and qualitative approaches in a 'mixed methods' study.

### **4. SOME COMMON RESEARCH TERMS**

**Participant** – An individual who takes part in a research study. Participants can be randomly selected, but often consist of individuals who collectively represent a subset of the population in relation to the area of study. For example, offenders who have been imprisoned as a sub-set of all offenders.

**Sample** – Defines a collective group of people who take part in a research study. Sample size varies depending on the nature of the study and research methods used. Quantitative studies tend to have large sample sizes (hundreds, thousands) with the aim of being able to generalise findings to the larger population. For example, we can be more confident about the generalisability of results of research on an intervention service if the sample included 750 out of a total of 1,000 people using the service compared with research based on a sample of 3 out of a total of 4 people using a service. However, a qualitative in depth study based on the sample of 3 participants may have value in highlighting people's different experiences of using a service and may generate findings that are relevant for understanding the detail of service delivery.

**Dissemination** – refers to the purposive sharing and spreading of research findings usually to influence change, generate debate and promote uptake and use. Typically research dissemination includes publication in academic journals and other published outlets, delivering findings at conferences, to the general public via the media and feeding back research results to policy makers, practitioners and users of the research. Independent scrutiny is an important part of the dissemination process for research and there are

procedures such as independent anonymous peer review which are designed to sustain quality standards.

## 5. SOME COMMON QUALITATIVE METHODS

**In depth interviews** – a technique used in qualitative research which involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a sample of research participants. The aim is to explore a particular subject or situation in detail. There are different methods of conducting and analysing interviews in social research and different degrees of structure in their delivery.

**Focus groups** – are group interviews with a representative sample of people, usually around 6-10 in number. The discussion amongst the group is facilitated by the researcher, often by asking a small number of open ended questions around a topic of interest.

**Ethnography** – is the study of social interactions and behaviours which occur within groups of people. The groups are usually observed within natural settings and real world environments, rather than environments constructed for the purpose, such as laboratories or interview rooms. The primary purpose is to gain an understanding of how people live, behave, interact and make sense of their experiences. Ethnographic research draws on a variety of data but observation, field notes and in depth interviews with participants are important sources of data. The researcher's role may vary from joining the group of people being studied as a researcher- participant (as in Winslow et al's study of nightclub bouncers) to observing the group as a researcher-observer (as in Kemp et al's 1992 research on police responses to domestic violence calls).

**Participatory methods** – research that is planned and conducted *with the* involvement of the people who are the subjects of the study. The degree and nature of participation can vary from research which is mostly participant led (where participants decide the research problem, research questions, methods and conduct the data gathering, analysis and dissemination of findings with guidance/consultation with research experts) to research which is mostly researcher led (where participants may be consulted on one aspect of the research such as the design of a survey). Participatory methods are particularly effective and commonly used with children and young people and with groups of people who are socially excluded and have traditionally lacked a voice in social research.

**Case file analysis** – involves retrospective in-depth review of documents and files for the purpose of collating and providing detailed information about an individual, sample or particular subject. Case file analysis can be used to provide a more complete picture and chronology of events or information on common features and circumstances in cases hitherto unexplored. It can provide important information on practice issues and assessment methods. An example of a case file study is research on early identification of children with sexually harmful behaviour based on a review of the characteristics and circumstances of offending children recorded in a treatment agency's case records (Hickey et al, 2005)

## 6. SOME COMMON QUANTITATIVE METHODS

**Survey** – a data collection tool to gather information about a population of people. They are often used in research to collect data on people's opinions, experiences, attitudes, beliefs and well-being, through self-reporting. Survey data can be collected from on-line

questionnaires, distributing paper survey forms or conducting telephone or computer assisted survey interviews.

**Randomised controlled trial (RCT)** – is research which uses experimental methods to reduce bias when testing a new response or service. Participants are randomly assigned to one of two or more study groups, those receiving the new response or service, the experimental group, and those receiving the standard or other form of treatment, who are the control group. Random allocation of participants to either the experimental or control group reduces the risk of selection bias so the impact of the different responses on participants can be more robustly evaluated. An example of an RCT in policing is the Minneapolis experiment and follow up studies which compared arrest with mediation for domestic violence offenders (Schmidt & Sherman, 1996)

**Longitudinal cohort study** – is an observational research method conducted over a period of years or even decades. The same sample or ‘cohort’ of individuals are used throughout the study with data commonly collected at different time intervals, called ‘waves’, in the research process.. The method has often been used in child development research, observing and comparing individuals through childhood and adulthood, who are subjected to different environmental factors. An example of a longitudinal cohort study is Farrington et al’s research on children and crime (Farrington et al, 2006).

## 7. WITHIN EVALUATION A COMMON TERM YOU MIGHT SEE IS

**Realist evaluation** – Is concerned not simply with what works, whether a particular outcome results from different interventions. Realist evaluation looks at how the outcomes are produced in particular social and material contexts and what is significant about the varying conditions in which an intervention or response takes place. The focus is on what works, for which groups of people, in what circumstances and contexts and what factors might influence these things. Realist evaluation will also look at which groups of people benefit from an intervention and which groups do not benefit, exploring the reasons why.

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