Department of Communities and Justice
Research Strategy 2020-2025

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Secretary foreword

The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) supports and enables research to drive evidence-based policy and practice. We know research directly leads to improved client and community outcomes.

Research is critical to the continued development of our knowledge about what works for the people we support.

DCJ has a history of investing in research that has a direct impact on improving services. But there's still lots we need to learn about what works best for our communities.

This research strategy aims to fill evidence gaps and generate new knowledge to inform policy and practice. We want to make sure we invest research that directly addresses our most pressing priorities.

We're dead set about the importance of collaboration. Our research strategy supports research projects with our partners, including universities, NGOs and other government agencies.

The initiatives outlined in the strategy will ensure that DCJ research works for clients and communities, is practice led, and embeds the principles of Indigenous data sovereignty and governance.

We hope this strategy offers something to everyone in the human services sector, including researchers, policy makers, service delivery professionals, and communities.

Together we can work to improve client and community outcomes.

> *DCJ and our stakeholders are focused on research that directly supports us to deliver policy, practice and services to improve outcomes for the people we serve.*
>
> Secretary

> *In the past, DCJ research supported individual parts of our work. Now, we come together under a research strategy that is aligned with all of our priority areas.*
>
> Senior Research Analyst

1. Strategy at a glance

The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) Research Strategy supports strategically-driven research projects and research partnerships with universities, NGOs and other government agencies. The Research Strategy will enable DCJ to invest in research that directly addresses our most pressing priorities. These research priorities will focus on evidence gaps and generate new knowledge to inform future policy and practice.

DCJ research aims to answer specific questions and find solutions to gain insights that support the Department to achieve its immediate and longer term priorities. The research encompasses the generation of new knowledge and the application of evidence to policy, practice and service delivery.

Vision

Research supports the Department of Communities and Justice to deliver evidence-based policy and practice that improves client and community outcomes.

Principles

Communities and Justice Research:

- is developed with clients and communities to identify what works
- is practice led and feeds back into practice and policy
- is aligned to the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework
- embeds the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance
- is rigorous, ethical and culturally responsive
- is generated through collaboration across the Human Services Sector
- supports Communities and Justice to achieve its strategic priorities.

Aims

1. Improve client outcomes by creating and using new knowledge to close evidence gaps.
2. Transform the Department of Communities and Justice into an evidence-based organisation where research informs decision making.
3. Implement a best practice model to direct, conduct and translate human services research.

Communities and Justice Research Activities

Undertake Internal Research

DCJ staff undertake research that informs evidence-based policy and practice

Commission External Research

Research is funded to close evidence gaps

Support Collaborative Research

Researchers and DCJ collaborate on developing new knowledge

Translate & Communicate Research

Research findings are translated to inform policy development, practice innovation and service delivery

Communities and Justice Research Priorities

Understanding Clients & Communities → Understand the needs and experiences of all clients and communities to inform service delivery and program development

System quality & effectiveness → Investigate how to improve system quality, effectiveness and processes

Identify what works for communities → Test the effectiveness of programs and understand what components and practices work to support stronger and safer communities

Aboriginal-led Research → Support Aboriginal-led research and the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Economic Benefits → Quantify the economic benefits of achieving Community and Justice outcomes

2. A strategic approach for Communities and Justice Research

The Department of Communities and Justice brings together a diverse range of services and programs to solve complex problems for the people of NSW. Through bringing together the former Departments of Family and Community Services and Justice, we have an opportunity to:

- focus on prevention and early intervention
- ensure an effective and efficient legal system, reducing reoffending and building safer communities
- support the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children, young people and families
- collaborate across the sector to improve client and community outcomes and ensure inclusive communities
- provide safe and affordable places to live.

Becoming an evidence-based organisation, where service design is based on high quality research, is critical to improving outcomes for all clients and communities.

The Research Strategy is client and community centric

The Research Strategy aims to generate practice-led research to develop evidence about what works for clients and communities. This will directly inform our policy and practice to improve client and community outcomes.

The Research Strategy is working alongside Ngaramanala: Aboriginal Knowledge Program

Ngaramanala: Aboriginal Knowledge Program aims to apply the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty to how evidence and data is collected, used and governed in the Department of Communities and Justice. It is a shared journey of discovery across Communities and Justice. The Research Strategy, in partnership with Ngaramanala: Aboriginal Knowledge Program, aims to recognise the historical and sometimes current misuse of data about Aboriginal peoples and support Aboriginal-led research.

The Research Strategy is an important building block to support the achievement of outcomes in DCJ's Outcome Business Plan

The Research Strategy supports NSW Treasury outcomes based budgeting. Outcome Budgeting puts the needs of the people at the centre of investment decision-making across the sector. It is an approach to decision making that recognises that the allocation of public resources should be based on investment in programs with the greatest likelihood of achieving outcomes rather than funding outputs.

DCJs Research Priority areas have been designed to close critical evidence gaps about what works for clients and communities to support outcomes based planning. Research generated under the Strategy will provide the evidence about how best to invest to improve client and community outcomes and what works best for different client groups.

Research evidence can be used in program design to test assumptions that underpin program logics. This ensures that programs will achieve the best outcomes for our clients and will produce the expected return on investment. The research under the Strategy includes a focus on generating research to support system-based and economic outcomes and to deliver better outcomes for Aboriginal people.

The Research Strategy will invest in and leverage DCJ's research and administrative data assets

DCJ has a number of rich research and administrative data assets. Through the Research Strategy, these data assets will be used internally, collaboratively and externally to develop research to close evidence gaps. DCJ has a number of data assets, including the Reoffenders Database, Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study, core administrative datasets and developed analytic datasets such as demand funding and service supply models and the Human Services Dataset. The Human Services Dataset is unprecedented in scale in NSW, bringing together 27 years of data, over seven million records, from over 60 frontline datasets in 11 government agencies.

The newly formed Stronger Communities Data Partnership is focused on driving greater use of human services data assets for research, evaluation and actuarial analysis within NSW Government. This will enable NSW Government agencies and services providers to enhance service delivery, improve customer experience, guide investment and drive policy reform across the human services sector.

The NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework guides our research

The NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework will guide our research to create and develop evidence about what works for clients and communities to support the design and implementation of Communities and Justice programs and services. The NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework is a cross-agency framework that specifies seven wellbeing outcomes for the NSW population: safety, home, economic, health, education and skills, social and community, and empowerment.

SOCIAL & COMMUNITY
All people in NSW are able to participate & feel culturally and socially connected

EDUCATION & SKILLS
All people in NSW are able to learn, contribute and achieve

EMPOWERMENT
All people and communities in NSW are able to contribute to decision making that affects them and live fulfilling lives

ECONOMIC
All people in NSW are able to contribute to, and benefit from, our economy

SAFETY
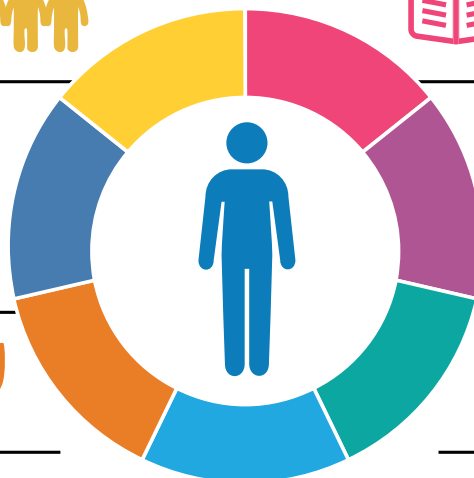All people in NSW are able to feel safe

HEALTH
All people in NSW are able to live a healthy life

HOME
All people in NSW are able to have a safe and affordable place to live

The Research Strategy builds upon a history of research that informs policy and practice

The Communities and Justice Research Strategy builds upon a proud history of research from across the department where evidence has been developed and used to inform policy and practice.

Below are a few examples of when evidence was produced and then translated into practice:

Informing the practice and measure of early identification of those at risk of intimate partner violence

The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) is a statistical and research agency within DCJ. A BOCSAR study in February 2019 found that the odds of being a repeat victim of intimate partner violence within 12 months are ten times higher for someone residing in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia.

This study was undertaken to improve the ability of police and others to identify those at high risk of repeat intimate partner violence. Findings from this study are informing the Government's redesign of the risk reassessment tool used by justice agencies to deliver victim services and support to those at most risk of further violence.

Improving the long-term outcomes of children in Out-of-Home Care

The Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study (POCLS) is the first, large-scale longitudinal study of children and young people in Out-of-Home Care (OOHC) in Australia. It examines the experiences of children in OOHC to understand factors influencing children's safety, permanency and wellbeing and to inform policy, practice and improvement of the service system.

The POCLS study has directly informed policy and practice for children in OOHC, including providing evidence to policy makers across DCJ looking at disability, offending, young parents and leaving care which has directly informed policy development and its implementation.

Identifying factors that contribute to positive early childhood health and development in Aboriginal children

Seeding Success aims to identify health factors that predict developmental vulnerability and to generate evidence about the characteristics of services and programs that improve outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. This research has been used to build the evidence base about the importance of positive early intervention, and contributed to the Independent Review of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care: Family Is Culture. This has been used by FACS early intervention policy makers and informed early intervention program design.

3. Communities and Justice Research Activities

Undertake Internal Research

Why is this research activity important?

Undertaking internal research is important as it:

- harnesses the existing skills, experience and knowledge of Communities and Justice research staff to generate and capture new knowledge that can be directly implemented
- provides timely advice for decision makers through the analysis of the most recent administrative data available
- generates an organisational culture of contributing to evidence-based decision making, policy development and practice innovation
- improves the rigour of policies as it will facilitate early and ongoing engagement with policy makers.

What will this look like?

- Communities and Justice research staff continue to undertake new and rigorous research that focuses on closing evidence gaps
- research staff synthesise existing research to inform service delivery and policy development in Communities and Justice focus areas, including literature reviews and evidence gap analyses
- research staff apply rigorous statistical methods to analyse existing data to improve our understanding of client need, system performance and effective service delivery
- specialist research areas collaborate with policy makers and practitioners to generate new knowledge about what works for clients and communities.

This research activity will be led by the Centres of Research within Communities and Justice. These are:

- NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research
- Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics
- The Office of the Senior Practitioner
- FACS Insights, Analysis and Research.

Commission External Research

Why is this important?

Commissioning external research is important as it:

- enables Communities and Justice to work with the human services research sector to close evidence gaps
- facilitates technical and specialised research that require the skills and knowledge of subject matter experts
- ensures that Communities and Justice investment in external research is focused on developing research that has an impact on improving client and community outcomes.

What will this look like?

Communities and Justice will establish a funded program of research in alignment with our Research Priorities. This will involve:

- targeted calls for specific research priorities
- researchers co-designing research studies with policy, practice and client peak organisations that directly close evidence gaps
- supporting and funding Aboriginal research scholarships
- funding rigorous research projects focused on:
  - flagship Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs)
  - innovation development
  - implementation research.

Externally commissioned research will be supported by a Communities and Justice Research Advisory Committee that will review research proposals and support the use of rigorous methods.

Support Collaborative Research

Why is this important?

Collaborative research is important as it:

- encourages Communities and Justice to work with other state and federal government departments through data linkage and collaborative research projects
- enables Communities and Justice to collaborate with and support research lead by the human services sector, including NGOs, community organisations and universities
- encourages innovative, diverse and multi-disciplinary research.

What will this look like?

Communities and Justice will:

- provide access for researchers to work with staff and use our administrative and research data sets
- participate in cross-agency and sector- wide research networks
- continue to provide in-kind support to researchers
- participate in collaborative research projects, including cross-agency data linkage and research forums
- collaborate with universities to close evidence gaps on a range of projects, from rapid reviews to major funded research collaborations.

Translate & Communicate Research

Why is this important?

It is important to translate and communicate research as it:

- embeds new knowledge into the design and delivery of policy and practice
- strengthens the capacity of Communities and Justice to use existing and new research throughout the department
- supports the human services sector by communicating research findings
- shares research findings with clients and communities so they can see how their voice is valued
- ensures that research has an impact on improving client and community outcomes.

What will this look like?

- Communities and Justice Centres for Research Excellence will continue to build capacity and develop resources about how to use new research
- research will be embedded into Communities and Justice policy and program design and development
- research findings will be presented at conferences, seminars and shared through peer-reviewed publications
- Communities and Justice will establish a Research hub website that will:
  - showcase and promote high quality research
  - ensure that research findings are available and accessible for decision making
  - publish knowledge translation notes to inform policy and practice.

4. Communities and Justice Research Priorities

How were the research priorities developed?

The research priorities were developed through an extensive development process to identify Communities and Justices most pressing challenges, priorities and gaps in evidence. This involved:

- reviewing the key frameworks, policies and reforms that underline the Communities and Justice vision to strengthen communities
- identifying initial research priorities through a review of the Premiers Priorities, State Outcomes, Human Services Outcomes Framework and Communities and Justice Program Logics
- consulting with research, policy and practice subject matter experts from across Communities and Justice to refine and prioritise the research priorities.

How will the research priorities be used?

The research priorities will be used to guide the development of research projects to create new knowledge that closes evidence gaps, and can be directly translated into policy and practice to improve client and community outcomes.

The research priorities can be applied to:

- Communities and Justice's key reforms and strategies
- NSW Government State Outcomes and Premier's Priorities
- every program area across Communities and Justice, for example Youth Justice, Corrections and Housing
- each service stream within the program area, for example early intervention, long-term support and restoration
- every outcome domain within the NSW Human Services Outcomes Framework.

Program areas can expand a research priority to provide further detail to outline how the priority applies to the specific gaps of evidence for their program area.

Understand the needs and experiences of all clients and communities to inform service delivery and program development

Why is this a priority?

Understanding the needs and experiences of clients will inform service delivery and help to develop an evidence base. This will support us to better address client and community needs and design programs that are client centric and work with communities.

What does this research priority include?

- Working with clients from programs across communities and justice, particularly people who are clients in multiple programs, to listen to their needs and experiences

- Identifying and listening to the needs and experiences of clients and communities with high levels of trauma, including individual, collective and intergenerational trauma

- Listening to communities about their needs and how Communities and Justice can better work alongside their community

- Understanding the service delivery needs for the population of people that use our services.

Investigate how to improve the quality, effectiveness and processes of Communities and Justice systems

Why is this a priority?

Communities and Justice consists of multiple complex and dynamic systems, ranging from statutory child protection to courts and tribunals. Designing our systems to be effective and deliver quality is critical to their success. Research into effective service delivery models and processes can lead to improved system performance and better client and community outcomes.

What does this research priority include?

- Researching system processes that are cost and time effective
- Identifying processes that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of community and justice service systems, whilst ensuring that quality is maintained
- Understanding the interdependencies and interactions of various components of service systems to assess policy impact and improve service delivery.

Test the effectiveness of programs and understand what components and practices work to support stronger and safer communities

Why is this a priority?

There is little evidence about what specific components of programs contribute to improving client and community outcomes. This research is important when designing programs and ensuring that they are evidence-based and adaptable to community's needs, cultures and geography.

What does this research priority include?

- Identifying what parts of successful programs work, and the circumstances that lead to their success
- Understanding whether programs and practices are effective for different communities
- Working with clients, communities and service providers to identify what works.

Support Aboriginal-led research and the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Why is this a priority?

Aboriginal-led research mutually benefits both Aboriginal peoples and Communities and Justice. It ensures research is inclusive and is conducted in accordance with Aboriginal Knowledge. The principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty ensure that research is transparent, collaborative and has a direct benefit to the community. This research will contribute to the development for better long-term outcomes for Aboriginal peoples.

What does this research priority include?

- Providing Aboriginal researcher's access to Communities and Justice administrative data
- Conducting research through using culturally inclusive methods
- Ensuring research is conducted according to the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty
- Partnering with Aboriginal communities to identify research priorities
- Applying the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty to develop research that is based on their stories about their realities
- Building an evidence base that embeds Aboriginal knowledges and voice.

Quantify the economic benefits of achieving Community and Justice outcomes

Why is this a priority?

Communities and Justice is committed to adopting an outcomes-focused approach. An outcomes-focused approach to program design, delivery and evaluation will facilitate a better understanding of program delivery and will benefit the community[1].

Research is required to address the large evidence gap on the economic benefits of achieving outcomes. This research is important to encourage further investment in programs that work to achieve outcomes, particularly in prevention and early intervention.

What does this research priority include?

- Using economic modelling to show the long-term financial benefit of achieving outcomes
- Conducting research that uses economic approaches, such as a cost benefit analysis
- Enabling researchers to analyse Communities and Justice data sets
- Investigating the economic benefit of achieving outcomes in early intervention and prevention services.

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1   https://www.finance.nsw.gov.au/human_services

5. Putting the Research Strategy into practice

Implementation of the Strategy

Success of the Communities and Justice Research strategy will only be achieved through collaboration across the human services sector, with academic institutions and government. The next steps to implement the strategy and enable collaboration are:

- Develop and launch the Communities and Justice Research Hub website
- Formalise the Communities and Justice Research Advisory Committee
- Develop the Communities and Justice knowledge translation strategy
- Work with Communities and Justice policy areas to develop targeted research calls.

To contact the Communities and Justice Research Strategy team for further information, please email ResearchPartnerships@dcj.nsw.gov.au

Review and monitoring of the strategy

The Communities and Justice Research Strategy is a strategic document aimed at increasing the impact of research. This will be achieved by ensuring that Communities and Justice focus on high priority internal research, commissioning the right external research and through developing effective collaborative relationships with research partners. Crucial to the success of the Research Strategy is the ability to translate research findings for policy, practice and service delivery.

The research priorities outlined within this strategy will be reviewed on an annual basis and will be informed by Communities and Justice governance committees as well as by external advisory committees.

The research strategy will be reviewed in 2021 to ensure that the approaches identified within this document continue to meet the needs of Communities and Justice and NSW Government.