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— DR. BARBARA SIMS, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Academia

By MELISSA W. KAYE

Barbara Sims steps out of the ivory tower and onto the streets to address pressing criminal justice policy issues

For an evaluation of a national initiative to reduce firearms violence, Penn State Harrisburg Associate Professor of Criminal Justice Dr. Barbara Sims examined police reports that involved a gun in the Middle District of Pennsylvania—and her findings were different from what was expected. The U.S. Attorney’s office assumed that drugs were the problem in those firearms incidences. However, she and her co-principal investigator Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice Dr. Jim Ruiz found—after creating a profile of the 33 counties in the district and examining more closely police reports in major cities and towns within those counties—that it wasn’t always drugs that were to blame.

“For example, in Harrisburg the guns were related to robbery; in Lebanon it was domestic violence,” explained Sims. “We made the presentation of our data to U.S. Attorney Martin Carlson and explained, ‘This is what we found.’ The U.S. Attorney right away turned around and said to those present, ‘We need to get the DAs on the phone and tell them.’ It is extremely satisfying to see your hard work being put into place on a policy level. We were seeing all this live; it’s the applied nature of the work.”

Sims, the recipient of the 2007 Faculty Outreach Award, has consistently focused her research on important criminal justice policy-directed issues and most importantly, her research products consistently make important contributions to informing those types of policy decisions.

“Since coming to Penn State in 1997, she has made her mark as perhaps the foremost criminal justice policy-centered person in Pennsylvania,” said Dr. Steven Peterson, director of the School of Public Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg. “Dr. Sims has received numerous grants

and contracts from many agencies because of the trust that her research skills have engendered and because of her skill at linking research to public policy.”

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) and other agencies focused on criminal justice have come to depend on Sims when a review of a program is needed—something that is necessary in order to receive funding. An outside person, who can objectively find out whether the program has been implemented the way it was intended and if it has an impact on the community, must conduct the evaluation.

“Dr. Sims has become a major resource to both state and local government as they attempt to develop more effective programs, and as they attempt to improve the coordination and communication between agencies and individuals,” said Dr. John Kramer, Penn State professor of sociology and crime, law and justice at the University Park campus.

Stripping Away Bias

Ask Sims for an example of how policy has changed because of one of her evaluations, and she explains that her work usually stops at that point.

“In applied research, I have learned that I have to take off my advocacy hat and strip away bias,” said Sims. “Some of these issues are very sensitive. I am not going into any of these agencies and telling them how to do their jobs. If they ask for a recommendation, I will do that, but I do it with caution. I am aware of the decreasing amount of funding for some of these programs.”

It can be tough to step back from the situation. In some projects she is involved in, for instance, Sims sees

A woman with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark blue police uniform jacket and blue jeans, is sitting in the driver's seat of a patrol car. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The car's emergency lights are visible on the roof. The text "in Action" is overlaid on the image in a large, white, italicized font.

in Action

INSTANT RESULTS

"It is extremely satisfying to see your hard work being put into place on a policy level," said Sims.



Fred Weber—Campus Photography

Interviewing officers is part of Dr. Sims' evaluation process.

firsthand the seemingly never-ending cycle of crime related to poverty.

As a consultant for the Mifflin County Police/ Probation Partnership Program—in which police officers and probation officers team up and check in on probationers—Sims looked at official crime statistics related to the program, interviewed police and probation officers privately, and also rode along with the officers on their house calls.

When riding with the officers, she sat in the back seat of the car, in a bulletproof vest, with a pad of paper and pen, taking notes. In one case they pulled up to a probationer's home and, after the police officer did a quick scan of the outside of the house, they approached the door.

"A woman answered the door, with three little girls running around saying hello," recalls Sims. "The girls asked questions, and I explained to them that I was observing. It turned out that the probationer was upstairs in the attic with a known drug dealer and the dealer's girlfriend. At that point the probation officer did an entire search of the house. The wife and the daughters started getting more and more upset. The officers had to call another cruiser to pick up the probationer, and the girls were asking, 'Why are you taking my daddy?'"

Sims continued: "I was looking at a household picture of the truly disadvantaged. Childhood abuse and neglect have been linked to subsequent delinquency. Clearly these little girls are going to have some problems, living in a home where drugs are involved and seeing their father hauled off. It was heartbreaking. It comes to life for you what poverty can do to people. Middle and upper

classes certainly do drugs as well, but they may have more resources to help them turn things around."

In another project, Sims conducted an evaluation of crisis intervention teams for victims of domestic violence, as part of work with the Greater Harrisburg YWCA. Again, she rode along with police officers and the crisis intervention teams going to domestic violence-related crime scenes and observed teams in action. "The woman is bruised and beaten," said Sims. "The perpetrator left; the goal is to get the women and children to safety and get immediate counseling. It's unsettling and frustrating to see the woman shaking like a leaf and to see a child in the middle of that type of situation."

Eyewitness Account

Sims says that it's crucial to witness such scenes in order to better understand what it is academics are studying and then make a difference in a community. "Applied research requires getting out of our ivory towers and seeing what's happening on the streets," she said. "Once you produce reliable, valid data, you can report and say whether a program is functioning the way it is supposed to. Your research findings can then take on a life. You can see the data being used."

Chief Juvenile Probation Officer Mark Benedetto of Mercer County, where Sims and Ruiz evaluated a police-juvenile probation partnership, can attest to the significant impact of Sims' work. "The evaluation provided quality assurance and an unbiased gauge from which to reliably measure our program's activity and outcomes," said Benedetto. "[It] furnished timely information necessary to seek out and obtain continued

Firearms Violence

The following are major findings from Dr. Barbara Sims' evaluation of Project Safe Neighborhoods, part of a national initiative to reduce firearms violence:

- One of the greatest predictors of firearms violence in any given county in the Middle District of Pennsylvania is the percentage of the population who live below the poverty level.
- Firearms violence in two major cities within the Middle District is related more to robbery and domestic violence than to incidences involving drugs.

funding during a time when taxes are on the rise and the atmosphere was highly political. ... Fortunately [the program] continues operation to this day, making the streets a little safer and families more accountable."

The Scholarly Route

After giving back to the community, Sims often takes the research that she has produced and turns it into more scholarly work. For example, collecting data on substance abuse addiction in 10 Pennsylvania counties resulted in a book that she edited ("Substance Abuse Treatment with Correctional Clients: Practical Implications for Institutional and Community Settings," Haworth Press, 2005) and in which she authored or co-authored three chapters. That, in turn, led to an invitation to Sims by the University of California, San Diego, Center for Criminality & Addiction Research, Training & Application to speak at its conference on the subject in Sacramento.

Lending her expertise to a Sexual Offenders Management Team established by the Pennsylvania Sexual Offenders Assessment Board, Sims not only organized and conducted research for understanding sex offender management systems in Pennsylvania, but also presented the data in Pennsylvania and nationally.

"Dr. Sims' work has provided the Commonwealth the opportunity to assume a leadership role within a national dialogue regarding the challenging work of sex offender management," said Diane Dombach, clinical director of the Sexual Offenders Assessment Board, based in Harrisburg.

Plus, Sims and Dr. Carl Garver (Penn State Harrisburg criminal justice lecturer) are the organizers of an upcoming conference on Pennsylvania's Weed & Seed

program—part of a national initiative that aims to empower communities to prevent crime and bring about positive change. The PCCD contracted with Sims to conduct the conference, which is expected to draw 300 community Weed & Seed leaders throughout Pennsylvania on June 7–8 in Harrisburg.

Giving Back to Adult Learners

For someone who was late in entering academia—Sims didn't begin college until she was 34—she certainly has a long list of additional academic accomplishments, including serving as the lead faculty member for the creation of an online criminal justice degree program for the Penn State World Campus that began last fall. The program mirrors the criminal justice program at Penn State Harrisburg and is aimed at adult learners with a job or a family who are drawn to the convenience of taking courses anytime, anywhere.

"The field is calling for such opportunities as it expands and professionalizes," said Sims.

Creating a convenient program for adult learners who may have multiple roles (such as parent, spouse and employee) is a fitting accomplishment for Sims, who raised three children while she went on to earn a master's degree and then a doctorate.

Sims recalls that initial foray into academia, and in particular, her interest in the field of criminal justice: "I started, and I didn't want to stop." ♥

Sex Offender Management

Here are a few major findings from Dr. Barbara Sims' research on understanding sex offender management systems in Pennsylvania:

- Many local police departments do not have a policy related to compliance investigations of registered sex offenders.
- About half of sex offenders serving time in a county prison in Pennsylvania receive some type of sex offender treatment.
- Juvenile sex offenders in Pennsylvania appear to fare better when it comes to "best practices" approaches to treatment than do their adult counterparts.