

We act as an enabler and conduit so that social scientists can have the maximum impact on Home Office policies

by Blog Admin

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A 'critical friend' of the Home Office, [Bernard Silverman](#) writes about the roles of Home Office Science, the varied group of social scientists who advise the Home Office on research priorities and policies.



It was a pleasure to take part in the recent conference about the ways in which social science can play its part in government. I particularly wanted to write about the Home Office advisory committees which fall under the sponsorship of Home Office Science, of which I am the head.

A key aspect of our sponsorship is that we act as an enabler and a conduit, so that each committee's advice can have the maximum impact, without compromising their independence and impartiality. All our committees are covered by the [principles of scientific advice to government](#) and in the case of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs there is also a specific [working protocol](#) agreed between the committee and the Secretary of State.

The Home Office Science Advisory Committee (HOSAC) has a responsibility to be the 'critical friend' of the Home Office – considering and advising on its plans, research priorities and policies. Social science is at the core of its work and therefore experts from disciplines across the breadth of the social sciences are represented on the board; currently by members from The Royal Statistical Society, The British Society for Criminology and the British Psychological Society. The Chair of the DNA Ethics Group is also a HOSAC member. Recently, HOSAC has agreed to provide a mechanism for ethical review of social research projects and will be providing guidelines to take this forward. Its work programme has included providing advice on statistical issues relevant to the Department's ethical review process and consideration of the British Crime Survey.

Social harms of misuse of drugs

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) is one of the highest profile government advisory bodies. Consideration of the social harms associated with substance misuse is integral to its work. The ACMD's terms of reference are provided by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 which is primarily concerned with the physical *and* social harms of drugs. It is therefore imperative that the ACMD has social science representation. The social science members on the ACMD represent areas such as criminology and substance misuse as well as other social science disciplines. They provide an informed social science perspective into drug misuse, identifying patterns of drug use, considering the social effects and identifying effective interventions.

Social science input is central to the ACMD's current review of khat – a plant which is chewed to achieve a mild amphetamine like effect. The work will require an analysis of cultural norms associated around the consumption of the substance. A consideration of the social factors around khat use was an explicit requirement in the ministerial commission of khat. The work of the ACMD's Polysubstance Working Group includes a significant social science component in identifying drug-taking behaviours and is chaired by the member representing criminology on the ACMD.

Ensuring quality standards of forensic science

The remit of the Forensic Science Advisory Council (FSAC) is to advise the Forensic Science Regulator on issues regarding forensic science quality standards. The Regulator is independent of government and sets the agenda for the FSAC meetings in order to receive the advice he feels he needs. The forensic sciences are generally considered to be practical applied sciences, for example the use of bio-analytical methods to

identify humans through their DNA. However, the application of analytical methods and interpretation of the results happens within the broader social context of live police investigations and interactions with investigators and other experts, which introduces important social, psychological and cognitive facets to the delivery of objective and reliable results. FSAC has been supporting the Regulator in the exploration and understanding of these social influences with presentations and inputs from social science researchers and experts.

Ethical issues of the National DNA Database

The National DNA Database Ethics Group advises Ministers on ethical issues around the operations of the database. The work of the Group has been underpinned by sociology, criminology, human rights law and psychology. The Group considered the basis for the current retention regime for DNA profiles on the database. It looked at longitudinal criminal careers research to establish if there was value in retaining the profiles of all those arrested. Such information was necessary to balance individual freedoms with the public interests of society. The Group monitors the disproportionate representation of minorities on the database, investigating whether there is discriminatory intent in the loading of profiles on the database and the possible negative effects that may arise.

Societal implications of using animals for research

By convention there is a philosopher and a lawyer on the membership of the Animal Procedures Committee (APC). In addition the Chair is a lay person; among past Chairs there have been lawyers and a theologian. Core to the APC is ensuring its deliberations consider the wider societal implications of using animals for scientific research; and to examine whether proposed work on animals is not only *'methodologically sound'*, but also whether the work is *'conceptually sound'*. For example, the APC recently discussed with a leading neuroscientist and an academic philosopher the ethics of neuroscience in animal research. It was an extremely constructive meeting, with the APC now looking to incorporate the debate and issues raised into its ongoing agenda of work.

An open, collaborative approach

As a final thought, in making appointments to all these committees we follow "Nolan principles". Some of the places on the committees are filled by nomination by learned societies and similar outside bodies but most are openly advertised. I would encourage members of the social science community both to apply for these positions when they come up and also to be active in their own subject societies which have an important general role to play. May I say again how grateful we are to all those who give of their time and expertise to ensure that we get the best possible advice.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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