



Collaboration, innovation, and empowerment: an evidence-informed way forward?

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I am honoured to join as a contributing editor to the *Journal of Community Safety and Well-Being* and to be invited to provide this editorial. Although I struggled at first with where to focus this editorial, as I read through the broad and innovative contributions in the issue, all became clear as I connected recent lessons I learned in Uganda with the quality content produced by the authors within. Thus, I start with discussing my work in Uganda, and then I comment on the articles, the connection, and my takeaways.

My collaborative work in Uganda is multifold; firstly, I am working with the Uganda Prisons Service (UPS) in a collaborative partnership unlike much of my previous prison work but closely aligned with the article written by a cross-section of Canadian public safety leaders, academics, and me in this very issue. What makes the Ugandan work unique, in my view, is my team of researchers which includes members of the UPS. Ethically, this is only possible because of the unique conditions within the Mbarara prison complex and UPS headquarters – there are trusting relationships between staff and prisoners at the prisons. What stood out most is how in a men's prison built with an intended capacity for 700, 2146 men openly reside (an open prison with no cells) with little evidence of intended violence.

The conditions of confinement are challenging – 45 inches to sleep, 270 men to a ward (built for 90 men), and the same food (posho and beans) 365 days a year, twice a day. Despite the conditions, there is greater focus on and more rehabilitative programming than I have seen in Canada. A simple example is the soccer league – 14 teams, run by the sport league president (a prisoner), with 12 teams comprising healthy prisoners, 1 comprising ill prisoners (20–25% of prisoners and staff are HIV-positive), and 1 team comprising staff, and self-officiated by prisoners. The soccer is what one would expect to see in any Canadian men's league – intense, dramatic, heated, but never violent or disrespectful. The intensity ends with the game and all return to their daily living. They are currently playing for the Easter Cup, which simply makes me smile.

Recidivism is low; all people I interviewed said the prison was about rehabilitation, becoming a better person, and attested they changed for the better in the prison. My

mind was blown over and over again by the efforts and approaches, the medical laboratory, the library, the trades training program, the internal security approach (where prisoners provide internal perimeter security), etc. However, external influences threaten these progressive efforts – the cut of medical supplies to Africa by the Trump administration is very real (i.e., <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-usaid-freeze-women-girls-risk-experts-warmrcna190783>). Millions will die when the medications and medical supplies run out – evidencing real inequities that are not right, nor just.

My other work in Uganda was to teach MicroResearch (MR) (www.microresearch.ca), co-founded by Profs. Noni MacDonald and Robert Bortolussi in 2008 (MacDonald et al., 2014, 2023). In Canada, we have and continue to run workshops in public safety organizations. In Uganda we delivered MR to a UPS team and four teams from public health organizations. Basically, MR democratizes and decolonializes research by empowering the frontline with research skills, knowledge translation skills, policy development skills, etc., so they can make evidence-informed change from within – as the frontline know better than most about what requires research. The experience empowers and changes lives – I learn more from teaching what I love than my class than participants, although I do not think workshop participants would agree. The Ugandans I co-taught with were all MR graduates, now professors, deans, deputy vice chancellor, etc., who developed research skills and a love for research, though, as Noni says “the magic that is MR” – a magic one needs to witness to truly understand. Lives change because of MR and the love for research the workshop and mentoring can inspire.

I know the MR outcomes will continue to change lives because it already has saved thousands of lives. To provide one of many examples, I will share a public health story, recognizing that public health and public safety are two sides of the same coin – each informing each other. Two MR teams, one building on the work of the other, reduced infant mortality in Uganda (and continue to) by at least 40% but upwards of 70%. Team 1 was interested in the cause of infant death in rural Uganda (Beinempaka et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2014). They

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found the cause of death was sepsis of the umbilical cord. Team 2, building on team 1, compared cultural practice post-birth activity with the World Health Organization's protocols for umbilical cord care. They found that the cultural practices were the source of infection (Beinempaka et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2014). The result of sharing their knowledge garnered through their MR projects includes knowledge transition to the government, and with assistance from a not-for-profit organization "Umbi-gel" was developed, which is applied on the umbilical cord prior to the cultural practice to protect from infection; it is now available to every pregnant girl or woman in Uganda in "Mama Packs," resulting in significant reductions in infant deaths. The cultural practices do not change – they are made safer, and this is possible because the research is community oriented and person focused. This resulted in thousands of lives being saved not just in Uganda as the practice has been shared outside of Uganda to save lives across Africa. The cost of these two projects was CAN \$3000. The real-world, community-driven research better informs the research questions because of their lived experience. They identified the question and developed the solution. These are stories I want for public safety, internationally, including in the UPS.

In this issue's article written by my team and me, regarding leadership, we co-produced knowledge. Everyone contributed, we learned how to do systematic reviews together, and became flustered together when we could not find relevant research. Our national leadership committee epitomized collaborative research. Like in MR, I was privileged to share what I love – research – with eager researchers/leaders striving to make positive change. What prevailed in the experience was the depth of passion to learn, discover and grow, and support, despite the struggles of our leaders who can be isolated due to the nature of their position. Our committee of leaders is, as of March 2025, growing, and any public safety leader who wants to be a part of the committee is welcome to attend our quarterly meetings (just send me an e-mail for the details). In these meetings, our intention is to work collaboratively (i.e., invite researchers studying elements of leadership), to inform leadership research or programs, to ensure leaders' ideas resonate, to ensure research invested in meets the stated needs of the leaders, and to ensure the outcomes focus on helping leaders be as effective as possible.

Of course, leaders are affected by governance – no matter what sector of public safety they work within. In the contribution by Corley and colleagues, the very focus is on how to improve police governance and accountability. The article speaks about the "delicate balance" police must navigate in being accountable to their board and their government while also being independent in their work, community engaged (just like MR), and never politicalized. I appreciated the detailing of the "police governance and accountability ecosystem" and valued the capturing of the police responsibilities to all parties, including their communities.

I also see the spirit of MR in Crawford et al.'s work on how being culturally aware can help support both investigative processes with victims of sexual assault and help to provide support in ways that resonate post-incident. Indeed, support can only be helpful if someone is willing to receive the support, and Crawford and colleagues put forth the necessity of

cultural awareness and sensitivity in these spaces to maximize the potential receptiveness for the support.

Gregory et al.'s article speaks about the opioid overdose crisis in the United States with much relevance to North America more broadly. To address the problem, a community-focused solution is clearly required, and I was excited to see the potential of the instrument created – the Project Maturity Adherence Tool (PMAT) – intended primarily to help with communication addressing behavioural health needs.

The issue includes two "strategy"-based articles with suggestions for positive change, one focused on policing and one on military survivors of sexual trauma. In the former, Handley and colleagues review the history of mandatory mental health check-up (i.e., Safeguard) programs in policing agencies. The authors propose a definition of Safeguard and provide their recommendations for how to create one in organizations where Safeguard is either not yet implemented or the recommendations could be used to adjust current implementations. The article reminded me of how keen I am to see an evaluation of Safeguard programs and other mental health programs to learn if they are effective, to what extent, and to provide evidence to better inform future improvements. The article provides hope for the future. In the latter, Tam-Seto and colleagues speak about the "lessons to learn," a lovely twist on lessons learned in proposing how to sustain a program focused on restoration for survivors of military sexual trauma. Like Handley et al., the team described and provided suggestions to support these victims as they recover from harm. I appreciated here the focus on institutional betrayal and healing for survivors as well as people within the organization – violations can wound deeply when an organization you believe in causes harm.

Finally, I had the pleasure of reading Couto's article about police culture and the implications of the interpretations of police in Canada. Couto speaks of an identity crisis among police, which remains true as many sign up for law enforcement but find themselves drowning in paperwork, acting as mediators or social workers, and in many other roles – some roles unimaginable to those without lived experience. The article explores training, recruitment, and other realms making forward-thinking suggestions.

Seeing many of the articles are written by people on the frontline or with people with lived experiences brings me back to Uganda. It further ignites my hope for more effective, kind, open, and inclusive interdisciplinary collaborations within the research realm between all who are focused on the good research can do.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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