



Dear Colleague:

I have been privileged to serve as NIJ's director through two solicitation seasons. As we enter the third season, I want to share some insights about what makes for a successful NIJ research grant application.

Many considerations go into the decision to fund a research proposal, separate and apart from the application's quality. Highly ranked proposals often go unfunded because of funding constraints, efforts to ensure diversity of topics in awarded grants, or overlapping investments in similar topics or proposed areas of study. Importantly, peer review comments only reflect the views of peer reviewers. All funding proposals are rigorously reviewed by NIJ science staff, and I personally read all proposals recommended for funding consideration.



All things being equal, NIJ favors proposals that meet our funding priorities, which are those that:

- Propose an inclusive research design.
- Address issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and other potential disparities in data sources, research methods, and outcomes.
- Propose a multi-disciplinary research team.
- Ensure rigorous measurement of implementation fidelity.
- Allocate ample resources for translation and dissemination of research findings.

To be successful, an application must also achieve two objectives. First, it must propose rigorous research that develops needed knowledge or tools to address the major challenges of safety and justice in the United States. Second and equally important, an application must demonstrate that resulting products have a potential to address those challenges — either directly through policy and practice improvements or indirectly by advancing the body of knowledge.

Therefore, a successful proposal must do the following:



Center the  
Need for Proposed  
Research



Present  
Rigorous and Feasible  
Project Design



Demonstrate  
Team Capabilities  
and Competencies



Describe Impact on  
Safety and Justice  
Challenges



Present Budget  
that Supports Work  
Proposed

- Center the need for the proposed research within the existing body of knowledge.
- Present a rigorous and feasible project design that is appropriate to address the question(s) of interest.
- Demonstrate that the proposed team has the capabilities and competencies to carry out the project.
- Describe how the research will address one or more U.S. safety and justice challenges, including a discussion of how relevant stakeholders can make the resulting knowledge products actionable.
- Present a budget that demonstrably supports the work proposed in the application.

NIJ staff and I have observed two common weaknesses in proposals. The first is not devoting enough text in the narrative to making a strong case for (1) the rigor and feasibility of the program design and (2) how the research results will contribute to safety and justice. For example, how does the applicant propose to communicate the newly developed knowledge or technology to practitioners in a way that is accessible and actionable?

The second key weakness is ambiguous proposal text that leaves the reviewers unclear about the applicant's intent and understanding. One common example is failing to clearly demonstrate an understanding of the project's key research challenges and how to mitigate them. Another example is when the research design requires access to data but fails to describe how the research team would gain access to the data (for example, through letters of support).

Other commonly missed opportunities to submit strong proposals include:

- Failure to describe how the applicant will ensure research independence and integrity of evaluation findings when the project team includes program staff.
- Insufficient discussion of the potential risks and harms to individuals or groups associated with the use and/or misuse of a proposed research practice or technology.
- Underdeveloped dissemination strategies that fail to make the case that the resulting research information will lead to actionable changes in the field.
- Timelines, staffing plans, and/or budgets that are not aligned with the proposed work.
- Inadequate specification of research questions and/or failure to connect research questions to the research design and analysis plan.
- Failure to demonstrate that the most rigorous feasible research and analysis methods have been proposed.

I encourage all prospective applicants to consider the Merit Review Criteria section in NIJ research solicitations. Those criteria guide the peer review panels' deliberations that inform NIJ's funding decisions. (Information on the peer review process may be available at [Proposal Review | National Institute of Justice \(ojp.gov\)](https://www.ojp.gov/proposal-review).) In addition, prospective applicants should consider having knowledgeable readers (independent of the project team) review proposals prior to submission. For examples of successful applications and other useful information, please see [Guidance for Applicants and Awardees | National Institute of Justice \(ojp.gov\)](https://www.ojp.gov/guidance-for-applicants-and-awardees).

Thank you for your continued support of NIJ and its mission. NIJ's ability to advance justice through science is dependent on our applicant community and the quality of the proposals we receive. I trust you will find this letter informative and that you will apply this guidance in future applications.

Sincerely,



Nancy La Vigne, Ph.D.  
Director, National Institute of Justice