Criminal Justice - “Body of Knowledge”

An overview of different types of information sources available and relevant to criminal justice or criminology research.

Many different types of information sources make up the “body of knowledge” in a discipline or field of study. Each source type has its pros and cons and is different with regard to creators, quality, trustworthiness, relevance to the particular need, potential uses, and where one needs to search to find particular source types.

Read over the key features of some of the major source types in criminal justice below.

Each numerical rating is on a scale of 1-5 where 5 is the highest rating.

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**Journal articles**

*Key features:* Report on new, original research; usually specific and narrow in focus; many are peer-reviewed before publication. Usually lengthy (10-30+ pages is typical).

*Typically created by:* Academics or researchers

*Level of detail:* 5

*When you might use:* To find information on current research and become informed on the state-of-the art of a particular area. May also be helpful for gathering information related to the broad context of a research - e.g. social, cultural, economic, environmental, legal, and political aspects.

*Outlets to search:* SVSU library databases, Google Scholar (optimized with SVSU “library links” settings)

**Books**

*Key features:* Scholarly books typically summarize and synthesize information rather than being the first place to report new research. Contains extensive information and thorough explanations about a topic.

*Typically created by:* Academics or researchers, but may be interested non-scientists as well

*Level of detail:* 4-5

*When you might use:* When looking for in-depth, in-context information on a topic synthesized from many sources. Helpful when attempting to master the fundamentals of a topic/concept. Sometimes not current due to the publishing cycle.

*Outlets to search:* SVSU library catalog (Encore), ebooks - SVSU databases (ebrary), MelCat, WorldCat, Google Books

**Conference Papers**

*Key features:* Report cutting edge research presented at conferences, often times before being published in a journal; contain very current information but may have incomplete or not fully analyzed results.

*Typically created by:* Academics or researchers

*Level of detail:* 3-5

*When you might use:* To explore the newest research and the latest trends in an area; to identify the researchers and institutions currently working on problems or projects.

*Outlets to search:* SVSU library databases, Google Scholar (optimized with SVSU “library links” settings), professional society websites (some material may not be available to non-members via websites - check with a librarian or your professor for access options)
Human experts

*Key features:* Interactive resource! Excellent for information about how criminal justice theory and research are applied in the real world; can give great advice. Quality of information you receive can depend on the quality of questions you ask.

*Typically created by:* N/A

*Level of detail:* Variable

*When you might use:* You want to know how a procedure or “best practices” works in the real world and you gain the perspectives and advice of an expert.

*Outlets to search:* Recommendations from instructors/advisors/co-workers/employers/clients; internet searches

Magazines and Trade Publications

*Key features:* Articles can vary in length from a few paragraphs to 5+ pages., and are general enough to be understood even by those outside the field. Articles often contain pictures. Most do not contain references though some may contain brief references (3-4 as opposed to pages in a journal article).

*Typically created by:* Journalists, staffers, science writers, or practitioners in the field, depending on the type of magazine.

*Level of detail:* 2-3

*When you might use:* To discover trends in your field and examples of similar projects, but in a more general context than journal articles would provide. Also, helpful for gathering information related to the broad context of research - e.g. social, cultural, economic, environmental, legal, and political aspects to help prepare for initial research. For practitioners, often contains very practical advice (“This is how we do it and why we think it works” types of articles).

*Outlets to search:* SVSU library databases, Google Scholar (optimized with SVSU “find text” settings), professional society websites (some material may not be available to non-members via websites - check with a librarian for access options)

Statistics and Data

*Key features:* Statistics are systematically collected numerical data that are then organized, analyzed, and interpreted through various mathematical techniques. Data are often collected through direct observation, interviews, or surveys and are usually recorded in textual or numeric form.

*Typically created by:* Government; researchers; universities

*Level of detail:* 4-5

*When you might use:* As supportive evidence for a research project; to examine trends; to make decisions.

*Outlets to search:* Government websites: Census.gov, Data.gov (for datasets), FBI.gov; The Urban League; Gallup; Pew: often statistics are located within original research.

Pictures/Images and other Multimedia resources:

*Key features:* Visual representations or graphical representations of data

*Typically created by:* Anyone from amateurs to researchers and professional practitioners

*Level of detail:* 1-5 (highly variable)

*When you might use:* Tables & charts -- to illustrate data. Other multimedia - to make a presentation more interesting.

*Outlets to search:* Flickr, Google Images, Google Videos, Wikimedia Commons; Historical images - many online digital collections available, such as VAST Academic Video Online (through SVSU databases), Library of Congress digital collections, NYPL Digital Gallery (and many more repositories exist); YouTube, Vimeo. **BE VERY CAREFUL WITH COPYRIGHT!**

Reference Sources (e.g. handbooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries)
**Key features:** Usually brief entries; designed to be consulted for a short time, contain basic overview/background information

*Typically created by:* Experts (library materials), anyone with an internet connection (Wikipedia entries, use caution with this and other websites)

*Level of detail:* 1-2 (most will be high level overviews)

*When you might use:* At the beginning of your research, or anytime you need to access data from a variety of sources in one location (handbooks) or get a general idea what a topic/concept is about (encyclopedias).

*Outlets to search:* SVSU library catalog (Encore), SVSU databases - Reference subject area + ebrary (ebooks), Google Books, Wikipedia (look at/go to article citations), specific websites (National Center for Victims of Crime, Department of Justice, Crime Stoppers USA, etc.)

**Review articles**

*Key features:* Published in journals but do not report on new research; instead summarize many journal articles to give an overview of a research topic at a given point in time. Sometimes called a “literature review.”

*Typically created by:* Academics or researchers

*Level of detail:* 3-4

*When you might use:* To get a summary of the most recent few years of a field of research on a topic at the time of publication. You might use it to find gaps in research or to see if a topic/subject needs to be updated with new research.

*Outlets to search:* SVSU library databases (some will allow you to limit to “literature review” or “review”, Google Scholar (optimized with SVSU “find text” settings)

**Theses & dissertations**

*Key features:* Detailed report on research project conducted to fulfill the requirements of graduate study, lengthy (often 50-200+ pages).

*Typically created by:* Graduate students

*Level of detail:* 5

*When you might use:* To find unique or original research with theory and data as well as detailed explanations on a specific topic or problem.

*Outlets to search:* WorldCat (see a librarian for assistance searching and obtaining the full text), UMI Dissertation Express website (citations only, see a librarian to obtain the full text version), Open Access Theses and Dissertations website (ProQuest); Google Scholar

**Websites**

*Key features:* Potentially very up-to-date, information provided varies greatly from news, entertainment, product marketing, statistics, educational/factual, opinion blogs, etc.

*Typically created by:* Anyone with internet access from people with no knowledge or experience to professionals, researchers, and industry experts Must carefully evaluate author(s)/information provider(s).

*Level of detail:* Highly variable

*When you might use:* For general research on nearly anything. Also, helpful for gathering information related to the broad context of a project - e.g. social, cultural, economic, environmental, legal, and political aspects to help prepare for initial research and generate relevant questions.

*Outlets to search:* Internet search engines, such as Google, Bing, Yahoo!, USA.gov, etc. Specific websites often helpful for criminal justice: Department of Justice; NCJRS; association websites, etc.
White papers
Key features: A white paper is a certain type of report that is distinctive in terms of purpose, audience, and organization. Often designed for a limited audience outside of the originator’s field, argue a specific position or propose a solution to a problem, addressing the audience outside of their organization.
Typically created by: Government agencies, corporations, universities, or research facilities
Level of detail: 3-5
When you might use: To explore complex issues, positions and possible solutions; typically prepared by the government or industry organizations.
Outlets to search: internet search engines (USA.gov for state/federal searches; NCJRS has some), company websites; government agency websites; sometimes SVSU databases or Google Scholar.

Newspaper Articles
Key features: Straightforward language that is generally easy to understand, contains a headline and author by-line, often written to inform readers about current topics/events, typically do not contain references
Typically created by: journalists, sometimes employed by news outlets, other times contractors
Level of detail: 2-3
When you might use: Gathering initial information to prepare research; getting a feel for a community; background information (for example, on a specific crime or legal proceeding).
Outlets to search: SVSU library newspaper databases (Saginaw, Midland, Bay City and other local, national, and world-wide newspapers available through Newsbank, also current and historical access available to the New York Times and more), internet search engines

Case study
Key features: A type of scholarly article, often found in peer reviewed journals. Focuses on one person or a group and is in depth — very detailed and specific to determine patterns and causes of behavior, for example, in a real world context. In social sciences they tend to be qualitative studies and sometimes cannot be generalized over a broad group.
Typically created by: Researchers -- university and others.
Level of detail: 4-5
When you might use: When you are trying to address a descriptive question (what is happening?) or explanatory question (why or how did this happen?)
Outlets to search: SVSU databases; Google Scholar (optimized with SVSU “library links” settings; NCJRS; some professional (i.e., criminal justice, criminology, sociology, psychology) websites may also contain case studies.

Laws: Statutes, Regulations, Ordinances
Key features: Created by the legislature so that it’s formally recognized by society
Created by: the government
Level of detail: 5
When you might use: Endless possibilities. Provide supportive information, factual information.
Outlets to search: Legislative branch websites (federal, state, local); judicial websites; some SVSU databases such as WestLawNext.