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**Research Coordination Network: Understanding Guilty Pleas**

Overview of RCN: There is a strong consensus in social science that 1) plea negotiations in the criminal justice system represent a vitally important policy topic affecting millions of defendants (95% of all convictions are guilty pleas), and 2) guilty pleas are seriously understudied by social scientists. The leadership at the top-ranked School of Criminal Justice at the University at Albany would like to sponsor an interdisciplinary symposium on guilty pleas as of advancing research in this area. However, there is a real worry that such an effort at the current time would simply extend the futile talk about the need for more research on guilty pleas that has already gone on for a decade or more. Because the number of active researchers working on plea bargaining in each field is limited, and little collaborative work has been attempted, an infrastructure that remedies these problems is a necessary precondition for a successful symposium.

The proposed RCN aims to create this infrastructure by 1) resurrecting the focus on the plea bargaining process that sparked in the 1970s but failed to ignite; 2) expanding the pool of socio-legal researchers focused on understanding the decisions made by prosecutors, judges, defendants defense attorneys as part of the plea negotiation process; and 3) sharing methodological, theoretical and practical insights across disciplinary boundaries in three core areas – psychology and law, economics, and criminology/sociology. The proposed leadership team is composed of disparate scholars who share a demonstrable commitment to the rigorous empirical study of guilty pleas. During the first year, scholars will identify key answerable questions, and identify common themes and problems within and across the core disciplines. In the second and third years, activities (workshops, conference symposia, and special journal issues) in each of the three cores will be completed to encourage high quality and innovative research on the identified questions. The activities of the RCN will lead directly to the envisioned Guilty Plea Symposium in 2016, marking a new beginning for social science research on guilty pleas.

Steering Committee Members: RCN PI: Shawn Bushway (University at Albany, SUNY). Co-PIs Criminology/Sociology core: Brian Johnson (University of Maryland). Economics core: Anne Morrison Piehl (Rutgers University). Psychology and Law core: Allison Redlich (University at Albany, SUNY). Steering Committee. Criminology/Sociology core: Cassia Spohn (Arizona State University); Ryan King (University at Albany, SUNY); Besiki Kutateladze (Vera Institute). Economics Core: Sonja Starr (University of Michigan); Bryan McCannon (St. Bonaventure University). Psychology and Law Core:

Vanessa Edkins (Florida Institute of Technology), Stephanie Madon (Iowa State University).

**Intellectual Merit:** The members of the assembled leadership team are top scholars with impressive track records of strong, social science research and committed engagement with the policy world. They have, independently and together, concluded that plea bargaining is a vital area for new research. The PI has a track record of running successful, interdisciplinary workshops in sentencing and economics and crime that led directly to new research and broader communities of scholars committed to interdisciplinary interaction (including a well-received NSF-funded symposium that prompted the proposed RCN). The RCN's choice to focus on decision-making and the processes that generate guilty pleas carries with it an important recognition of the need for theoretically informed models that simultaneously recognize and exploit the institutional features of the sentencing process.

**Broader Impacts:** The proposed RCN and its activities have numerous policy and practice implications. First, 95% of all convictions in the American criminal justice system are the result of guilty pleas, and social scientists know embarrassingly little about the process. Second, two recent (and controversial) U.S. Supreme Court cases (Frye and Lafler, 2012) on pleas underscore the close scrutiny that the guilty plea process has been, and will likely continue to be, given. And, third, decreases in the discretionary power of judges due to determinate sentencing, guidelines, and mandatory minimums have affected pleas rates and mass incarceration, but these relations are not well understood. Although the extant research on pleas is currently not strong enough to support clear policy recommendations, the goal of this RCN is to stimulate more research and researchers (particularly students and junior scholars) to motivate and evaluate policies designed to deal with these issues. In essence, the very existence of an RCN dedicated to guilty pleas may validate an interest in what is now a marginal topic in most fields, despite the clear significance for practice and policy.