

Citizen Security Research Initiative

Proposal Tips

This reference document aims to help applicants strengthen their proposals by ensuring they align with our thematic and methodological priorities, while avoiding common pitfalls. We encourage all applicants to review these recommendations carefully before submission to ensure their proposals meet the competitive standard for consideration.

While exceptions to the guidance provided here may apply in rare cases, we encourage you to reach out to us at justice@poverty-action.org before submitting your proposal to discuss any specific circumstances.

General Guidance for All Project Types

The [Citizen Security Research Initiative \(CSRI\)](#) aims to improve security outcomes by building the evidence base on countering organized crime, reducing crime and violence, disrupting illicit trafficking, and strengthening justice institutions. As outlined in our [Call for Proposals](#), CSRI is most interested in proposals that generate actionable evidence to inform policy and programming in the citizen security and justice sector, especially ones that challenge common beliefs, pioneer innovative interventions, and produce evidence where little currently exists. As you prepare your proposal, we suggest clearly explaining how your project will generate or contribute to future generalizable insights or methods beyond the project's specific context.

Consider how your project relates to regional and transnational security dynamics

We encourage applicants to reflect on how their project speaks to or has implications for regional and transnational security dynamics, particularly those that affect the United States. This includes discussing how findings could contribute to reducing cross-border criminal activity, how the intervention might strengthen regional security outcomes beyond the immediate study context, or how evidence generated in one country can inform policy

responses to shared security challenges across the region. Proposals that engage with these regional dimensions will be better positioned to produce generalizable, policy-relevant evidence for practitioners and policymakers working across jurisdictions.

Reference the academic literature

Engage with relevant, rigorous evidence appropriate to your project type. For example, full impact evaluation or pilot studies may draw on evidence from field experiments, while foundational and contextual research projects may engage with qualitative studies, observational data, or descriptive analyses. Use this to demonstrate how your research will advance existing knowledge. Please link this literature to your research question, methodology, outcomes of interest, and impact.

Include only eligible costs in your budget

Justify your budget by clearly aligning it with your proposed research design, ensuring that expenses directly support the execution of your research activities.

Don't include intervention implementation costs. For more information, see our [Application Instructions](#).

Assemble an eligible research team

Include at least one researcher primarily affiliated with a university, who either holds or is pursuing a PhD in a relevant field. We consider this necessary because one of our expectations is that projects will eventually publish results in peer-reviewed journals. In limited and exceptional cases, we may consider researchers affiliated with recognized research institutions other than a university. For more information, see our [Call for Proposals](#).

Detail other expertise your team has, including relevant experience conducting rigorous evaluations, experience conducting research in the specific context, and interdisciplinarity, as appropriate.

Match the project type to the proposed research project

Ensure the proposed project directly aligns with the scope of the project type. Don't select the project type primarily due to budget considerations. For more information on each project type, see Section V of our [Call for Proposals](#).

Guidance by Project Type

I. Full Impact Evaluation Study Proposals

Full impact evaluation studies are for rigorous impact evaluations that aim to assess the causal effects of an intervention, program, or policy. While most of the impact evaluations CSRI will fund will be randomized evaluations, studies that use rigorous quasi-experimental methods will be considered when a randomized evaluation is not possible. We will consider requests for supplementary funding for ongoing studies, or funding to measure the long-term impacts of completed studies.

Ensure funding is committed for intervention implementation

CSRI's full impact evaluation studies evaluate the causal impacts of an intervention, program, or policy run by an external implementing partner (e.g., an NGO, government, multilateral, etc.). Ensure that intervention implementation costs are committed or secured. CSRI does not fund these costs except in extremely rare cases necessitated by the research design. Unallowable costs include:

- Any costs the implementing partner would have otherwise incurred to implement the program or policy being tested
- Any costs associated with refining or developing new approaches that will be adopted by the implementing partner if proven effective

CSRI may consider supporting additions or alterations to the intervention that are required to answer the proposed research questions, but that the partner has not implemented in the past and will not implement in the future (e.g., a placebo intervention).

Include power calculations

Include complete power calculations and ensure a robust study design by considering factors like sample size, effect size, adoption rate, population variance, and randomization level. If testing multiple primary outcomes, account for multiple hypothesis testing corrections in your power calculations.

For more information about our power calculation requirements, please see our [Application Instructions](#).

Clearly describe the theory of change

When reviewing proposals, CSRI looks for a clear and detailed theory of change that outlines the program's key components and (if applicable) how they work together to achieve the intended outcomes.

Detail the specific pathway(s) through which the intervention would have an impact on outcomes of interest. In doing this, we recommend referencing literature relevant to the program's theory of change.

II. Pilot Study Proposals

Pilot studies are intended to lay the groundwork for future impact evaluations. They are for studies with clear research questions, identified interventions, and established partnerships, but which require substantial upfront investments in design, measurement, and/or implementation before a full impact evaluation can be designed and a full study proposal can be submitted.

Describe how piloting will lead to the design of a future rigorous impact evaluation

Identify a specific intervention for evaluation with an established implementing partner. Clearly outline the pathway to a rigorous impact evaluation, describing how the pilot will serve as a foundation for a future study.

Define appropriate pilot research activities

Define research activities that align with the funding category, such as A/B testing, testing intervention uptake for power calculation refinement, developing new measurement strategies or instruments, analyzing existing data, piloting survey questions, refining research logistics with the partner, or developing and collecting new data to inform the evaluation.

Don't propose purely intervention piloting activities, like implementing or refining the intervention itself. Focus on activities that test research methods, designs, or tools.

If you are randomizing, provide power calculations and/or a clear explanation for why you are randomizing

Pilot studies under CSRI are intended to help prepare for larger-scale, rigorous impact evaluation by addressing feasibility questions. We typically do not fund pilot studies that plan to draw causal conclusions. However, if you plan to randomize in your pilot study for logistical piloting or other reasons, please provide a detailed justification in your proposal and provide power calculations.

Don't apply for a pilot grant if you plan to evaluate a program and publish the results. We recommend applying instead for a full impact evaluation study with a clear impact evaluation design and power calculations.

III. Infrastructure and Public Goods Creation Proposals

Infrastructure and public goods grants support the creation of publicly accessible tools, measurement techniques, or panel data that generally facilitate future rigorous impact evaluations. We particularly welcome proposals that address barriers to research in hard-to-reach or under-researched contexts, or on under-researched topics.

Show how the project would be a “public good”

Demonstrate how your project qualifies as a “public good,” and how the data or tools may be leveraged by others for future work by other researchers and/or practitioners. We expect that tools, methods, data, etc., produced under these grants will be made available for public use.

Show how the project would contribute to future field experiments

Demonstrate how future impact evaluations may leverage the project. In most cases, our infrastructure and public goods creation projects can be used to inform or improve future impact evaluations. Past projects supported by the Peace & Recovery program have included panel surveys, survey tools, and best practices for research on violence. For instance, a [panel study in Bangladesh](#) developed a sampling frame used in subsequent randomized evaluations, while a panel in Lebanon created a publicly available [WhatsApp surveying tool](#).

IV. Foundational and Contextual Research Proposals

Foundational and contextual research projects support studies that build a foundational, empirical, or conceptual understanding of emerging or understudied issues within CSRI's

thematic priority areas, as outlined in our [Call for Proposals](#). These projects are not designed to estimate causal effects but to map actors, dynamics, and trends in complex or evolving settings. Eligible approaches include qualitative research (e.g., in-depth interviews or focus group discussions), quantitative analysis of primary or secondary data (e.g., surveys, administrative records, or observational data), or mixed-method designs. Their goal is to inform future research and policy innovation.

Explain why foundational understanding is necessary

Strong proposals clearly articulate why foundational or contextual research is needed before impact evaluation studies can be pursued. Common reasons include insufficient understanding of key actors, mechanisms, or pathways; a phenomenon too new or understudied to warrant impact evaluation; existing theories that don't adequately explain the context; program design assumptions that need empirical validation; or a setting too complex or rapidly evolving for immediate causal studies.

Demonstrate that jumping directly to an impact evaluation would be premature or potentially misleading, given current knowledge gaps. Help reviewers understand why building foundational knowledge is the appropriate first step.

Justify your methodological approach

Clearly explain why your chosen methods are appropriate for answering your research questions and how they will help you generate reliable insights. For qualitative work, describe your data collection approach, sampling strategy, and analytical framework, including how you will systematically analyze and interpret your data. For quantitative work, specify your data sources, analytical methods, and why they are best suited to address your research questions. For mixed-methods designs, explain how different approaches will complement each other and why combining them strengthens your study.

Demonstrate methodological rigor appropriate to your approach. This might include detailed sampling plans, data triangulation strategies, validation procedures, or transparent analytical frameworks.

Describe how your work will inform future research or policy

Foundational and contextual research should inform future work. For instance, it should clearly articulate what specific knowledge gaps your study will fill, how your findings could inform the design of future impact evaluations, what new research questions or hypotheses your work might generate, and how your results could influence program design or policy decisions.

Strong proposals show a clear pathway from foundational understanding to future action, whether through research, programming, or policy. Reviewers want to see that your study won't simply describe a phenomenon but will create actionable knowledge that shapes subsequent work.

Demonstrate feasibility and context expertise

Show that you have the necessary access, relationships, and contextual knowledge to conduct this research successfully. Describe your team's relevant experience in the study context and with similar research methods. If you're working in complex or hard-to-reach settings, explain your approach to overcoming logistical or access challenges.

For studies in rapidly evolving or emerging contexts, demonstrate your awareness of the political, social, or security dynamics that may affect your work. Context expertise strengthens confidence that you can navigate challenges and produce reliable insights.