YOUTH POLICY LAB
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

USING BEST-PRACTICE RESEARCH TO INFORM PROGRAM REVISION IN JUVENILE JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

Approaches to and public perceptions of juvenile justice in the United States have long been mutable. Recent shifts in the field include efforts to raise the age for youth who are tried as juveniles and increased opposition to life-sentences for juvenile offenders. This followed trends in the late 1980s and 1990s which sought to be harsher on juvenile offenders. Current opinion polling indicates that the policy swing away from harsh punishment has popular support. While some Americans feel that court-involved youth should be punished, the majority opinion is that "getting juvenile offenders the treatment, counseling, and supervision they need to make it less likely that they will commit another crime" is more important than "serious punishments." In some areas, this has led to a shift away from detention and toward probation and therapeutic programs for all but the most severe offenses. These programs, sometimes referred to as Intensive Probation (IP), have evidence of effectiveness and have been adopted by a number of courts across the country.

In the last few decades, a number of studies have focused on the specific needs of high risk youth involved in juvenile justice systems. Researchers like Mark Lipsey at Vanderbilt University have conducted meta-analyses that reviewed research in the field to determine what works to reduce recidivism and for whom. From these analyses, three elements appear to be most closely tied to reductions in recidivism rates for youth at a higher risk for reoffending: programs that are 1) mostly therapeutic in nature rather than punitive and controlling, 2) use a validated assessment tool to assign only the most high risk youth to IP programs, and 3) incorporate on-going internal monitoring of programs to insure sustained program fidelity.

> **Getting juvenile offenders the treatment, counseling, and supervision they need to make it less likely that they will commit another crime.**

Therapeutic Approach

Existing research supports the idea that therapeutic programs like skills training, mentoring, and counseling are more effective at reducing recidivism than programs that focus on control like deterrence, surveillance, or discipline. Programs that are designed to address a young person's extant risk factors and developmental needs are more likely to reduce recidivism than programs that punish their behaviors. While surveillance—a control oriented rather than a therapeutic oriented approach—does have the potential to reduce recidivism, therapeutic programs have the potential for much larger positive impacts. Studies looking at discipline or deterrence-based control-oriented programs like boot camps or Scared Straight have found that, on average, they increase recidivism rates by 2-8%. Even as early as 1967 (before the official Scared Straight program was established), the Michigan Department of Corrections reported a 26% increase in delinquency 6 months after a Scared Straight style program had young people visit an Ionia Reformatory.

Risk Assessments & High-Risk Youth

While therapeutic programs can reduce recidivism, two other programmatic factors may have even stronger impacts on recidivism rates. The first is focusing services on high-risk youth as identified with a validated, population-appropriate risk-assessment tool. Use of risk assessments also increase consistency between service providers and can minimize certain elements of racial bias. [ii][iii] There are many risk/need assessment tools available to the justice system for both adult and juvenile offenders. Among them are the WRN, the Level of Service Inventory-Revised (LSI-R), and the Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions (COMPAS). Some assessments are specifically designed for use with youth including the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory, the Youth Assessment and Screening Instrument, and the Positive Achievement Change Tool (PACT). Still other instruments are designed for more specific uses within the juvenile population including the Structure Assessment of Violence Risk in Youth (SAVRY) and the Juvenile Sex Offender Assessment Protocol II (J-SOAP-II).

Identifying and targeting certain programing toward youth at a high risk of reoffending increases the effectiveness of interventions. In fact, many programs which work well for high-risk populations actually increase recidivism rates among low risk offenders. In a study of adults receiving intensive probation (including electronic monitoring and therapy) compared to released inmates, there was a drop in recidivism among high-risk individuals of close to 20 percentage points. In contrast, those who had been identified as low risk were over twice as likely to re-offend after intensive probation as low-risk individuals who were untreated.[iv]

Monitoring Quality

Quality program implementation is also associated with greater positive impacts on recidivism, and in some cases is more effective than even therapeutic services. In this context, quality refers to how well a program is implemented—especially over time—and whether it is being implemented as intended, not the caliber of the research or theory behind a program's design. However, this does not mean program-design should be dismissed entirely. Monitoring systems can help make sure that well-conceived programs are implemented correctly and identify potential problems early. When refining existing or adopting new juvenile justice programs, the research suggests that the following activities can help strengthen program efficacy: 1) creating or adopting a program manual; 2) collecting and tracking evidence of staff training both generally (i.e. licensure, certifications, degrees) and in relation to specific program and devised protocols (i.e. that all staff administering an assessment have been appropriately trained to create consistency); 3) establishing procedures for monitoring the program and the quality of service such as internal review calendars or data tracking systems; and 4) creating procedures for taking corrective measures when issues arise either with implementation of the protocol or results of the program.

CASE STUDY: WASHTENAW COUNTY TRIAL COURT- JUVENILE DIVISION

While there is evidence to suggest that these three practices are effective in addressing juvenile delinquency, adopting and modifying programs can be challenging for entities like county juvenile courts where tight budgets, elected judges, and state requirements may influence or limit the court's programmatic flexibility. More than two decades ago, the Washtenaw County Trial Court Juvenile Division retooled their approach to juvenile justice, including an evidence based retooling of the Intensive Probation program with support and guidance from the National Center for Juvenile Justice and the national Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.[v] Since then, changes in community needs, funding streams, staffing, and other factors have resulted in both intended and unintended changes in the IP program.

Recognizing that the current IP model was no longer yielding the reductions in recidivism it was designed to achieve, the Court IP team partnered with the Youth Policy Lab (the Lab) to reevaluate and revise the IP program to maximize its effectiveness.

Considering the three program attributes associated with reduced recidivism that were previously mentioned, two areas were flagged for improvement. First, due in part to staffing reductions, the current IP program offered limited and inconsistent skill-building, counseling, or therapeutic support for young people. Second, there was not a system for regular internal review and refinement of the IP program nor a system for easily tracking useful data about youth on IP throughout the course of their probation period. Court currently uses the Positive Achievement Change Tool (PACT)—a validated risk assessment tool—to screen youth and insure that only the highest risk youth are placed in the IP program. Since this is already aligned with best practices, revision was not considered for this part of IP.

Process

The process of designing the program revisions took approximately eight months. During that time, staff from the Court met regularly with Lab staff, eventually setting up biweekly meetings. Initial meetings focused on outlining the goals of the IP program and identifying how the existing program was or was not meeting those goals. Later meetings were spent drafting timelines, discussing programmatic needs for therapeutic supports, and defining the expectations of youth in the program. Staff from the Lab reviewed the literature on similar programs and helped identify where the current program deviated from what evidence suggests are the best practices.

After identifying two areas for revision, the Court IP team began to investigate possible ways to increase the counseling and skill-building programming offered as part of the IP program. IP staff looked at the risk factors most frequently flagged among IP youth and researchers at the U-M School of Social Work Program Evaluation Group (SSW-PEG) helped the IP staff review data from the PACT risk assessments to identify areas of most frequently correlated with re-offense. IP staff, reflecting on the research and their caseloads, decided to pursue a near total overhaul of the IP program including new court hearings, program offerings, and guidelines for completion.

Treatment

In the redesigned IP program, youth will be connected with multiple treatment programs ranging from academic support to therapeutic skill-building. Attending these programs will be an expected part of the IP program and will be offered consistently for all young people with appropriate accommodation as needed. Because it was not feasible to develop and staff all of the suggested programs within the court, community partners were identified to support the redesign. For example, youth will be connected with in-school academic mentoring through the Check & Connect program already adopted by the Student Advocacy Center throughout the county and will receive Multisystemic Therapy through a standing contract with Highfields Inc. Other programs, however, will be run by court staff including the Parent Project, and Moral Reconation Therapy.

Review

Multiple elements have been added to the IP program to monitor progress both actively—while youth are in the program—and retrospectively to monitor program effectiveness. First, a system of monthly review hearings with a judge is being added to the IP program. This idea was borrowed from the drug treatment court model being used with success in the county. By meeting regularly with probation officers and other key stakeholders, these hearings will allow youth and their families to check in on their progress, allow for more timely praise for positive behaviors and growth, and will allow the Court to respond more quickly to issues as they arise. Further, these hearings will create more transparency and communication between stakeholders including school representatives, parents and guardians, counselors, and youth. To help facilitate these hearings, a uniform Excel-based data collection tool is being adopted that will track the progress of youth in IP and will also help evaluate programmatic trends. In addition to this data-tool, the courts plan on conducting a biannual survey of all key stakeholders to gather feedback as well as biannual internal reviews to make sure programs are being offered as planned and that youth are having successes in the new IP program.

Elements Added to IP Program:

1. System of monthly review hearings with a judge

2. Excel-based data collection tool

3. Biannual survey of all key stakeholders

4. Biannual internal reviews

CHALLENGES

Among the barriers to implementing this kind of program redesign is the fact that change, especially changing behavior, is hard. Organizations may unintentionally resist change through structural inertia associated with complicated beauracracies.[vi] As is the case in most organizations, implementing evidence based practices in justice and correctional organizations also requires a certain degree of buy-in from personnel, particularly those individuals responsible for enacting the changes.[vii] While there is relatively scant research on innovation and change within juvenile justice systems, one could assume that they behave not unlike education systems where "bottom-up" support from teaching staff is often the key-factor in successful implementation and institutionalization of new policies.[viii]

When planning their own program redesign, the probation officers in charge of the IP caseload were included from the earliest meetings and were engaged throughout the process. Their input was instrumental to the choices made and helped craft a program design that merges best practices with existing structures and local context. They were empowered to identify programs they thought would work well for their youth and given the responsibility of presenting the updated program to key-stakeholders after the redesign was finalized.

"Organizations may unintentionally resist change through structural inertia associated with complicated beauracracies."

Implementation & Roll Out

The way in which young people enter Intensive Probation creates another challenge for program redesign. Unlike in a school setting where, for the most part, a single cohort starts and ends a program year together, youth are placed in IP due to a court involvement that can occur at any time. Furthermore, since their progress in IP is partially determined by their behavior, the length of time a young person is on IP can also vary. The caseload at any given time, therefore, is a mix of young people who have been on IP from anywhere from a few weeks to twelve months or more. This poses a challenge for program roll out, particularly since the changes will incorporate new expectations for program completion. Additionally, only a small number of youth are on IP at any given time, each with unique needs and at different stages in their probation. Figuring out a timeline for program launch and deciding which program elements current IP youth should be enrolled in presented a challenge. Furthermore, in the three months between program redesign and program launch, it is likely that new youth will be placed on IP and the court staff will have to decide how to best serve their needs during the transition period. In order to facilitate this process, the Youth Policy Lab worked with staff at the Courts to 1) create a checklist of action items necessary before program roll-out collected by theme and 2) create a calendar that maps these tasks out chronologically. While these documents were both fairly simple to create and fairly intuitive in nature, they provided Court staff with a useful reference as they move forward with their work implementing the program changes.

CONCLUSION

While adopting evidence based practices may be gaining popularity, modifying existing programs to align with what evidence recommends remains a challenge. Redesigning these programs is not unlike building—or in this case renovating—an airplane in midflight, but it may be well worth the effort. In starting this work, the Court first identified a discrete program they were interested in changing. Leadership brought in a partner to help their staff with the redesign including reviewing and synthesizing relevant research in the field.

The key staff within the Courts were involved in all planning meetings and were in large part the key decision makers in the process. The plan was designed to be responsive to the needs of the population served and the limitations of the local community. While the redesign of the program is ultimately an overhaul of the entire IP program, it was designed piece by piece and with the understanding that the roll-out of the program may be similarly incremental. While the evidence suggests that internal review systems are good for reducing recidivism, it will likely be a useful program component to have in place to allow for continued program revisions.

ENDNOTES

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Youth Policy Lab Mission

The University of Michigan Youth Policy Lab helps community and government agencies make better decisions by measuring what really works. We're data experts who believe that government can and must do better for the people of Michigan. We're also parents and community members who dream of a brighter future for all of our children. At the Youth Policy Lab, we're working to make that dream a reality by strengthening programs that address some of our most pressing social challenges.

We recognize that the wellbeing of youth is intricately linked to the wellbeing of families and communities, so we engage in work that impacts all age ranges. Using rigorous evaluation design and data analysis, we're working closely with our partners to build a future where public investments are based on strong evidence, so all Michiganders have a pathway to prosperity.