

Innovation Brief

University Partnerships as a Strategy for Promoting Data-Driven Decision Making in Juvenile Justice

A critical piece of juvenile justice reform is the use of data to objectively identify areas in need of reform, select the types of reforms that match a jurisdiction's needs, and to evaluate the effectiveness of reform efforts. This leads to a data informed juvenile justice system that offers more objective oversight for its stakeholders, ensures that reform efforts are effective and cost efficient, and can support dissemination of practices to other jurisdictions.

The Issue

Prior to 2006, the use of data to guide juvenile justice decision-making was quite limited across the state of Louisiana. In 2006, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation selected Louisiana as one of its *Models for Change* (LaMfC) sites and the state selected three targeted areas for reform: a reduction in disproportionate minority contact (DMC), an increase in alternatives to formal processing, and an increase in the use of evidence-based assessment and treatment practices. However, before local jurisdictions could implement strategies to target these areas for reform, there was a need to gather data describing the current capacity in each targeted area, identify areas where change was needed the most, and determine how to allocate resources appropriately. Data were also needed to evaluate the success of the reform efforts.

At the outset, most juvenile justice agencies across the state did not have the capacity to meet these needs. Therefore, the University of New Orleans (UNO)

(in collaboration with the LaMfC lead entity- now formally known as the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center- Institute for Public Health & Justice) was allocated funding from the LaMfC project to develop a model of university-agency partnerships focusing on helping juvenile justice agencies across the state build the needed data capacity for effective juvenile justice reform. Universities can be a valuable resource to local and state agencies because they have expertise in data collection, data storage, and statistical analyses; they can provide personnel that are often less expensive than hiring other outside sources (e.g., data consulting firms); and they encourage sustainability because both the agency and the university are invested in the community. Beginning in 2006, UNO established partnerships with a number of juvenile justice agencies to accomplish several types of data collection and analyses to guide the LaMfC reform effort. In this brief, we describe several of these partnerships to illustrate the potential utility of university-agency partnerships to promote data-driven

Innovations

Outcome monitoring in juvenile justice reform.

The initiative in Louisiana incorporated a number of different types of juvenile justice agencies (e.g., juvenile courts, district attorneys, status offender programs, advocacy groups) with very different goals for reform. Therefore, an outcome monitoring system for LaMfC had to be developed to accommodate the very diverse goals of these entities (e.g., reduction in reoffending, increase in level of evidence-based services, changes in policy, improved training of juvenile justice professionals) and the strategies undertaken to accomplish the goals.

Thus, UNO developed a LaMfC Outcome Evaluation Structure which included three main types of outcomes:

- **System wide outcomes were broad indicators** (e.g., reduction in arrest/rearrest rates, decrease in out-of-home placements, increase in use of diversion) that were typically obtained from official data bases;
- **Targeted areas of improvement specific outcomes** were more specific to the goals of reducing disproportionate minority contact (e.g., reduction in minority representation at various levels of processing in the juvenile justice system), increasing alternatives to formal processing (e.g., increase in the number of children diverted from formal processing; changes in policies for processing status offenders), and increasing evidence-based services (e.g., increase in the use of evidence-based screening, assessment, and treatment interventions at various stages of processing; changes in the policy for funding treatment programs by prioritizing evidence for effectiveness);
- **Process outcomes** which focused on changes in system functioning, such as changes in staffing that emphasized community-based programs, changes in policies concerning assessments of risk and needs, and changes in the training requirements for juvenile justice professionals (e.g., probation officers, district attorneys, juvenile court judges).

To develop these outcomes, the university worked with each agency participating in the LaMfC program to:

- Articulate their specific goals for reform (e.g., implement policies which reduce the number of non-violent youth formally processed in the juvenile justice system),
- Specify outcome indicators for evaluating their success in reaching these goals (e.g., number of non-violent youth processed will decrease over time without an increase in recidivism),
- Implement a system for collecting the data relevant to these outcome indicators (e.g., collect number of youth formally processed and rate of recidivism), and
- Develop a strategy for reviewing and disseminating the results of the outcome evaluation (e.g., develop yearly reports that are presented to youth planning boards and posted on the agency web site).

This outcome monitoring system served as a roadmap for evaluating the success of LaMfC. It helped grantees identify the types of data that were needed to evaluate their progress at the beginning of their reform efforts, instead of waiting until the end of the project. Once the necessary data elements were identified for each outcome, the outcome monitoring system served as a foundation for the university and participating agencies to work together to develop a plan for ensuring that all necessary data elements were available, accessible, and collected on a consistent basis. It allowed agencies to develop an outcomes-oriented approach to reform, with yearly progress reports on the success of their reform efforts to determine if the reform efforts should be continued, modified, and/or disseminated to other jurisdictions. As a result, most of the additional innovations discussed below were developed as part of this overall outcome monitoring plan.

Juvenile justice mapping. UNO developed a partnership with the Child and Youth Planning Boards in two Louisiana parishes (i.e., counties) to conduct a juvenile justice mapping procedure to help parishes select specific areas for reform and to be used as part of the outcome monitoring system described above. The goal was to provide

a “map” of the key decision points in the juvenile justice system within each parish. This map was to define:

- The number and characteristics of youth involved in the juvenile justice system at each decision point,
- The most common and important decisions that are made for youth at each decision point,
- How these decisions are made,
- The mechanisms for funding that influence these decisions, and
- What data are obtained, stored, and shared related to these decisions.

This mapping process played a critical role in guiding changes and improvements to meet the targeted areas of improvements in the parish. It made the decision-making procedures at each point in the juvenile justice system transparent to all those involved and fostered cooperation among the various agencies involved in the parish’s juvenile justice system. The method for collecting the data used in the mapping process was clearly specified so that it could be replicated by other jurisdictions. Specifically, a standardized survey was developed and sent to agencies representing key decision points in each parish: law enforcement agencies, district attorney’s office, juvenile court, status offender program, and the detention center. Also, the mapping process was repeated after five years, in order to compare information across two time periods and allow the parish to evaluate changes which occurred during the time they participated in the LaMfC initiative.

The mapping process was viewed by the participating parishes as being very helpful in monitoring changes taking place within their juvenile justice system. The ability to replicate this process was tested by having UNO team up with another university in a different part of the state who was able to conduct and effectively utilize a similar mapping process in a third Louisiana parish.

Improving data collection procedures. A basic requirement for any agency to become more data-driven is to have a system for collecting data that addresses four questions:

- What data are most relevant for meeting the agency’s needs?

- How can these data be collected within the context of the agencies available resources?
- How can these data be accessed in a useful and understandable format by agency personnel?
- What policies can be established so that important decisions are made based on these data?

UNO’s partnerships with juvenile justice agencies as part of LaMfC often focused on assisting juvenile justice agencies in answering these four key questions. In many jurisdictions and agencies, data were either not being entered into a local data base or the data base was not easily accessible (e.g, kept only in paper format or entered into a system that only outside consultants could access at great expense). Therefore, UNO served as a resource to guide agencies through the steps involved in developing the capacity to track information on the youth they serve in an easily accessible, electronic data base that was sustainable and efficient. This process entailed creating mechanisms such as coding sheets for locating information, data files to enter the information electronically, and templates to use for analyzing and summarizing the information on a routine basis. Examples of these projects include:

- Developing a data base to help a local district attorney’s office track referrals and outcomes of youth referred for formal processing;
- Developing a monitoring system to collect data from a local jurisdiction’s status offender program;
- Developing a one-page form that was entered into a data base to track juvenile contacts with local law enforcement agencies, even if the contact did not lead to arrest; and
- Developing a data collection process for tracking screening/assessment results, treatment referrals, local probation outcomes, and recidivism.

The data collection systems ranged from simple and inexpensive electronic spreadsheet files to advanced integrated systems based on the available resources and agency capacity. The ultimate goal was to ensure that these data collection procedures were sustainable, cost-effective, and provided valuable data to help inform decisions and monitor progress.

Discrete projects. As part of LaMfC, universities entered into partnerships with a number of juvenile justice agencies to carry out a number of projects or “studies” that addressed very specific questions identified by the agency as important for improving their ability to serve youth.

Examples of these projects include:

- Evaluating a detention risk assessment instrument to determine if it led to a decrease in the number of low risk youths who were placed in detention pre-adjudication;
- Evaluating the implementation of a standard and structured risk and needs assessment instruments to determine if their use led to increases in appropriate treatment referrals, increases in successful probation outcomes, and/or reductions in recidivism rates; and
- Assessing the collection and use of data to drive decisions among juvenile detention centers across the state in order to estimate the resources needed to implement statewide standards for detention centers housing juvenile offenders.
- Evaluating the implementation and outcomes for a model of juvenile drug court treatment

These discrete data projects were the result of universities and agencies coming together to explore or evaluate a program or policy for a local jurisdiction. They served as resources for gaining support from community members and stakeholders, a starting place for reform efforts, and the testing of models to disseminate to other jurisdictions engaging in similar work.

Results

The innovations discussed above have resulted in tremendous progress in increasing agencies’ capacity to collect, analyze, report, and use data for important decisions in the juvenile justice system. Most importantly, these university partnerships have helped juvenile justice agencies recognize the vital role that data can have on informing decisions that have important effects on the youths, families, and communities they serve. Through these university-agency partnerships, a number of data related accomplishments occurred over a five-year period.

- There was an increase in the number of juvenile justice agencies that were able to electronically collect and analyze data internally. These agencies now have

continuous access to their own data and can use the data to inform decisions on an as needed basis.

- There was an increase in the number of local jurisdictions that routinely used data to make decisions during meetings with employees, community partners, and stakeholders.
- There was an increase in the capacity of local agencies to monitor the effectiveness of policies and programs through routine tracking of youth outcomes.
- There was an increase in the production and dissemination of annual reports summarizing the number/proportion of youth served at each decision point of the juvenile justice system.
- There was an increase in cross-agency and cross-jurisdiction data-sharing.
- There was an increase in policies which require data-driven, individual-level decisions, such as whether to make an arrest or detain a youth, whether to formally process or divert a youth, and to guide post-adjudication dispositional planning.

These innovations have also led to an overall interest in and recognition of the importance of data-driven decision-making across the state and the significance of university-agency partnerships. As a result of these partnerships, there is a strong movement across the state to replicate these collaborative relationships, develop data collection procedures, evaluate policies and programs, and routinely monitor juvenile justice decision-making. Many of the jurisdictions involved in the work have become champions of the use of data and are beginning to spread the word that data-driven approaches are useful, effective, efficient, and sustainable. The university-agency partnerships that were developed through the LaMfC initiative serve as models for jurisdictions and universities across the state and country.

Lessons

Becoming data-driven is not an easy task that can be accomplished quickly. It requires dedication, patience, time, and collaboration. Building the capacity to collect and analyze data requires buy-in from agency employees at all ranks of the organization. The most successful and

sustainable examples typically had a “champion” within the agency that was firmly committed to the data-driven approach. Also, there has to be careful attention to data quality. If the information is not valid and reliable, the data are, at best, useless and, at worse, misleading. Further, building the capacity to become data-driven requires the allocation of resources such as employee time, software, and training. Such resources are often scarce for many juvenile justice agencies.

Although most agencies considered limited resources as the biggest obstacle in becoming data driven, the LaMfC experience suggests that the main obstacles are culture and communication. Often, identifying the “what” and “why” of data seemed to be the hardest part for an agency attempting to become data driven. Juvenile justice agencies that are not data-driven do not think or speak in terms of “measurable outcomes” or “data elements” and translating important agency goals into these terms can be challenging. However, this is where local universities can serve as great partners in the quest to become data-driven. The university partnerships established as part of LaMfC suggest that becoming data-driven is possible for any jurisdiction, no matter their available resources. It is a sustainable and efficient method to improving the decision-making processes of a system that can have long-lasting effects on the well-being of children and families in the community. Partnering with local universities is an effective and efficient way to facilitate the process towards sustainable data-driven decision-making.

The Broader Impact

In Louisiana, the importance of using data to inform decisions has been recognized across the state. Local agencies are reaching out to local universities to develop partnerships. The innovations discussed above are being disseminated as “models” and are being replicated by other jurisdictions across the state. For example, UNO served as a “mentor” to the University of Louisiana-Monroe in their attempts to establish university partnerships with local juvenile justice agencies. As the use of data continually increases across juvenile justice agencies, the need for a statewide juvenile justice data system has become more

apparent. This has led to several attempts by the state to establish a centralized, integrated data base inclusive of data from each stage of the juvenile justice system from each jurisdiction. Such a statewide system could enhance the ability of the state to make reliable and accurate decisions regarding funding, policies, and programming at the state level. It will also improve cross-agency data-sharing and serve as a foundation for future discussions regarding state-level reform.

Resources

All resources available through the **Institute for Public Health & Justice** (phone (504) 568-5953; Website- <http://publichealth.lsuhscc.edu/iphj/>)

System Tools

- *Louisiana Models for Change Outcome Monitoring Plan*
- *Juvenile Justice Mapping Process- A How to Guide*
- *Survey of Louisiana Juvenile Detention Centers*

Detention

- *The Development and Implementation of a Risk Assessment Instrument for Pre-Trial Detention in Two Louisiana Parishes*
- *Implementation and Evaluation of the Detention Screening Instrument in Rapides Parrish*

Probation

- *Jefferson Parish Youth Outcomes Study*
- *Juvenile Contact Form*
- *Department of Juvenile Services Probation Data Sheet*

Special Populations

- *Juvenile Drug Court Monitoring System Development*
- *Model Data Collection System Developed by Rapides Parish Informal Status Offender (FLNS) Program*
- *Model Data Collection and Reporting in the Rapides Parish District Attorney’s Office*

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from *Models for Change*, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. *Models for Change* is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.