



A Toolkit for Status Offense System Reform

USING LOCAL INFORMATION TO GUIDE SYSTEM CHANGE

MODULE

2

STATUS
OFFENSE | REFORM
CENTER

The Status Offense Reform Center is a project of the Vera Institute of Justice and is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, as part of its Models for Change Resource Center Partnership.

ABOUT THE MODELS FOR CHANGE RESOURCE CENTER PARTNERSHIP

The Resource Center Partnership works to advance juvenile justice systems reform across the country by providing state and local leaders, practitioners, and policymakers with technical assistance, training, and the proven tools, resources, and lessons developed through the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change: Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice initiative.

The Partnership is anchored by four complementary, connected Resource Centers that address four important issues in juvenile justice:

- Mental health: **The Mental Health and Juvenile Justice Collaborative for Change**, led by the National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice. For more information, visit: cfc.ncmhjj.com
- Stronger legal defense for indigent youth: **National Juvenile Defender Center**. For more information, visit: njdc.info/resourcecenterpartnership.php
- Appropriate interventions for youth charged with non–delinquent—or status—offenses: **The Status Offense Reform Center**, led by the Vera Institute of Justice. For more information, visit: www.statusoffensereform.org
- Coordinated systems of care for young people involved in both the juvenile justice and child protective systems: **The Robert F. Kennedy National Resource Center for Juvenile Justice**, led by the RFK Children's Action Corps. For more information, visit: www.rfknrcjj.org

The Partnership also includes a strategic alliance of national experts and organizations representing state leaders, mayors, judges, law enforcement, prosecutors, corrections professionals, court personnel, and justice reform advocates. These partners further enrich the tools, best practices, and training offered by the Centers and provide direct connections to professionals working in juvenile justice.

For more information about the Models for Change Resource Center Partnership, visit: modelsforchange.net/resourcecenters



www.statusoffensereform.org



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TOOLKIT

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, states and localities are seeking to develop and implement strategies for safely and cost-effectively diverting youth from the juvenile justice system. Perhaps nowhere is this more necessary than in the response to youth who have committed what are called status offenses— a range of behaviors, such as running away from home, skipping school, or violating curfew, which are prohibited under law because of an individual’s status as a minor. Across the country, these young people are frequently referred to juvenile court and subject to the same punitive interventions as youth charged with criminal activity. According to the most recently available national estimates, 137,000 status offense cases were processed in court in 2010, and youth in more than 10,000 of those cases spent time in a detention facility.¹

Using justice system interventions to respond to behaviors that are problematic, but noncriminal in nature, is costly and often does more harm than good.² Overburdened with more cases than they can handle expeditiously, courts are ill-equipped to provide the assistance youth and families in crisis urgently need.

There is a better way. Several states and localities nationwide have implemented community-based and family-focused alternatives to court intervention that are reducing family court caseloads, lowering government costs, and providing meaningful and lasting support to children and families. These community-based systems feature the following hallmarks:

- **Diversion from court.** Keeping kids out of court requires having mechanisms in place that actively steer families away from the juvenile justice system and toward community-based services.
- **An immediate response.** Families trying to cope with behaviors that are considered status offenses may need assistance right away from trained professionals who can work with them, often in their home, to de-escalate

¹ Charles Puzzanchera and Sarah Hockenberry. *Juvenile Court Statistics 2010*. (Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2013).

² Annie Salsich and Jennifer Trone. *From Courts to Communities: The Right Response to Truancy, Running Away, and Other Status Offenses*. (New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, 2013).

the situation. In some cases, families also benefit from a cool-down period in which the young person spends a few nights outside of the home in a respite center.

- **A triage process.** Through careful screening and assessment, effective systems identify needs and tailor services accordingly. Some families require only brief and minimal intervention – a caring adult to listen and help the family navigate the issues at hand. At the other end of the spectrum are families that need intensive and ongoing support to resolve problems.
- **Services that are accessible and effective.** Easy access is key. If services are far away, alienating, costly, or otherwise difficult to use, families may opt out before they can meaningfully address their needs. Equally important, local services must engage the entire family, not just the youth, and be proven to work based on objective evidence.
- **Ongoing internal assessment.** Regardless of how well new practices are designed and implemented, some are bound to run more smoothly than others, at least at first. Monitoring outcomes and adjusting practices as needed are essential for sustaining support.

While these practices are critical for developing an alternative system for responding to status offenses, leaders and officials interested in making change are often stymied by a lack of guidance and tools. Questions they commonly raise include: Who should be involved in this work? What policy and practice changes should we make? And, most critical, how will we know if the reforms are working?

A product of the Status Offense Reform Center (SORC), this toolkit addresses those questions and many more. With funding and support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) launched SORC as a one-stop shop of information and practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to prevent youth who engage in noncriminal misbehavior from entering the juvenile justice system and provide them with services and supports in the community. A Toolkit for Status Offense System Reform draws on Vera’s work with policymakers and practitioners in more than 30 jurisdictions across the country to improve local status offense systems. It is also grounded in the lessons learned through the MacArthur Foundation’s flagship juvenile justice reform initiative Models for Change and informed by sound planning and implementation practices identified in research literature and policy reports.

The toolkit is organized into four modules, each of which covers a discrete phase of the system change process.



MODULE ONE: STRUCTURING SYSTEM CHANGE describes how to lay the foundation for productive engagement with stakeholders that leads to action and meaningful system change. Given the complex and often fragmented nature of status offense systems, this module helps you think about who should be involved in the change process, how they should be engaged, and what information will help them along the way.



MODULE TWO: USING LOCAL INFORMATION TO GUIDE SYSTEM CHANGE describes how stakeholders spearheading the reform effort can assess their current system to promote a reform planning effort that is data-driven and attuned to the unique strengths and needs of their jurisdiction.



MODULE THREE: PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING SYSTEM CHANGE describes how to use the information gathered through the system assessment, along with best practice insights from across the country, to develop and implement a well-informed plan for system change that fosters sustainability and continual learning.



MODULE FOUR: MONITORING AND SUSTAINING SYSTEM CHANGE describes how to monitor whether the reform plan is being implemented as designed, measure whether the changes are leading to improved system outcomes, and modify as needed.

Woven throughout each module are tips, spotlights and resources. Tips are bite size pieces of advice intended to help you effectively implement a step. Spotlights are examples of jurisdictions that have translated a step into meaningful action. And, resources (which are listed in the accompanying appendix and available through SORC's library) run the gamut from publications that you may want to consult as you implement a step to customizable datasets and PowerPoint presentations.

The toolkit modules follow an order common to many processes that aim at system reform; however, the ordering is not intended to be prescriptive. System change is not always linear in nature and is often iterative. Practitioners are encouraged to use the modules in the order that is most logical for a particular situation and community. For example, officials in jurisdictions that are just beginning to get their feet wet with system change, may wish to start with module one and make their way through the series in full, whereas those that have already implemented a reform may be interested in going directly to module four and perhaps going back to the others as the need arises. Keep in mind that each module is written with the assumption that jurisdictions are taking on this work on their own, without the benefit of an outside technical assistance provider. If you do have the resources for outside help, work closely with that provider to map out his or her role in the process and what order will work best for you.

MODULE
2



USING LOCAL INFORMATION TO GUIDE SYSTEM CHANGE

A well-planned status offense reform effort depends on a complete and accurate understanding of where your system currently stands. By conducting a system assessment—that is, by collecting and analyzing information from multiple sources in order to know how the system operates—you will be able to design, implement, and sustain a reform approach that is data-driven, attuned to your jurisdiction’s unique strengths and needs, and much more likely to succeed.



STEP 1

PLAN A SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

During the launch meeting (see Module One) working group members discussed the strengths and challenges of your local status offense system. It is time now to put the perceptions and hypotheses to the test and uncover just how well your system is diverting young people and families from court involvement, responding to referrals in a timely manner, triaging cases, providing accessible and effective services, and tracking outcomes. In other words, to what extent do current operations align with or deviate from the features of an effective community-based status offense system? (Although this module assumes you are undertaking a comprehensive system assessment, we understand that this is not always possible. Be as ambitious as you can but, if time and resources are in short supply, focus your efforts on the quantitative data collection and analysis outlined in Step Three.)

REVIEW SCOPE

A comprehensive system assessment calls for an investigation of the following key areas: the policies that govern your status offense system (Step Two); how, and by whom, the status offense system is being used (Step Three); how local stakeholders perceive the system (Step Four); and local service capacity (Step Five). To investigate these areas, you will need to gather and assess multiple types of information—both quantitative and qualitative—across the system, from the point of first contact through deep-end court involvement and case outcomes. As a general rule, you should collect data for each point plotted on your system flow chart (see Module One), including but not limited to:

- **Referral:** Youth alleged of a status offense are referred to an entity assigned with reviewing the case with an eye toward eligibility and next steps. This system gatekeeper varies across jurisdictions but is often social services, probation, a private service provider, the court, or the prosecutor's office.

- **Intake:** Referred youth deemed eligible receive a formal intake. Additional information is gathered (preferably through a screening and assessment process), and a decision is made as to the course of action.
- **Diversion:** Cases processed through intake may be diverted away from formal court processing to services or programming in the community.
- **Court Processing:** Alternatively, cases processed through intake may be referred, or *petitioned*, to court. In many jurisdictions, this may occur immediately following intake or after an unsuccessful diversion attempt. Depending on the jurisdiction, petitioned cases may be *adjudicated* (found by the judge to have committed some or all of the acts outlined in the court petition) and later receive a court *disposition* (sentence) that may include probation, an alternative-to-placement program, or out-of-home placement in a residential facility. In some jurisdictions, at various stages of this process, youth may be admitted to juvenile *detention* (short-term confinement in secure facilities that are locked or non-secure facilities that are unlocked but staff monitored) or alternative-to-detention programs.

REVIEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Depending on the size of your working group, it may be helpful to task a sub-group of members with the system assessment work. Recruit members who can access data and have some experience with collecting and analyzing system information. Also recruit youth and family representatives as they bring a uniquely important perspective to the work and will play a critical role in gathering information from other young people and families. If your group is consulting with outside researchers or technical assistance providers, talk to them about what role they will play in the work. The sub-group's tasks include reviewing system statutes and regulations, collecting quantitative data, speaking with local stakeholders, cataloging youth and family services, and analyzing this information to develop a cohesive narrative of your system.


AFFIRM TIMELINE

Review and adjust, if necessary, the timeline for your assessment work that working group members agreed to at the close of the launch meeting. Depending on the size of your system, data accessibility, and the availability of group members (or outside researchers/technical assistance providers) to do the work, a comprehensive system assessment will take anywhere from three to 12 months to complete. (See appendix for toolkit resource—a sample system assessment workplan.) 📄📄📄



STEP 2

REVIEW THE POLICIES THAT GOVERN THE STATUS OFFENSE SYSTEM



Research and review the statutes (laws) and regulations (agency rules) that govern how your status offense system operates. Knowing what is and is not required at each system point can help illuminate areas of practice that have become fixed over time but for which there is no legal basis. A thorough policy review will also help to distinguish reforms that can be pursued within the current legal framework from those that require legislative action. (See [appendix for toolkit resource—sample questions for policy review.](#)) 📖



STEP 3

COLLECT QUANTITATIVE DATA ON HOW, AND BY WHOM, THE SYSTEM IS BEING USED



Quantitative data are especially important to the reform process. With “hard facts” at your disposal, you will be able to better identify what needs to be changed, persuasively champion that change, and ensure that it is designed and implemented in an effective manner.

This step discusses the types of aggregate statistics (that is, data that have been combined from more granular pieces of information) that you should aim to collect for each system point. While collecting data for the most recently available year can certainly be helpful, it is best to collect data for the most recently available five-year period. In this way, you will be able to study system trends, ultimately isolating those areas that reflect effective practice (such as high court diversion rates) and those that do not (such as the use of detention). Not all of the information may be readily available to you, and some may be available only for certain system points. Collect what you can and don’t get discouraged. Developing knowledge about local data capacity is part of the assessment exercise, and you will have an opportunity to address data limitations and challenges later on in the reform process. Of course, if you find that your data capacity is particularly robust, don’t hesitate to add data elements to the list or collect information at the more granular individual or case level. (See appendix for toolkit resources, including a customizable data collection spreadsheet.) 📄📄📄

CASE VOLUME

Depending on the process you have sketched out on your system flow chart, you may want to collect: the number of cases referred to the system; the

number of referred cases that receive a formal intake; the number of cases diverted away from formal court processing; the number of cases petitioned to court (if possible, distinguishing those cases referred to court directly at the point of intake from those referred to court after a failed diversion attempt); the number of dispositions by type; and the number of cases admitted to juvenile detention at any point along the way.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Beyond how many cases flow through your system, it is important to understand who the young people are at each system point, and whether particular youth are disproportionately represented at certain stages. At a minimum, you will want to collect demographic data about race and ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, age, and geography (defined by zip code, neighborhood, or school). For each demographic at every system point, include both the aggregate number of cases and the proportion of total cases that number represents (for example, 330, or 65 percent, of intakes were for girls).

ALLEGATION

To identify why, at the most basic level, young people are entering the system and if certain types of cases are more heavily represented at certain system points, you will need to collect data on the allegations that led to the system involvement. Depending on your local statutes and practices, allegations may include truancy, running away, incorrigibility, curfew violations, and liquor law violations.

REFERRAL SOURCE

While most applicable at referral and intake, it is also useful to collect this information for each subsequent system point. In this way, you will be able to identify whether certain cases are penetrating the system more frequently when they stem from a particular referral source. For example, are school referrals heavily represented among cases petitioned to court, or do those cases tend to be diverted?

SERVICE NEEDS AND PRIOR/OTHER SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

In order to better understand and address the complex needs and struggles faced by the young people and families entering the status offense system, try to collect the following information: child welfare involvement; juvenile

TIPS: GOOD DATA COLLECTION PRACTICES

Collecting, analyzing, and using data to understand how your system is operating is not a one-time endeavor. It is a process you will engage in throughout your reform planning, implementation, and monitoring efforts. The tips below can help you lay a sound foundation for that ongoing work.

1. **Assess data availability:** Part of getting to know your system is getting to know its data capacity. As you begin collecting data, document in a simple table the availability of and source for each desired piece of information. Are data available in an easily accessible electronic form, only available in paper files, in fragmented form, or not available at all? If more than one agency collects the same information, then note which has the most complete, accurate, and readily available data. This information will help members structure and prioritize data requests.
2. **Assess data quality:** Working group members and their colleagues are often good sources of information about the quality of available data. Through their networks, they may learn about an agency's concerns regarding the ways it collects and records data. In this way, for example, it could come to your attention that while your local district attorney's office tracks all cases petitioned to court, it inconsistently records the demographic data on those cases. Such intelligence can help you preemptively identify the areas where data may be of limited or no use due to poor quality.
3. **Structure clear data requests:** When submitting data requests, clearly specify your desired data elements, especially those such as race and ethnicity, gender identity, allegation, and offense history that can be interpreted in more than one way. Be sure to ask the agency to describe its data definition and collection processes. For example, does it follow good practice and collect race and ethnicity data separately and allow for self-identification on the part of youth? With regard to allegation, request the "most serious allegation," since in many instances more than one allegation is made.

delinquency involvement; prior status offense involvement; mental health and substance abuse needs and treatment (to the extent this information is not protected by confidentiality laws); educational level and special needs; family history and dynamics (e.g., justice system involvement, substance abuse history); and housing. If your jurisdiction already uses an assessment instrument, some of this data may be available there. This type of information can also later inform the design of a service continuum.

CASE PROCESSING TIMES AND COSTS

Timely responses to referrals, a key feature of effective community-based approaches, can help de-escalate crises, while delayed responses can exacerbate problems. If possible, collect data on the average case processing/response time from one point of the system to the next (for example, from referral to intake, from intake to either petition or court diversion, and from

SPOTLIGHT: A DATA-DRIVEN STATEWIDE REFORM

In 2006, the Connecticut legislature passed a law creating the Families with Service Needs (FWSN) Advisory Board charged with exploring out-of-court alternatives for status-offending youth and their families. The board—which included educators, court officials, juvenile justice experts, and child advocates—was crucial in developing comprehensive changes to Connecticut’s status offense system. According to Martha Stone, co-chair of the FWSN Advisory Board, their work was driven by data. At the onset of their yearlong planning period, the board collected aggregate statistics from the Judicial Department on status offense referrals (including detailed demographics) and case processing. Specifically, the board collected information on gender, court location, handling decision by court location, FWSN dispositions, race/ethnicity, and behavioral health needs (using data from the Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument Second Version). To supplement aggregate data collection, the board also collected information from select FWSN case files. Having access to this data—along with information on service capacity, statutes and regulations, and best practices—provided members with a strong foundation to develop a framework for service delivery that diverts youth alleged of status offenses from the court process.

petition to disposition). Also useful are the costs of the processing time at each of these points. This information can help provide a baseline for a future cost-benefit analysis of reform efforts.

TYPE OF DETENTION FACILITY, LENGTH OF STAY, AND COST (ONLY FOR DETAINED YOUTH)

Some jurisdictions may make use of “non-secure” detention facilities. Sometimes described as “staff secure,” these facilities do not include secure hardware (locked doors, fences) and, therefore, fall outside the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act’s call for “deinstitutionalization” of status offenders. Including data on admissions to both non-secure and secure (locked) facilities will allow a full and accurate picture of how often, and for which cases, youth are removed temporarily from their homes. Information on the average length of stay in detention, and the average per-diem and total annual cost helps to put a price tag on detention and estimate the potential cost savings that would result from reducing its use and relying instead on community-based alternatives.

TYPE OF PLACEMENT FACILITY, LENGTH OF STAY, AND COST (ONLY FOR YOUTH WHO RECEIVE A COURT DISPOSITION OF OUT-OF-HOME PLACEMENT)

As with the detention data, collect information on the type of out-of-home placement facility, the average length of stay, average per-diem cost, and annual cost.

OUTCOMES

To begin to gauge the impact of the current system on youth, families, and communities, gather outcome data for each of the key system points. For example, how do youth and families who are diverted from court into community-based services fare in areas such as education (e.g., school attendance and engagement), crisis management (e.g., family functioning and reunification), and subsequent system involvement (in the status offense, delinquency, or child welfare systems)? And how do they compare to youth who are petitioned, detained, or otherwise placed out of the home? While very few jurisdictions have the capacity to conduct rigorous outcomes research (ensuring that comparisons are fair and based on similarly situated youth and families), collecting aggregate outcome data is a step in the right direction.

TIP: GOING BEYOND AGGREGATE DATA

Creating one unified dataset that contains detailed, youth-level information from the point of referral through deep-end court involvement (including disposition) for the elements included in Step Three will allow you to go beyond aggregate data and broad system trend analyses. In this way, you can take a closer look at the young people who make up those trends, analyzing how youth flow through the system and how similarly-situated youth perhaps have different outcomes at various points. For example, you will be able to examine the difference in the likelihood that young people are diverted from court based on race, gender, and allegation. While ideal, this approach can be challenging, particularly without outside support and assistance.

To take this on, you can pull from various existing data systems (with permission, of course) and match youth based on unique identifiers (e.g., name, date of birth, case number). Or, in the absence of such discrete data systems, you may need to do what is known as a “case file review,” going through case files and answering standardized questions at each relevant system point (e.g., was the youth diverted from court? was the youth detained and when?).



STEP 4

COLLECT QUALITATIVE DATA ON HOW LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS PERCEIVE THE SYSTEM

Gathering the impressions, opinions, and insight of the young people and families who have been affected by the system as well as the people who operate, refer to, or provide services within the system will afford you with a more holistic view. This type of qualitative information—collected through interviews, surveys, or focus groups—can help explain why a trend may be occurring, reveal critical information that may not surface otherwise, and yield practical suggestions for system improvement. Moreover, firsthand accounts lend texture to your statistical findings, providing stories that can powerfully capture the attention and interest of a broader audience.

STAKEHOLDERS WHO WORK IN OR WITH THE SYSTEM

Interview representatives from law enforcement, schools, probation, social services, mental health and substance abuse agencies, the prosecutor's office, the public defender's office, judges, and community-based service providers. To the extent possible, talk with both leaders (commissioners, directors, deputies, or supervisors) and line staff to solicit feedback and foster buy-in for your future reform. Ask questions that help you understand how cases actually enter and move through the system (and how this corresponds, or deviates from the process prescribed by statutes and regulations) and allow interviewees to candidly share their perspectives on the system's challenges and potential solutions to those challenges. (See appendix for toolkit resources, including sample interview questions for stakeholders who work in or with the system.) ■■■


TIPS: PREPARING FOR AND CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWS WITH SYSTEM STAKEHOLDERS

1. **Try to find a neutral party to conduct the interviews:** There are some people with whom stakeholders will be candid, and there are others with whom they will not. Try to level the playing field as much as possible and avoid potential power imbalances that can arise with certain interview settings (e.g., having a supervisor interview a supervisee or an agency representative interview a provider with whom the agency contracts).
2. **Develop effective interview questions:** Interview questions should elicit detailed responses about the individual's understanding of the system and his or her role within it. Avoid the use of close-ended questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" and refrain from using emotional or loaded language that could bias an interviewee's response. Save any sensitive or hard-to-answer questions for the middle or end of the interview once rapport has been established. Close the interview by asking the interviewee whether he or she would like to elaborate further on anything already discussed or address any additional topics of interest.
3. **Maximize the interview process:** To build trust and rapport with the interviewee, start out with friendly, even off-topic conversation. Before asking any questions, explain the purpose of your interview and discuss how the information gathered will be used by your working group. Review any confidentiality protocols that may be in place (this is especially important for interviews with young people and family members). If the interviewee offers incomplete or brief responses, don't move on; ask additional questions until you have sufficiently explored the interviewee's knowledge on the topic at hand. Consider recording the interview or having a note-taker accompany you to the interview to ensure information is captured accurately and completely. And, lastly, thank the interviewee for his or her time, provide your contact information, and ask if you may follow up with him or her as needed to clarify information.

SPOTLIGHT: GATHERING INFORMATION FROM SCHOOL-BASED STAKEHOLDERS

One of Washington State's five Models for Change sites, Spokane County has focused much of its status offense reform work on expanding alternatives to formal processing and secure confinement for youth alleged of truancy. When starting out, local county officials wanted to learn about the issue of truancy from those that encounter it and work to address it every day—school administrators. With support from Washington State University researchers, county officials surveyed 44 school administrators across 11 school districts. The survey collected information about the prevalence of truancy, causes of truancy, existing truancy procedures, school-based interventions, and recommendations for improvement. Survey findings confirmed county officials' concerns that truancy is a significant problem and that existing resources were insufficient in alleviating its underlying causes. Results also highlighted an interest among school administrators to bolster school-based responses to truancy, with special emphasis given to the need for dedicated staff and holistic programs. With this information, along with additional local data and national research, county leaders produced a toolkit to help school districts create their own community truancy boards.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILY MEMBERS

Conducting interviews with young people and caregivers requires careful preparation. Draw on those young people and family members who are part of or affiliated with your working group for assistance in developing interview questions and recruiting interviewees. Ask interviewees whether they would prefer to share their reflections as part of a focus group or in a one-on-one interview. To put interviewees further at ease, invite someone with whom they have a trusting relationship to lead the interviews or organize peer-led interviews whereby young people and family members are interviewed by their counterparts on the working group. It's critical that you inform interviewees that their participation is voluntary, that the information they share will remain confidential (with the exception of the disclosure of any abuse occurring at home), and that they can withdraw their participation at any point without consequence. (See appendix for toolkit resources, including sample interview questions for youth and family members.) 

SPOTLIGHT: GATHERING INFORMATION FROM YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILY MEMBERS

In 2009, with support from the MacArthur Foundation, the Benton-Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Center (BFJJC) in Washington State set out to improve the care of justice-involved young people. As a first step, and with research support from the University of Washington, BFJJC conducted focus groups and a survey with community members to identify and understand the challenges faced by youth in the community, their thoughts and perspectives about the juvenile justice system, and needed programs and services. The information, combined with other data, was used by working groups in Benton-Franklin counties to prioritize areas for change, including system responses to truancy.



STEP 5

COLLECT INFORMATION ON LOCAL SERVICE CAPACITY

Because meeting the needs of young people engaged in status offense behaviors and their families outside of the juvenile justice system requires a continuum of accessible and effective services, it is critical for you to assess your local service capacity. This service inventory will help you not only identify gaps in services and areas of duplication but also determine which services in the community could be leveraged or expanded as part of your system change effort.

DEVELOP A LIST OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

Whether you are updating an existing catalog of services or starting from scratch, ask youth and family serving agencies, such as schools, social services, and probation, for a list of service providers with whom they contract or otherwise refer young people and their families. Also ask community members, child and family advocates, and members of faith-based institutions for a list of youth and family serving agencies they use for referrals. Be sure to tell people that you are casting a wide net with respect to the type of provider and service offered. It is in your interest to identify providers—both large agencies and smaller, grassroots providers—that offer general support services, such as mentoring, arts and recreational activities, skill building, and community service, as well as those that offer more targeted interventions, such as respite, substance use treatment, family counseling, and educational assistance.

SURVEY SERVICE PROVIDERS

Once you have compiled a comprehensive list of service providers that work with youth and families, develop and administer a standard survey instrument to those providers. Ideally, the survey instrument should cover the following

topics: target population, referral sources, services provided, needs services target, service delivery setting, eligibility criteria, service duration, cost of services, funding source, and outcomes. The survey may be administered in person, by phone, or online. (See appendix for toolkit resources, including a sample service provider survey instrument.) 📄📄📄



STEP 6

ANALYZE THE DATA

Data are only as good as their use. In other words, the information you have worked so hard to collect becomes meaningful only when you actively use it to inform your work. What do the data tell you? What findings please you? What troubles you? Taking time to reflect on these questions will deepen your understanding of your current system and ensure that efforts to collect extensive data are not wasted.

UNCOVER THE NARRATIVE(S) OF YOUR SYSTEM

What story or stories do your data tell? To uncover the narrative(s) of your system, start broad by analyzing each individual piece of information separately (policy review, quantitative data, qualitative data, and service capacity). Next, zoom in on the findings that are most telling; in other words, what looks “off” or problematic to you. Use the five features of an effective community-based status offense system as a guide (see toolkit introduction) when honing in on areas of possible concern—how well is your system diverting young people and families from court involvement, responding to referrals in a timely manner, triaging cases, providing accessible and effective services, and tracking outcomes? Finally, dig deeper into your findings by combining different types of data. For example, join multiple quantitative elements or variables (e.g., number of cases, demographics, and service delivery) to provide more nuance to a finding, layer qualitative data on to the quantitative findings to provide more texture, or examine the service capacity findings in light of the needs you see in the youth entering the system. The following illustrates what this zooming in process looks like:

- When we considered all status offense allegations that end up in court, we found that truancy allegations make up the vast majority of cases.
- When investigating the referral source of truancy allegations, we found that 80 percent originated from one school district.

- In our interviews with officials from that school district, we learned that they, unlike the other school districts in our county, lack a formal school-level intervention to address truancy.

TIPS: GOOD DATA PRESENTATION PRACTICES

1. **Keep it simple and visual.** Avoid presenting crowded lists, tables, and graphs, which can have a paralyzing effect and make it difficult for people to know what to focus on. Instead, present your data in a simple and visual manner that tells a story. For example, a simple chart showing court petitions and detention utilization by allegation can quickly highlight that a locality is relying on court and detention for a large number of truancy cases, revealing a potential area for reform.
2. **Be explicit about your findings.** Your data presentation should convey a message that is accessible and useful to practitioners, policymakers, and the youth and families that are part of your working group. Be sure your charts and graphs highlight important information and underscore how that information relates to your working group's goals. But even when you think the message is clearly told through the visual aid, it is always useful to spell it out in a text box of a slide (e.g., in the most recent year, 70 percent of court petitions for status offense cases have been for truancy, representing a 40 percent increase from five years ago). Make it as easy as possible for the viewer—don't make them work for the story.
3. **Be transparent about missing data.** If and when there are missing data, be sure to include that in your presentation. It is important for people to know when information is not available so that they can understand the limitations of the findings you're presenting.

PRESENT AND REFLECT UPON KEY FINDINGS

Once you have analyzed the data as much as you can, prepare to present the most interesting and pertinent findings to the full working group at a follow-up to the launch meeting. It's imperative to use the findings to tell a story or series of stories that clearly lays out how your jurisdiction is currently responding to youth and families involved in your status offense system, reveals the system's

strengths and weaknesses and how it stands up to effective practice, and will move people to action. Consider designing a PowerPoint presentation for this purpose. The presentation should weave together visualizations of your data analyses—graphs and charts that are clear and uncomplicated—with an easy-to-follow narrative. (See appendix for toolkit resources, including a sample PowerPoint data presentation.) ■■■

It's helpful to conclude your presentation to the working group with a “wrap-up” or summary of what was learned through the assessment work. This will help members focus on the findings most relevant to your local status offense system reform effort. A summary for a jurisdiction that undertook a comprehensive system diagnostic might look something like this:

- While the overall number of status offense referrals has decreased slightly (10 percent) over the last five years (from 450 to 405), the number of cases petitioned to court has remained roughly the same (324 in the most recently available year). What this means: the *proportion* of cases that result in formal system processing has actually increased over time (from 72 percent to 80 percent).
- In the most recently available year, 60 percent (243) of all referrals were immediately petitioned to court at the time of intake, and half of the remaining 40 percent (81) were petitioned after a failed attempt at diversion.
- Qualitative interviews reveal that the high court referral rate is likely due to limited availability of services (confirmed through the service inventory), long wait lists for those services that do exist, and lack of timely response to the initial outreach for help. Quantitative data illustrate the slow response time: on average, it takes 20 days to schedule an intake interview with youth and families after initial referral; 45 days to decide whether to petition the case to court or use community-based options; and 120 days to present the case in court.
- Of the cases petitioned to court after an unsuccessful diversion attempt, 60 percent (49) involved Latino youth and the vast majority were from the same neighborhood. The service inventory uncovered a dearth of youth and family serving agencies in that particular neighborhood. And, diversion officers responsible for making service referrals in that neighborhood expressed in interviews that they frequently encounter language barriers with Spanish speaking parents and do not routinely have access to translators.

- Although short-term secure detention for youth charged with status offenses is prohibited by local statute, reliance on longer-term out-of-home placement is high. Placements spiked two years ago (to 50, representing 15 percent of all court petitions). They have since decreased slightly (by 15 percent); however, the total number of placements is still 40 percent higher than it was five years ago.
- Sixty percent of court referrals and 70 percent of out-of-home placements involve black and Latino youth, a much greater proportion than their representation in the general population (33 percent, combined). In particular, black and Latino youth are heavily represented in school referrals for ungovernability and truancy.
- Girls account for the majority (85 percent) of runaway referrals, and nearly all of those cases (90 percent) are referred immediately to court, with 50 percent of them resulting in an out-of-home placement.
- While statute dictates that youth in status offense cases can be held no longer than six months in an out-of-home facility, data show that more than 30 percent of placements continue for one year or longer. A review of placed cases, and conversations with facility staff, revealed that girls between the ages of 13 and 15 accounted for the longest lengths of stay. In focus groups, stakeholders expressed that girls tend to act out more in the facilities, leading to extended placement orders.

With a summary like this as a jumping off point, take some time as a group to discuss your reactions to the findings. Are you surprised by what you see? Does the system and the way youth are experiencing the system comport with what you would like to see in your jurisdiction? If not, why not and where in the system do you see the greatest need for change?

CONCLUSION

At this point, you have planned and conducted a comprehensive status offense system assessment. By gathering and analyzing policies that govern your system and quantitative, qualitative, and service capacity data, you have developed an accurate, nuanced, and complete understanding of the local status offense system. Once your working group meets to reflect upon key findings, you are ready to begin planning and implementing system change (see Module Three).

APPENDIX

TOOLKIT RESOURCES FOR MODULE TWO: USING LOCAL INFORMATION TO GUIDE SYSTEM CHANGE



This appendix includes a list of resources designed to help you take tangible steps toward using local information to guide system change. These resources run the gamut from existing publications and guides about a specific topic to sample interview questions and PowerPoint presentations that can be customized to meet the needs of your jurisdiction. Some are focused exclusively on status offense system reform while others are not, but they all represent good practice and process. You can access all of these resources and more online at <http://www.statusoffensereform.org/library>.

STEP 1: PLAN A SYSTEM ASSESSMENT

AFFIRM TIMELINE

- Sample System Assessment Workplan

STEP 2: REVIEW THE POLICIES THAT GOVERN THE STATUS OFFENSE SYSTEM

- Sample Questions for Policy Review

STEP 3: COLLECT QUANTITATIVE DATA ON HOW, AND BY WHOM, THE SYSTEM IS BEING USED

- Collecting and Analyzing Data on Racial and Ethnic Disparities: The Peoria Pilot Project
- Customizable Data Collection Spreadsheet
- A Guide to Calculating Justice-System Marginal Costs
- Toolkit: How to Calculate the Average Costs of Detaining a Youth

STEP 4: COLLECT QUALITATIVE DATA ON HOW LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS PERCEIVE THE SYSTEM

STAKEHOLDERS WHO WORK IN OR WITH THE SYSTEM

- Benton Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Personnel Truancy Survey Report

- Sample Interview Questions for Stakeholders Who Work In Or With The System
- Survey of Spokane County Schools on Truancy Issues – Final Results
- Tipsheet—Qualitative Interviewing
- Writing Interview Protocols and Conducting Interviews: Tips for Students New to the Field of Qualitative Research

YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILY MEMBERS

- Benton Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Needs Assessment Results
- Family & Youth Involvement: A Workbook for Policy & Governance Boards and Planning Groups
- Sample Interview Questions for Youth and Family Members

STEP 5: COLLECT INFORMATION ON LOCAL SERVICE CAPACITY

SURVEY SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Juvenile Justice System Screening, Assessment & Treatment Services Inventory
- Sample Service Provider Survey Instrument
- Sixteenth Judicial District Court Juvenile Justice System Provider Survey

STEP 6: ANALYZE THE DATA

PRESENT AND REFLECT UPON KEY FINDINGS

- Changing the PINS System in New York: A Study of the Implications of Raising the Age Limit for Persons in Need of Supervision
- Louisiana Juvenile Justice Mapping Rapides Final Report
- Persons In Need of Supervision Report 2012: Orange County, NY
- Rapides Parish FINS Cases Data Analysis for the Rapides Parish Court and FINS Program
- Sample Powerpoint Data Presentation

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This toolkit is available on Vera's Status Offense Reform Center website at www.statusoffensereform.org.

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