

FOCUS GROUP WITH JUVENILE COURT COUNSELORS

Reducing Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System, Guilford County Demonstration Project

METHODS



In the Spring of 2005, a focus group session was conducted with several juvenile court counselors from the Greensboro and High Point offices of the Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The goal of the session was to gain clearer awareness of the issues contributing to disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system in Guilford County and it was conducted as a part of the Disproportionate Minority Contact in the Juvenile Justice System Project, funded by a grant from the NC Governor’s Crime Commission. The session was audio-recorded and transcribed. Findings and interpretations represent major themes and perspectives of the sessions as summarized by multiple observers and readers.

MAJOR THEMES

- > There are multiple contributing factors.
- > There are multiple referral sources.
- > Often community resources are available, but are under-utilized.
- > Some services are missing and needs go unmet.

MULTIPLE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

“There are so many dynamics that are out of our control due to the family situation that sometimes we can provide all of the services but it’s difficult because you may not be able to fix it.”

In many cases, the family situation of youth may contribute to their involvement in the juvenile justice system. Most youth seen by court counselors are from single parent families or extended family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts) are raising them. These family situations mean that many youth do not have adequate supervision, structure, or discipline, and most do not have positive male role models.

In other cases, youth have mental health conditions that manifest as behavior problems. If these conditions are not recognized by the schools, parents, or law enforcement, youth may be charged for offenses stemming from conditions they have little control over. Moreover, court counselors sometimes must make decisions about how best to serve a child who has a mental health diagnosis with which they are unfamiliar.

Other times, cultural misunderstandings lead to youth entering the juvenile justice system when

actions that are culturally appropriate for black youth are considered inappropriate by white adults in positions of authority.

For still other youth, problems begin with academic difficulties in school. When they do not understand how to complete their assignments, they often get behind in their classes, become frustrated, and start to act up in school, a situation which may eventually result in suspension or criminal charges. Other times, young or inexperienced teachers do not know how to manage behavior problems effectively.

Finally, although more complaints are filed against black youth—the majority of which are misdemeanors—court counselors can divert minor offenses but over 90% of felony cases are automatically sent to court.

“Race is an issue, but I think it’s disproportionate before it gets to us.”

MULTIPLE REFERRAL SOURCES

“DSS, mental health, the schools, everybody wants the kids on probation. They want court counselors. They think we can solve everything.”

Court counselors receive referrals from numerous sources. While referrals come from all the human service systems, the schools, including SROs, are a major referral source, even though as many as 60% of the youth who enter the juvenile justice system never re-enter. One court counselor suggested that school referrals seem to have escalated since “zero tolerance” discipline policies were implemented, “That’s why we get them.”

Another believes misdemeanor charges for affrays and disorderly conduct have increased since school re-

source officers were assigned to schools, “When we got the resource officers we started getting a lot of affrays. In the past, schools may have dealt with those types of charges.” Others indicated that referrals for truancy typically come from school social workers.

Parents also frequently call upon court counselors whom they see as a resource for getting the support and help they need for their children. Unaware of other community resources or unwilling to try alternatives, they may sign petitions charging their child as a “runaway” or “undisciplined” as a way of restoring parental control or of punishing behavior.

Other common referral sources include patrol officers policing neighborhoods, the Department of Social Services, and Guilford County Area Mental Health (The Guilford Center).

OTHER COMMUNITY RESOURCES ARE UNDER-UTILIZED

The court counselors believe that many human service employees, uncertain how to respond to a particular child, typically call court counselors as a first, rather than last, resort. Since many of the referrals they receive are inappropriate candidates for court-processing, the court counselors often divert these youth into various community programs as alternatives to formal court processing or detention. They believe other human service systems have the same discretion to di-

vert as they do, but are less often utilizing these services, either because they are unaware of them or because they prefer to let the court counselors make that judgment call.

Even when community services are recommended in lieu of detention, court counselors find that youth often do not attend programs due to transportation challenges or inadequate family support and supervision, a situation that fre-

quently results in youth entering formal court-processing anyway.

“Brokering out services is key. If we shoulder all of the responsibility then we would have about 70 kids on our caseload.”

WHAT IS MISSING

Court counselors try to divert as often as possible to avoid taking a child to court. In many areas there are generally sufficient local services, but particular services are lacking. Overall, there are not enough mentors, academic tutors, culturally appropriate and interesting extracurricular activities, or in-school mediation and problem resolution programs.

Moreover, transportation problems may need to be addressed so that youth can take advantage of some services.

In addition, family-centered approaches are needed to address complicating factors, such as teen pregnancy and strained family relations, and to empower caregivers to help their own child.

Other service agencies and parents need greater awareness of available diversion programs that offer more appropriate solutions than court.

Finally, court counselors suggest that extending their office hours may help working parents attend meetings that may keep their child out of court.