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RESEARCH

Evaluation of the Youth Justice Board

Impact on Alternative-to-Detention Policy in New York
City, 2008-2010

BY RACHEL SWANER

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About the Author

Rachel Swaner is a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Court Innovation and a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Introduction

The Youth Justice Board (YJB), a program of the Center for Court Innovation, is an after-school program where 15-20 teenagers from different schools, neighborhoods, and experiences within New York City come together to study and devise policy recommendations on a specific issue affecting youth. Though the teens typically stay for one program year, the Board addresses the same policy issue for two. The first year is devoted to researching an issue and forming policy recommendations, the second year to advocating for and pursuing implementation of those recommendations.

This report is a brief evaluation of the Board's work on alternative-to-detention (ATD) programs for youth in the juvenile justice system during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 program years, looking at whether the Board was successful in taking what was learned from a capacity building research project to be more effective in getting policymakers to implement or consider implementing any of the recommendations.

At the end of the 2008-2009 program year, 29 policymakers who attended the Board's June 2009 event were surveyed after the youths' presentation in order to assess their attitudes towards the recommendations and feasibility of implementation. Additionally, I interviewed five juvenile crime practitioners and policymakers in order to understand the impact they believe the Board can have on juvenile justice policy. These interviewees were from the New York City (NYC) Law Department, the Legal Aid Society, and the Criminal Justice Coordinator's Office. At the end of the 2009-2010 program year, I interviewed four practitioners and policymakers to gauge their reactions to the products produced by the Board that year. These interviewees were from the Legal Aid Society, the Criminal Justice Coordinator's Office, the Vera Institute of Justice, and the Center for Urban Pedagogy.

Capacity Building Report: Increasing the Voice of Youth

In 2008, a Youth Justice Board alumnus and I conducted a capacity building project in order to understand how young people can become important players in the policymaking process. We interviewed staff from several New York City programs that work to increase the voice of inner city youth in policy in order to determine what have proven to be effective strategies for influencing policy. We also sought to determine what policymakers want to know from youth and how the voice of young people can most effectively be heard and respected, interviewing several policymakers from NYC and New York State agencies that focus on youth. The final report¹ describes key findings on "how to" strategies for youth groups trying to influence policymakers. These included:

- Collaborating with other organizations doing similar work;
- Identifying who has the power to implement the recommended changes and directing presentations to them;
- Being professional without losing the authenticity of their teenage voice;

¹ Swaner R and Correia S. 2008. "Increasing the Voice of Youth: Strategies for New York City Teens Influencing Public Policy." New York: Center for Court Innovation.

- Trying to bring media attention to the issue;
- Demonstrating an understanding of the fiscal impact of their recommended changes;
- Limiting the number of policy recommendations; and
- Branding their group as a source of trustworthy young people who can offer thoughtful input.

Youth Justice Board staff were presented with the findings of the report, and they attempted to incorporate what was learned into their planning.

2008-2009: ATD Policy Recommendations

After spending several months conducting interviews with over 30 stakeholders, visiting four ATD programs, and conducting three focus groups with young people involved in the juvenile justice system, the 2008-2009 Board developed ten recommendations for expanding and improving the alternative-to-detention system in New York City. These recommendations, which are discussed at length in their final report², fell under three themes:

1. Providing youth and families with information and resources to help them be able to meaningfully participate in the juvenile justice and court process.
2. Maximizing use of resources to ensure young people receive appropriate supervision.
3. Increasing the availability of individualized services in ATD programs.

The Board presenting their findings to a group of practitioners and policymakers in June 2009. Of the 29 attendees who responded to a survey after the event, 93 percent described the quality of the Board’s presentation as Excellent, 97 percent said the presentation addressed issues convincingly, and 97 percent said that the presentation was well-suited to the audience. Survey respondents were asked to indicate how likely they or their agency were to implement each of the ten recommendations. As shown in Table 1, respondents overwhelmingly (86%) said that they were interested in implementing the recommendations related to providing young people and their families with information to help them understand the various juvenile justice system processes.

When asked about which recommendation they would like the Board to most pursue, the two recommendations related to providing more information was also what was most often indicated. Some even stated that they would like to the Board to help in the creation of the information packets to be given to youth and their families.

² Youth Justice Board. 2009. “Strong Families, Safe Communities: Recommendations to Improve New York City’s Alternative to Detention Programs.” New York: Center for Court Innovation.

Table 1: Likelihood of Implementing YJB’s Alternative-to-Detention Policy Recommendations, Results from Stakeholder Survey*

Policy Recommendation	Very likely	Somewhat likely	Somewhat unlikely	Very unlikely	N/A
Give young people information and resources to help them understand the juvenile justice process.	86%	7%	0%	0%	7%
Provide more information to families and encourage active participation in the court process.	86%	7%	0%	0%	7%
Partner with other community-based organizations to provide activities, services and referrals that are appealing and meaningful to young people.	75%	4%	0%	0%	21%
Offer mental health services, screenings and referrals.	73%	8%	0%	4%	15%
Utilize up-to-date information to ensure that services and supervision are responsive to needs of youth.	61%	28%	0%	0%	11%
Provide every young person with an exit plan that includes aftercare services.	54%	25%	4%	4%	13%
Strengthen educational programming and build stronger relationships with schools.	52%	19%	10%	0%	19%
Increase access to ATD programs and make it easier for youth to transition into lower levels of supervision.	46%	25%	4%	0%	25%
Add short-term housing resources for youth who cannot return home immediately.	33%	7%	11%	11%	38%
Conduct long-term research to test the impact of ATDs on dispositions, recidivism and the social service needs of participants.	33%	37%	0%	4%	26%

*N=29, but can be as low as 26 due to missing data.

The survey also asked an open-ended question asking which recommendations would be most challenging to implement. Table 2 shows that over three-quarters of respondents said that short-term housing would be the most difficult. As indicated in their comments, though they agreed that respite care facilities were needed, the financial barrier was too high, especially in these tough economic times.

**Table 2: ATD Policy Recommendations Most Difficult to Implement,
Results from Stakeholder Survey⁺**

	N	%
Add short-term housing resources for youth who cannot return home immediately.	15	79%
Utilize up-to-date information to ensure that services and supervision are responsive to needs of youth.	1	5%
Strengthen educational programming and build stronger relationships with schools.	1	5%
Offer mental health services, screenings and referrals.	1	5%
Provide every young person with an exit plan that includes aftercare services.	1	5%

N=19

When asked how the Board could improve their work, responses included: meeting with more stakeholders, adding legislative and budget recommendations, addressing fiscal incentives for the use of ATDs, collaborating with youth councils from others systems and developing partnerships with the family support and advocacy movement.

Finally, survey results found that 96 percent of respondents said that they found the youth perspective on ATDs very helpful, and 64 percent said thought that youth could be very effective as meaningful players in public policy.

Interviews conducted with key practitioners and policymakers who read the report reiterated the survey findings. As one lawyer from the Legal Aid Society stated: “The informational recommendations were great and make the most sense.” She suggested that the Board spend their action year developing these information sheets. She also stated that her staff will definitely take into consideration the parts of the report that were related to lawyers, since they were hearing from youth and youth are Legal Aid’s consumers, whom they want to better serve. Similarly, staff from the Criminal Justice Coordinator’s (CJC) office said that giving young people and families more information is a good idea, and they would love if there were a user-friendly handout that could be given to youth going through the juvenile justice system. Unfortunately, they stated, “there are not enough resources to do so.”

Overall, the responses to the Board’s policy recommendations were extremely positive, both in terms of the recommendations themselves and the high-quality and important report that the Board wrote. Some people stated that, in the future, they would like to see the Board be a little more critical in their analysis and interpretation of the interviews they conduct, not necessarily just reporting back what their interviewees say. Despite that, nearly everyone surveyed and interviewed believed that hearing the voice of youth was extremely important and that they would take the recommendations seriously.

2009-2010: Providing More Information to Youth and Families

After analyzing the feedback they received from the surveys and interviews about the policy recommendations, Youth Justice Board program staff decided to focus the action year on developing informational material to be provided to youth to help them understand the juvenile justice process. The focus on just one of their recommendations was in part due to the capacity building report finding that youth can be more effective if they focus on one or two of their recommendations instead of trying to tackle too much.

To that end, they applied for a grant at the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), an organization that brings artists and urban planners together with community-based advocates and researchers to work together to produce educational materials, curricula, and exhibitions.

After being awarded the grant, the Board collaborated for multiple months with a graphic designer from CUP to produce a product called *I Got Arrested! Now What?*, a comic book guide to the juvenile justice system³ that tells the story of a young teenager, Chris, who gets arrested for graffiti. The comic follows Chris as he gets interviewed by probation, meets with his lawyer, and makes appearances in Family Court. Definitions of important court language are given, and the comic shows every possible scenario of what could happen to Chris and his case, offering advice along the way for what he and his family can do to improve his chances for the best possible outcome.

When one of the members of CUP's staff was interviewed about his experience working with the Board, he said that he was on the jury that selected this project over others that had applied for the grant, and he chose it for four reasons: 1) the Board and the Center for Court Innovation have good reputations, 2) the Board effectively demonstrated a need for such a product through their research in 2008-2009, 3) the Board had a plan for an official distribution channel (if all went well the comic would be distributed through the NYC Department of Probation), and 4) there was a need for a large number of copies to be printed.

CUP worked directly with the Board to create the comic's story, using the information that the Board members collected from interviews conducted with various players in the juvenile justice process. Though the artist from CUP did the actual drawings in the comic, the Board helped make it youth-friendly. Aside from deciding on the comic form, the Board named the characters and gave input into how the characters should look, as well as helped the artist with making the document "not too dry and not too technical," so that it would be more accessible to the teenagers they hoped it would help. As a CUP staff member mentioned, "Youth are great policy translators, investigating and translating to a wider audience."

The Board was able to work with Probation to get them to agree to distribute the comic to every young person coming through the juvenile justice system at their first post-arrest interview with a probation officer, directly addressing the first recommendation from their report. In addition to the comic, the Board also ran six workshops for young people at two ATDs, providing them with information about the juvenile justice process.

³ For an electronic copy, see http://www.courtinnovation.org/_uploads/documents/comic_book.pdf.

Reactions to the comic have been extremely positive. In addition to the numerous requests by organizations for large amounts of copies of the comic, interviews with key stakeholders showed that they were very impressed with the Board's work. As one person from the Vera Institute stated, "You can tell that the Youth Justice Board really put thought into who the ultimate audience was going to be and spoke to them in the proper format." He went on to say that "one of the things that struck me is that I work with youth in other positions and other youth boards and they're usually just speaking for adults, and YJB wasn't, they had their own thoughts and ideas and weren't reliant on the adults." Similarly, a Legal Aid lawyer stated:

I love that it's kid-friendly and that it was designed by young people and it was their guiding hand in making it appealing to other young people. It's great to put down useful information but if you don't do it in a way that will attract the youth it doesn't mean anything. There wasn't any resource available for young people and now there is and it's in a format that they will access.

All interviewees expressed how impressed they were with the Board, especially with the buy-in that they have gotten from all of the key stakeholders in the system. They also stated that it was great that the Board did not stop after issuing their recommendations in 2009, but took on one of the recommendations and actively pursued it, getting a key player (Probation) to agree to give the comic out.

Discussion

The Board successfully incorporated many of the findings from the capacity building report into their work over the last two years. First, they limited the scope of what they were trying to do: though the 2009 report produced ten recommendations, they concentrated on just one in their advocacy year, which allowed them to focus their attention and resources in a way that helped bolster their campaign. They reached out to and collaborated with other organizations doing ATD work to seek and incorporate their input, as well as collaborating with CUP. As the responses from the survey at the first year presentation indicated, their presentation was well-suited to the audience. Additionally, in the action year they were able to identify the people in power (Probation) who would be most effective at distributing the comic to young people at the earliest moment in time of their juvenile case, and get them to agree to do so. Policymakers and practitioners who were interviewed were impressed with the Board's ability to be professional yet still be authentic teenagers, not only in their presentations but in their comic as well.

Additionally, they were successful in bringing media attention to their cause. The NY Law Journal did a piece on the comic⁴, and some YJB staff and members were able to speak about their work and its importance on WBAI's City Watch radio program. They participated in a podcast hosted by the Vera Institute of Justice, and two members of the Board wrote an op/ed piece that they are currently trying to get published.

⁴ Storey, J. "Poster Aims to Demystify Multifaceted Process Faced by Arrested Teens." *New York Law Journal*, 4 August 2010.

Though, as some of the survey results indicated, their recommendations did not directly address the fiscal feasibility of implementation, the Board did understand that even for some of the less costly recommendations to get implemented, limited financial resources was going to be a barrier. They overcame this by seeking their own funding from CUP to create the informational handout (the comic).

All of these factors combined to result in a highly successful two years for the Board, helping to solidify the YJB brand. As a policymaker at the Criminal Justice Coordinator's office said in a recent interview, many of the other recommendations in the report are starting to be addressed as well. While not exclusively because of the Board's report, "it helped put some of the issues on the front burner and made us address them more quickly."

Next Steps and Recommendations

While the Board has clearly been successful in their research and advocacy work over the last two years, it is important to track the longer-term impact. To that end, in addition to keeping a log of how many copies of the comic are ordered and by whom, a survey has been created for organizations and individuals who request copies in order to understand how they will be using or have used the comic in their work. The survey also asks about whether, based on their observations, they feel the young people who receive a copy of the comic understand the juvenile system better than those who do not receive it.

Additionally, once some time has passed to allow for probation to incorporate handing out the comic as part of their intake process, focus groups with youth going through the juvenile justice system should be conducted in order to assess their attitudes towards the comic: whether they read it; whether it has been helpful; and if so, how, and if not, why not. Because this population may be difficult to access, it is recommended that recruitment be done and focus groups be conducted at the two alternative-to-detention programs run by the Center for Court Innovation.

A representative from the Criminal Justice Coordinator's Office mentioned that it has been globally identified that better acquainting youth and families with the juvenile justice process is an ongoing need, and that the comic can help with that. The city may be interested in contracting with the Center for Court Innovation to use this in their ATD facilities. The Center may wish to pursue this, as well as promote technical assistance around the use of the comic in other places throughout the state in order to help fund the production of additional copies.

As one of the interviewees mentioned, it might be useful to have the comic translated, with a special section for immigrant youth.

Finally, a finding from the capacity building report that was not discussed above was that it is often hard to keep morale up among people (not just youth) doing policy and advocacy work, as it often takes many years to see results. Since only one member from the 2008-2009 Board returned for the next year (in addition to one member who became a part-time staff member for 2009-2010), many of the youth from that cohort may not know how the work they did has influenced policy and practice. It is recommended that a YJB alumni event be held, inviting the members from the two years of work on ATDs, in order to celebrate their accomplishments. If

such an event occurs, a representative from the CJC volunteered to come speak to the youth and go through the policy recommendations and discuss the work that is now being done to implement them, in part because of their hard work. Having a non-Center for Court Innovation employee publicly praise their work may give further validation to their experience with the Board and build their confidence in their ability to be meaningful players in the policymaking process in the future.