NJJEC Bulletin

The NJJEC Bulletin

NJJEC is a project of the Justice Research and Statistics Association funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). NJJEC’s purpose is to improve the evaluation capacity of states, localities, and tribes and facilitate the use of evidence-based programs and practices in juvenile justice. The NJJEC Bulletin is disseminated directly to subscribers and posted on the NJJEC website, and provides information related to juvenile justice evaluation that is of interest to state, local, and tribal juvenile justice professionals.

We welcome your participation! If you would like to submit an article, suggest a news item for the Bulletin, or ask a question about evaluation, e-mail njjec@jrsa.org. For more information about the resources available through the National Juvenile Justice Evaluation Center, visit the NJJEC website.

What’s Going On at NJJEC?

On December 6, 2012, NJJEC staff delivered a webinar entitled Sustainability: A Collaborative Approach. Panelists discussed the importance of performance measurement in sustainability, and ways grant-making agencies and service-providers can work together to support program success. Thank you to all who attended! Webinar slides and narration will be available on the OJJDP NTTAC website shortly. To view archived NJJEC webinars, check the NJJEC Trainings and Presentations page.

We are developing our spring webinars, and creating a series of short, narrated resources on program evaluation and performance measurement. The first in the series is entitled Hiring and Working With An Evaluator. This resource discusses the advantages of hiring an evaluator, how to select an evaluator, and how to develop and evaluation plan. Check the March edition of the Bulletin for more information and a link!

Upcoming Events of Interest

The 38th Annual Juvenile Justice Symposium and National DMC Conference
February 13-15
In conjunction with the Mississippi State Advisory Group, The Coalition for Juvenile Justice will hold its Annual Symposium and National DMC Conference February 13-15 in Biloxi, Mississippi. Sessions cover a wide variety of topics related to disproportionate minority contact and other issues of interest to the juvenile justice field, including evidence-based practice. Check the conference website for more information and to register!

2013 National Conference on Bullying
February 27-March 1
The School Safety Advocacy Council will host the 2013 National Conference on Bullying February 27-March 1 in Orlando, Florida. Session topics include methods for reporting and tracking bullying as well as evidence-based interventions. A full schedule and registration information are available online.
National Youth-At-Risk Conference  
March 3-6
The College of Education and The Division of Continuing Education at Georgia Southern University will host the 24th Annual National Youth-At-Risk Conference March 3 through 6 in Savannah, Georgia. Conference session topics will include academic achievement, violence prevention, and youth mental and physical health. Check the conference website for registration information and to view the full program.

Featured Resources: 
The MacArthur Foundation’s Models For Change Knowledge Brief Series

The MacArthur Foundation’s Knowledge Brief Series provides information on effective practices in juvenile justice. The Briefs span a wide range of topics relevant to the field, including mental health issues, Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC), cost-benefit of juvenile interventions, and the work of the child welfare system.

The briefings provide plain-language summaries of studies and evaluations conducted by the MacArthur Foundation, and include background information about the issue being examined as well as easy-to-interpret graphical displays of evaluation results.

For example, the briefing Can Risk Assessment Improve Juvenile Justice Practice? provides results from a Foundation study of the use of risk assessment tools by juvenile probation officers. Risk assessment is generally viewed as an effective way to deliver targeted services to youth, and to avoid unnecessary interaction with the juvenile justice system for youth at low risk of reoffending. The study results include the responsiveness of probation officers to the assessment recommendations, the effect of the use of these tools on the intensity of system response for high-risk and low-risk youth, and the effect of the tools on reoffending. The study found that probation officers were in fact making use of the risk assessment recommendations, and allocating more resources and services towards high-risk youth. However, at completion of the study there was not yet a significant reduction in reoffending.

Check the MacArthur Foundation’s website to access the Knowledge Brief Series.

Evaluation Feature: 
Understanding Control Variables

One of the key challenges for practitioners who wish to participate in a program evaluation is having adequate data to provide an evaluator. We frequently discuss how to collect program data, but it is also very important to understand what to collect. Preparing for a true evaluation requires the collection of more than basic performance measures. In order to know what to collect, practitioners need to understand some of the components of an evaluation.

In an evaluation, a control variable is a characteristic that is known to be related to the outcome of interest. Because it is known to affect the outcome, a statistical analysis must be used to “control” that variable. Controlling on a variable means it is held constant so it is not a contributing factor on the effect of an intervention. Evaluators can use program participant data to make sure individual characteristics (control variables) are not affecting observed outcomes, and this...
helps to establish that program activities (independent variables) caused the results. It is important for program managers and staff to know variables that should be controlled for in an evaluation so they can collect the relevant data on program participants whenever possible. Collecting these data will help an evaluator work more efficiently and effectively to perform an outcome evaluation.

A quick look at publicly available resources can assist practitioners in identifying characteristics of youth that might be controlled for in an evaluation. For example, Can Risk Assessment Improve Juvenile Justice Practice?, the Knowledge Brief by the MacArthur Foundation which we referenced in the Featured Resources section, identifies dynamic risk factors for delinquency like poor school performance and a lack of social ties. The Center for Juvenile Justice Reform at Georgetown University has a wealth of resources on this topic. A 2012 report entitled Addressing the Unmet Educational Needs of Children and Youth in the Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Systems identifies risk factors for system involvement such as poverty, learning disabilities, and adverse childhood experiences such as abuse.

Understanding risk factors that should be used as control variables in an evaluation can help practitioners prepare to work with an evaluator. Service providers and program managers who are able to collect this information on program participants will be better prepared to equip an evaluator with the necessary tools to conduct an outcome evaluation.

Local Spotlight: Chittenden County, Vermont

Substance abuse is a complex problem and a pervasive issue in the justice system. Frequently, treatment is not readily available or easily accessed by justice-involved youth and adults. Chittenden County, Vermont has found a unique way to respond to this issue, and to reduce the length of time to referral for treatment.

In partnership with Spectrum Youth and Family Services in Burlington, Vermont, the Chittenden County Criminal Court created the Rapid Referral program. The purpose of the program is to support pretrial substance abuse assessment. Spectrum provides substance abuse and mental health outpatient treatment for individuals up to age 23 using techniques such as motivational enhancement and cognitive behavioral therapies. Using pre-trial conditions of release, Rapid Referral assesses the dependency levels and treatment needs of offenders, and requires that those exhibiting a need for treatment participate in that treatment during the pretrial period.

Defendants are assessed at arraignment, and identified candidates are provided with therapy immediately rather than delaying services until their adjudication dates. Within 72 hours of arraignment, individuals with an alcohol or drug-related charge are ordered to an appointment for an evidence-based substance use/co-occurring assessment and treatment if indicated using American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM) placement criteria. The program is a new approach to the longstanding problem of repeat offenders with substance dependency.

An outcome assessment of program participants showed a low recidivism rate of 18.7 percent, but because there was no control group for comparison, that assessment could not rule out other factors beyond participation in Rapid Referral that might have affected recidivism for program participants. While the Court and Spectrum saw positive results in
their participants, additional evaluation was needed to establish the link between program activities—in this case, pretrial treatment and reductions in reoffending.

This is a problem faced frequently by youth service providers: providers see positive results, but are not able to establish through evaluation that program activities actually caused those results. Juvenile justice practitioners often find program evaluation to be infeasible, and one of the most common challenges is that they are unable to meet the “gold standard” of research methodology and randomly assign youth to one condition or another. For example, it might be considered unethical or even illegal to randomly assign some youth to mandatory treatment and not others, other characteristics being equal.

To establish a link between program participation and lower recidivism, researchers at the Vermont Center for Justice Research created a control group after the program had been implemented using criminal history and demographic characteristics available in the Vermont Criminal Information Center. The control group consisted of individuals processed through Chittenden County Court during the same period that the Rapid Referral program was evaluated who were similar to program participants with regard to fourteen criminal history and demographic factors. Statistical tests were conducted to confirm that the groups were equal on all of these important dimensions, so that an additional evaluation could compare Rapid Referral participants to offenders who were similar but had not received pretrial treatment. While this design is not a “true” experiment (also known as a Randomized Controlled Trial) because it did not involve random assignment, a matched-group comparison is still a strong way to evaluate program effectiveness.

The evaluation results showed that the control group had a recidivism rate of 84.3 percent, substantially higher than the 18.7 percent of the treatment group who reoffended. Analysis showed that the differences were statistically significant, meaning they were large enough that they were unlikely to be due to chance. Because the treatment and comparison groups were similar on characteristics related to recidivism and the results were statistically significant, the study established that Rapid Referral does indeed lower the likelihood that program participants will reoffend.

The final report by the Vermont Center for Justice Research is available online.