

Innovation Brief

Using Evidence-Based Interventions with Youth Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses

Despite a growing body of research challenging traditional assumptions about youth who sexually offend, few jurisdictions have made a systematic effort to use this research to re-engineer the way in which they respond to these youth. One jurisdiction that has undertaken such a task is DuPage County, Illinois. With *Models for Change* support, the DuPage County juvenile court has taken steps to strengthen its responses to sexual offending by youth and, along the way, learned valuable lessons from which other jurisdictions can benefit.

The Issue

DuPage County, the state's second most-populous county, traditionally sent very few youth who had committed sex-related offenses to the Department of Juvenile Justice detention system. Instead, prior to 2010, the County relied heavily on residential treatment or traditional probation supervision and services for these youth. While the primary residential-treatment provider used by DuPage County delivered reliable services, the program was located nearly two hours away in an area inaccessible by public transportation. As a result, the type of meaningful family engagement in the treatment process recommended in the research literature was difficult, if not impossible. When youth returned from extended placements, they were frequently estranged from a support network and it was often difficult for them to reintegrate into their families, school, work or community.

And this approach was costly. In the four years prior to initiating its reform efforts, DuPage spent nearly \$2 million on non-secure residential care for youth adjudicated for sexual offenses. With national and local

economic crises deepening, DuPage County could no longer afford to sustain these practices without sacrificing other local services. Circumstances were ripe for a re-examination of effective interventions with youth who commit sexual offenses.

To launch the project, the DuPage County *Models for Change* team—led primarily by the juvenile probation department—convened a broad group of local stakeholders and tapped into technical assistance from the *Models for Change* National Resource Bank to examine existing policies and practices.

During the planning phase, the *Models for Change* workgroup, in tandem with the National Center for Juvenile Justice, gathered data, analyzed research, and conducted site visits and informational interviews with leaders of a successful program in Lucas County, Ohio, to learn more about effective community-based programming and cost-efficient approaches for working with youth who commit sexual offenses. The group then synthesized its findings for presentations to other

stakeholders—including prosecutors, defenders and judges—whose collaboration and input were vital in developing a more evidence-based response to juvenile sexual offenses.

The Research

To create solid foundations for their efforts, the DuPage team carefully examined data and research to better understand the characteristics and behaviors of youth who commit sex offenses and the elements of effective interventions. Four clear findings emerged:

Youth are different: More than half of the DuPage County youth adjudicated delinquent and placed on probation for sexual offending were 14 years old or younger. Youth display significant developmental differences in cognitive, social, emotional and biological functioning from adults. As a result, youth sexual offending tends to be very different than sexual offending by adults. Most youth sexual offending has roots in immaturity, developmental challenges, impulsivity, poor decision-making skills and social deficits.

Family / community contexts: Consistent with state and national statistics, local data confirmed that the vast majority of sexual offending by youth involves family members or a victim known to the youth. Between 2010–2014, 45% of the victims of youth placed on probation for a sex offense in DuPage County were family members; 55% were friends, neighbors, classmates or otherwise acquainted with the youth. Because family functioning

and relationships play a key role in offending behavior, engaging families in addressing that behavior is critical.

Low risks of reoffending: Most youth who commit a sexual offense present very low re-offense risks, especially with appropriate intervention, services and maturation. Youth are also highly amenable to positive change and learning new ways of thinking and behaving. This responsiveness to treatment means that youth, families, victims and communities can achieve positive outcomes with the right support, supervision and services.

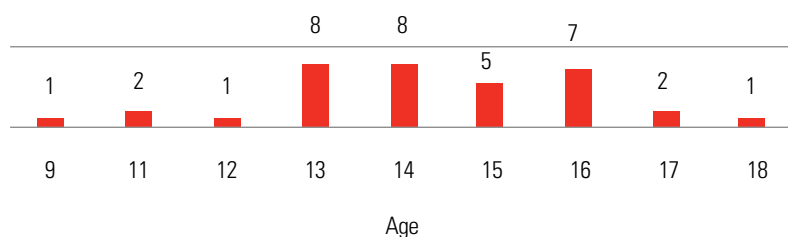
Small numbers of offenders: Local data revealed a youth profile consistent with state and national data: youth referred to court for sexual offending were a small proportion of overall caseloads, comprising approximately 2% of all youth referred to probation for intake / screening since 2000. A total of 50 youth were adjudicated delinquent and placed on probation for a sexual offense between 2006–2009. These data proved important, as they demonstrated to stakeholders that individualized, evidence-based interventions were practical and cost-effective for this population.

Innovations

With research in hand, the Probation Department launched an enhanced community-based program for youth on probation for sex offenses, with an emphasis on objective assessments, risk-based decision-making, individualized case-planning, youth accountability, and cognitive-behavioral skills development.

Offender Age at Time of Offense

(Youth on probation for sex offending during program period)



Estimate of Risk of Adolescent Sexual Offense Recidivism (ERASOR): To ensure informed decision-making by all stakeholders, the Department improved evaluation and assessment with the use of the *Estimate of Risk of Adolescent Recidivism (ERASOR)*¹ tool. The first ERASOR is conducted by a department psychologist to determine a youth's initial risk level. Subsequent ERASORs are conducted every six months throughout a youth's term of probation to ensure that the treatment strategies in place are having their intended impact. As a result of these practices, judges have access to more complete, relevant and timely information and probation officers can better match youth and families with effective services.

Specialized Caseload: The Department now assigns a specialized, full-time probation officer to supervise youth on probation for sex offenses. This officer and the supervision team have received training from national experts on the origins of problematic sexual behavior by youth, adolescent development and the impact of trauma. These officers have also developed specialized skills in interviewing youth with sexual behavior problems and utilizing the ERASOR and individualized, strength-based approaches for working with youth and families.

Risk-Based Supervision and Case Management: To ensure appropriate probation supervision, the Department implemented a tier-based case management system specifically for youth on probation for sexual offenses. Assignment to one of three supervision tiers is determined by the results of the ERASOR and other relevant information, including input from school personnel, parents, therapists and case managers. Youth assigned to Tier 1 receive the most intense supervision; Tier 2 youth receive mid-level supervision; Tier 3 is the lowest level of supervision. The new tier system has shifted probation supervision from standardized guidelines or offense-based classifications toward customized case-planning for each youth based on his/her risk level for committing another sexual offense.

Individualized Treatment Expectations for Youth Based on Best Practice: To complement these structured supervision strategies, the Probation Department implemented a risk-based, individualized, skill-building approach to treat these youth. Using individual or group treatment models, the program works to ensure that youth understand the negative impact of their actions on their victims and themselves, identify "thinking errors" and circumstances that create risks for abusive behavior, use cognitive-behavioral techniques, participate in family therapy, acquire a positive self-concept and self-accountability, and learn new social skills to cultivate satisfying, socially acceptable, age-appropriate relationships with others.

Qualified Treatment Providers: The Department also created clear standards for clinical service providers serving these youth and families from one to three agencies through a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process. The RFQ focused on identifying agencies with youth-focused experience and established minimum qualifications and standards for agencies providing these services.

Results and Next Steps

In the nearly four years since the program's inception, 37 youth were adjudicated delinquent for a sex offense and referred for specialized supervision and services. Two were placed in residential care, although for a shorter period of time than in the past. The youth were racially and ethnically diverse, and all but one were boys.

Evidence-informed interventions: As a result of *Models for Change* support and local leadership, interventions with these youth are now better aligned with evidence-based practice and research. Evaluations are conducted using the ERASOR, individualized case plans guide supervision and services according to "tier" assignments, and probation and court personnel have received specialized training and support in handling these challenging cases. Probation goals now focus on youth accountability, increased competencies to avoid future offending, equipping families to supervise and support youth and to protect victims of interfamilial abuse.

Impact

Because the number of youth adjudicated delinquent for sexual offenses is so small—even in a populous county—a statistically-valid outcome evaluation of DuPage’s revised approach to sexually-offending youth has not been possible. One statistic that can be meaningfully assessed is the impact that the new intervention model has had on the cost and use of disruptive residential treatment. Since implementation, residential placement numbers have dropped by 78% and overall placement costs for sexually-offending youth have declined by 89%.

DuPage County’s project methodology, practice models and lessons learned can be instructive to other jurisdictions

seeking to align policy and practice with research on effective interventions for these complex cases. In Illinois, state-level opportunities have also emerged following publication of a new statewide study on juvenile sexual offending by the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission. (Available at <http://ijjc.illinois.gov/youthsexualoffenses>).

These resources are now available to provide guidance to justice system stakeholders who seek to prevent sexual offending among youth, improve outcomes for young people, protect victims and enhance the well-being of communities across the state.

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1. The ERASOR is an empirically guided assessment tool that uses 25 factors to estimate the short-term risk of sexual re-offending with youth ages twelve to eighteen. The results of the assessment classify youth as low, moderate, or high-risk to re-offend sexually.

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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.