Juvenile Recidivism—Measuring Success or Failure: Is There a Difference?

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Consider the situations of two young offenders, both of whom are real individuals who were released several years ago from a youth correctional facility. They were sentenced to a juvenile correctional facility for felonies involving person-to-person assaults. They both had some strengths on which to build—they had completed treatment while in custody and received high school diplomas. They also both faced some challenges—neither had family or a home to return to after being released.

"Aaron"[1] has made positive connections with community members who are helping him negotiate the paths to independence and reentry. Since the date of his parole, the community has wrapped its arms around this young man. Community members have helped him find housing, helped him enroll in college, and aided him in finding part-time work. He has remained crime-free and continues working toward his undergraduate degree at a local university.

"Brad" has not fared as well. His community did not have the resources available to help him continue to build on his successes while in custody. Despite ongoing attempts to find a job, he remains unemployed. He has ended up homeless, couch-surfing through a series of friends' apartments while receiving federal food assistance. Like Aaron, Brad also has remained crime-free, but he continues to struggle with finances and depression.

By any measure besides recidivism, there is just one success story here. But if the only way a juvenile corrections agency measures performance is through recidivism rates, both young men are equally successful. Both are crime-free. The agency has "done its job."

Pros and Cons of Measuring Recidivism

Measuring and reporting recidivism rates are important responsibilities of juvenile correctional agencies and historically have been the primary measures used to track performance. Recidivism is an easy, cost-effective measure to track, and it resonates with members of the public and legislators who are concerned about crime rates. However, focusing exclusively on recidivism data reflects a deficit-based approach to delinquency intervention and juvenile corrections, rather than a strengths-based approach. When used as the primary indicator of an agency's performance, recidivism does not reflect the full range of the work that juvenile correctional agencies, youths, families, schools and communities perform on a daily basis.

Recidivism reveals whether juvenile offenders who leave custody go on to lead crime-free lives, but not whether they lead productive crime-free lives. Recidivism does not measure whether these young adults demonstrate successful pro-social behavior and contribute in a positive way to their communities. To really understand which programs and treatments are effective in reforming young offenders and placing them on a firm footing in life, juvenile correctional agencies are beginning to track not only what goes wrong, but also what goes right by tracking positive youth outcomes.

Pros and Cons of Measuring Success

Research and experience have suggested that successful transitions from childhood to adolescence and then adolescence to adulthood require positive development in several areas. These areas include education, pro-social family and peer relationships, health and well-being, and work and life skills.[2]

Much of the day-to-day work in correctional agencies and other areas of the juvenile justice system acknowledges and embraces an approach to reducing delinquency through youth development. Although some agencies more explicitly express their youth development goals, every agency conducts assessments to identify risk and protective factors in several domains such as substance abuse history, familial relationships, living arrangements, school or employment history and mental health. Case plans strategize ways to reduce dynamic risk factors and

increase protective factors. Youths, families and staff work to build on youths' strengths while reducing risk factors.

Agencies are seeking positive youth outcomes that go beyond just remaining crime-free. What the juvenile justice system lacks, however, is a way to consistently define, monitor and measure those positive outcomes in a manner that resonates with the public and legislators. Agencies are beginning to clearly demonstrate which programs and treatments are effective and merit funding.

By knowing which factors help a youth successfully transition into adulthood and thrive in his or her community, states can make informed, evidence-based funding decisions that involve an appropriate array of services. Given the youth development goals and values reflected in the existing practices of many juvenile corrections agencies, it is important that this well-rounded approach to youth development does not carry through to performance measurement at the agency level. Together, recidivism and other outcomes data can paint a more comprehensive picture and supply much needed information for decision-making. Therefore, recidivism and other outcome measures are complementary.

Building the Foundation

Positive youth outcomes generally refer to indicators of protective factors, competence or strengths. The notion of measuring positive outcomes is rooted in a positive youth development (PYD) philosophy. Butts and colleagues note a basic underpinning of PYD is that even youths from the most challenging of circumstances can achieve optimal development if the right mix of resources are present, including opportunities to engage in positive relationships, activities and prosocial experiences with positive role models.[3] By paying attention to the potential positive youth outcomes that can result from the work juvenile justice agencies perform, corrections professionals can begin to answer questions about effectiveness in a more complete way than simply attending to recidivism.

Before corrections professionals can begin to measure positive youth outcomes, they have to consider the intervention that precedes the outcome. Intervention strategies tend to have a built-in theoretical framework that guides the activities and suggests potential outcomes. Therefore, if corrections professionals seek to increase the capacity to measure positive youth outcomes, they must consider the types of interventions used. Traditionally, juvenile justice agencies have followed a deficit-based model—treatment is focused on reducing anger, eliminating drug and alcohol use, or addressing mental health issues. Although these are important treatment interventions, the inherent focus on the problems a youth presents is somewhat inconsistent with measuring the healthy development of a youth through positive youth outcomes.

Positive youth outcomes should address the development of new skills and competencies, establishing a pro-social identity, and other elements essential to transitioning to adulthood for all youths. Since agencies cannot revolutionize their approach to treatment overnight, they need to get creative in discovering elements of existing interventions that lend themselves to positive youth outcomes. For example, if the program focused on drug and alcohol abuse, is there a way to prom general physical well-being through exercise and self care? so, the agency can measure health indicators and survey yout on knowledge gains related to maintaining a healthy lifest devoid of drugs and alcohol. In an anger-reduction treatme program, are youths being given the opportunity to find alter tive methods of expression, such as art, writing or sports? addition, is there a way to train youths in mediation skills conflict management?

Many agencies are already engaged in efforts consistent wi the measurement of positive youth outcomes. These activiti include assessing youths for risk and protective factors up admission, completing case-planning to provide treatment a opportunities for youths to develop skills, and engaging fam lies and communities in the process. The next step is to qua tify these efforts and identify the most relevant positive you outcomes agencies should track. Ideally, agencies would pr vide a number of programs or interventions that support pos tive youth outcomes. Butts and colleagues suggest focusing c six areas, or practice domains, that may be most important achieving measurable positive youth outcomes: work, educa tion, relationships, community, health and creativity.[3] Cu rently, agencies may already have the capability to track suc outcomes as the number of youths completing vocational trai ing, the number of resumes or job applications submitted, th number of youths earning a high school diploma or GED ce tificate, or the number of volunteer hours completed.

The goal of connecting recidivism and positive youth outcomes is to paint a more vivid picture of a juvenile justice agency's impact on the youths it serves.

Connecting Recidivism and Positive Youth Outcomes

Agencies should maintain recidivism as a fundamental ou come measure in determining performance. Reducing futu criminality is a principal goal of public service agencies. It an indicator of performance that legislatures and the public a not only used to hearing but also are expecting. The goal connecting recidivism and positive youth outcomes is to paint more vivid picture of a juvenile justice agency's impact on th youths it serves. Youths should be returned to their communiti with increased skills, gained competence and tools to help the become productive crime-free citizens of their communitie However, the sustainability of measuring and reporting pos tive youth outcomes is potentially dependent upon correlati those outcomes to recidivism. Presumably, the positive you outcomes an agency chooses to measure will be inversely co related with recidivism; in other words, the greater the educ tional attainment, the lower the recidivism. In an environme that increasingly expects evidence of treatment effectiveness

it is essential to demonstrate to lawmakers and the public that positive youth outcome measures are inversely correlated to recidivism.

For the past year, the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA) has been examining the issue of measuring positive youth outcomes in a juvenile justice context. The goal of this effort has been to develop a more consistent and comprehensive set of performance measures that address positive youth outcomes that can be implemented in agencies around the country. A theme of the work of this group has been to maintain a nexus back to recidivism while promoting the measurement of positive youth outcomes. A set of guidelines and strategies will result from this effort and should be a resource for agencies to begin to build the foundation of measuring positive youth outcomes.

Measuring Real Success

As CJCA moves forward with development of proposed measures, agencies will be better able to demonstrate the effectiveness of treatments based on achieving positive youth outcomes, and they will be able to retain legislative and public support for those programs. Those measures also will tell a more useful story about whether youths are served well while in the juvenile justice system. It will be apparent when looking at the outcomes achieved by "Aaron" and "Brad" that only one of those youths is succeeding. Through treatment and services provided both within correctional institutions and in communities, it will be clear how to ensure more youths end up like "Aaron."

Notes

1. Names have been changed.
2. Butts, J.A., G. Bazemore, and S.A. Meroe. 2010. *Positive youth justice—Framing justice interventions using the concepts of positive youth development.* Washington, D.C.: Coalition for Juvenile Justice.

   Catalano, R.F., M.L. Berglund, J.A.M. Ryan, H.S. Lonczak, and J.D. Hawkings. 1998. *Positive youth development in the United States: Research findings on evaluations of positive youth development programs.* Seattle: University of Washington, School of Social Work.
3. Ibid.

Critical Thinking

1. Should taxpayers pay for juvenile delinquents' education while they are in custody?
2. How should juvenile justice agencies measure success?

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