



NOTES FROM THE FIELD

A product of the Status Offense Reform Center (SORC), Notes from the Field is a series profiling jurisdictions that have undertaken status offense system change.

What is a status offense?

Status offenses are behaviors that are prohibited under law only because of an individual's status as a minor, including running away from home, skipping school, violating a curfew, drinking under age, and acting "incorrigibly." They are problematic, but noncriminal in nature.

What is SORC?

SORC provides policymakers and practitioners with tools and information to create effective, community-based responses for keeping young people who engage in noncriminal behavior out of the juvenile justice system. The Center is a project of the Vera Institute of Justice and is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* Resource Center Partnership.

New York City

POPULATION: 8,336,697
YOUTH POPULATION: 1,765,828
MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban

The Call to Action

In 2001, the New York State Legislature expanded the definition of status offenders—referred to in New York as Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS)—to include 16 and 17 year olds. In anticipation of the jurisdictional age for PINS youth increasing to 18, localities across the state, including New York City, began to examine the strengths and weaknesses of their existing PINS system and assess the effects that the projected influx of older youth into their system may have.

In New York City, the Department of Probation (DOP) served as the gatekeeper for PINS complaints. Probation officers were responsible for performing both intake and monitoring duties for every PINS case. At intake, the officer would open a formal probation case, and either divert the case for services in the community or refer it to court. Due to high case loads, there were often long waits for intake appointments and contact with clients during the monitoring period was sporadic. Although the majority of youth were initially diverted to services, escalating problem behaviors, including non-compliance with probation orders, led to a significant percentage of these cases ending up in court. And, once cases entered court it was common for youth to violate court orders, and for judges to order youth into costly foster care placements. Fearing an influx of between 3,800 and 5,300 new cases into the city's already challenged PINS system under the new legislation, officials from DOP and the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) took action to transform their status offense system.

The Change Process

To guide their collaborative strategic planning effort, DOP and ACS officials reviewed data on the PINS system, including the typical characteristics of system-involved children, as well as the common pathways that these children take through the system. Through this work, officials determined that PINS youth would be more efficiently and effectively served if ACS was the gatekeeper of the PINS system. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was developed to formalize this transfer of responsibilities between agencies. Signatories to the MOU included ACS, DOP and the city's departments of Police, Youth and Community Development, and Education.

The MOU designated ACS as the lead agency for the provision of diversion services and outlined a new process for filing a PINS petition, which would refer individuals to ACS' newly formed Family Assessment

Program (FAP) for assessment and service referrals. Under the MOU, a family was only to be referred to DOP for official PINS intake if the FAP team determined that there was no substantial likelihood that the youth and his or her family would benefit from further attempts at diversion services.

In 2010, after nearly a decade of operations, ACS redesigned FAP to enhance the delivery of services to youth and families accessing the PINS system. Under the original FAP model, high-needs families were referred out to contracted providers for a comprehensive assessment and targeted service referrals. ACS found that the assessment process for these families could be lengthy, community-based services were frequently not able to meet their needs, and there was no mechanism in place to track their outcomes. In anticipation that its contracts with these providers were coming to a close, ACS seized the opportunity to launch a new intake process, screening and assessment tool, and continuum of services.

The Model

Families who request services through the PINS system or are referred to the system are directed to one of the city's five FAP offices (there is one in each of the city's boroughs) to meet with an experienced ACS social worker known as a Family Assessment Specialist. At a FAP office, the social worker conducts a same-day intake, using the automated FAP Screening and Assessment Tool to conduct a brief interview (approximately 30 questions) with the youth and his or her caregiver. The screening tool generates a score allowing staff to identify and differentiate between low- and high-needs families. Low-needs families receive counseling and then, if necessary, a referral to a neighborhood-based service. High-needs families go through the comprehensive screening component of the tool, which is designed to identify the family's strengths and needs across the following domains: family/relationships, education/school, community/peers, mental health, medical, aggression/violence and use of free time. The assessment tool generates a report that includes a visual representation of the family's assessment score (a bar graph of the family's strengths and needs as a percentage of the total possible score in each domain) and applicable program exclusions. The report guides staff in referring the family to an appropriate neighborhood-based service or a FAP-contracted provider that is required to contact the family within 24 hours and meet with the family within five days.

FAP's contracted services include a number of evidence-based program (EBP) models, and fall along a continuum of intervention levels designed to meet the varying needs of families:

- Level I: Family Stabilization (in-home crisis mediation and family support for up to 90 days)
- Level II: Functional Family Therapy (FFT)
- Level IIA: Multidimensional Family Therapy (MDFT)

- Level III: Multisystemic Therapy (MST)
- Level IV: Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC)

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

Monitoring FAP's progress in a way that goes beyond basic metrics is something ACS has struggled to do over the years. However, due to the new FAP Management Tool (FMT)—an automated data management system—managers will soon be able to review and learn from detailed monthly data reports. Staff are required to document the details of their interactions with clients into FMT, which helps them keep track of and maintain consistency with their cases; and in addition, it records data about program operations and services in a consistent and organized manner for FAP and ACS managers. While the reports to be generated by the tool are still under development, administrators intend to use the tool to track and monitor data at the point of intake (basic demographics and referral source), assessment (aggregate data on the needs of youth to help identify any gaps in services) and post-assessment (the services to which youth are being referred and the timeliness of service initiation).

An additional way in which ACS is attempting to ensure success of the program is through the use of performance-based contracts. All FAP-contracted providers of evidence-based services will soon be required to demonstrate a certain level of adherence to the model and level of utilization. ACS plans to withhold 10 percent of each provider's annual funding at the start of the fiscal year and then disburse those funds on a quarterly basis throughout the year if and when the provider meets or exceeds its performance requirements.

Outcomes

Since its initial implementation more than a decade ago, FAP has had a positive impact on the city's PINS system and the experience of families accessing the program:

- The program's first two years of operations contributed to an 80 percent decrease in probation intakes (a drop from 3,345 in 2002 to 697 in 2004) and a nearly 55 percent decrease in court referrals (a drop from 1,043 in 2002 to 474 in 2004). Moreover, out-of-home placements for PINS youth decreased by more than 20 percent during that time.
- Five years after the program was launched, a study conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice and based on interviews with young people and their parents with contact with FAP offices found that three months after the FAP intervention many youth showed improvement on several mental health indicators and there were improved perceptions of family functioning.

- Most recently, the program's redesign contributed to a decrease in both the percent of cases referred to court and the percent placed. From 2009 (the year preceding the redesign) to 2012, there was a 33 percent decrease in PINS petitions and a 50 percent decrease in PINS out-of-home placements; this occurred despite a 13 percent increase in referrals during that same time.

Reflections

Meet, meet, meet!: Officials acknowledge that regular meetings between agency officials and service providers were invaluable to the rollout of FAP's new program design and continue to ensure smooth service delivery, as well as foster collaboration and buy-in from contracted providers. During implementation, ACS officials met on a weekly basis with contracted providers and EBP model developers, and at present they meet monthly. These meetings help the group identify and address issues in a timely manner.

Measure outcomes from the start: The original FAP design did not allow for the tracking and monitoring of program outcomes. As a result, ACS has been unable to monitor whether youth served through FAP are avoiding further contact with juvenile justice, child welfare, and criminal justice agencies. ACS is developing a process for FAP to monitor and track these longer-term outcomes, but it is a complex and time-consuming endeavor since it requires establishing data sharing protocols across agencies. Officials feel that it would have benefited the program to create this outcome tracking infrastructure concurrent with FAP's initial development.

Collaborate with other agencies: Taken together FAP's directory of neighborhood-based services and continuum of contracted providers are capable of addressing a wide array of family needs. However, because the contracted EBPs are bound by many of the same exclusionary criteria, there are gaps in services for youth that have serious mental health, substance abuse, and/or domestic violence issues. While identifying services for these hard-to-serve populations remains a challenge for staff, FAP has made headway in this area by collaborating with the city and state health departments. Consultants from these departments have conducted trainings for FAP staff on how to work with youth that present with severe mental health and/or behavioral issues and have assisted FAP workers in identifying and linking these youth to appropriate services in the community.

Related Resources

Check out the following resources related to New York City's status offense system reform effort at <http://www.statusoffensereform.org/library>:

- A Study of New York City's Family Assessment Program
- The Family Assessment Program: Trajectories and Effects

