



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.

Onondaga County, New York

POPULATION: 468,196

YOUTH POPULATION: 103,600

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban/Suburban

The Call to Action

Onondaga County, New York, which encompasses the city of Syracuse and outlying suburbs, historically handled status offenses, known as Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS), in the courts. While diversion services, such as counseling, were available, many youth still faced court intervention after diversion efforts proved unsuccessful. After Onondaga received a grant from the state Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to partner with the Vera Institute of Justice in reforming its PINS system, county leaders realized just how much their court-based PINS system was contributing to high out-of-home placement rates of low-risk youth. As James Czarniak, director of Juvenile Justice and Detention Services for the county, explained, "We began doing larger juvenile justice reform to avoid detention and even court involvement for delinquent youth, and then we realized that kids who were skipping school faced even harsher outcomes. The system felt out of balance." The county's Juvenile Justice Steering Committee, created in 2005 in the wake of the OCFS grant, assembled a PINS subcommittee to identify system challenges and suggest improvements.

The Change Process

The PINS subcommittee first sought to foster conversation among all those who had contact with PINS-involved youth. In addition to including court officials and Department of Social Services (DSS) staff, the subcommittee recruited a law enforcement official to speak about the police department's approach to youth runaways and enlisted school officials for discussions about truancy. These discussions provided the subcommittee with important information about how stakeholders approached status offenses in their own institutions, and gave court officials an opportunity to educate all key system players about the PINS laws currently in place.

With help from Vera, the subcommittee then examined data from its existing PINS system. They discovered that PINS court intakes had been steadily increasing in recent years—from 865 in 2002 to 1036 in 2004—and that PINS cases comprised an overwhelming 92 percent of all non-secure detention intakes from 2002 to 2004. The subcommittee also examined data on referral sources. While the majority (69 percent) of countywide PINS intakes were referred by parents, the number of PINS cases referred by schools was higher in Syracuse, the county's largest school district. These findings would inform subsequent efforts to educate

parents about the PINS process and to institute school-based mechanisms for addressing truancy.

After studying their own system, Onondaga looked to other jurisdictions for inspiration. Vera provided the county with information on other New York reform efforts, including that of Orange County.

The Model

Onondaga County's reformed PINS system reduces PINS referrals and subsequent out-of-home placements in three key ways.

First, the county addresses truancy at the school level. Each school district has a dedicated truancy unit to which referrals are sent. After receiving a referral, the unit—comprised of school officials, guidance counselors, and a dedicated probation officer—convenes an in-school truancy hearing for the youth, family, and any other counselors or community members the family wishes to invite. At the hearing, the group discusses the student's case and works together to identify causes and solutions for any barriers to school attendance. After the meeting, the probation officer will check in with the student and family and, if necessary, refer the student to the juvenile probation department for more intensive diversion services. A formal court petition for truancy will be filed only if all diversion efforts fail.

Second, the county requires that any parent filing a PINS "ungovernability" petition attend a PINS orientation, in which court officials explain the process and potential outcomes for the youth and family. In addition, Onondaga County's Department of Probation educates parents about community-based services that address root causes of troubling youth behaviors. The agency recently published *What Do I Do Now?*, a parent resource guide, which identifies some of the common reasons for problematic adolescent behavior and provides contact information for community agencies that work with families in crisis. Together, these two measures have led to a drop in the number of parents needing to resort to PINS petitions to address their child's behaviors.

Third, even if a parent or school official feels that a PINS referral is truly necessary, the probation department seeks to avoid formal court involvement whenever possible. It uses the Youth Assessment Screening Instrument (YASI) tool to identify the youth or family issues that may be contributing to a child's involvement in the PINS system. The department will then refer the case for appropriate diversion services. Through partnerships with New Justice Conflict Resolution Services and other service providers, it offers not only youth-based programs—such as Project Restore, aimed at reconnecting youth with school and career preparation—but also family-based programs to diffuse family conflict and improve communication. Because it can refer youth to comprehensive services that address a whole host of PINS-related behaviors, the department is often able to provide the help needed to change youth or family dynamics without court involvement.

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

A large part of Onondaga County's success in decreasing PINS referrals lies in its consistent messaging to parents and school officials. The probation department continues to emphasize that PINS will not provide families or schools with a "quick fix" for students exhibiting troubling behavior, such as out-of-home placement or other punitive court orders. By urging families and schools to seek out-of-court services for troubled youth, the department helps to ensure that young people receive treatment far more lasting—and effective—than a court order.

The county's reform efforts have also been sustained through regular communication among local stakeholders and consistent data collection and analysis. Every two months, court officials meet with members of each school district's truancy unit, along with other community-based dropout prevention organizations, to analyze truancy data for that period and discuss upcoming truancy hearings. The probation department also produces a monthly juvenile justice report with statistics on delinquency cases and PINS referrals broken down by area, so probation officials can analyze trends and adapt their PINS approach accordingly.

These mechanisms have proved essential in ensuring the continued success of Onondaga County's efforts. For example, a recent data report revealed an uptick in PINS truancy referrals from some of the smaller school districts. Probation officials realized that although they had successfully trained the larger school districts such as Syracuse on the school-based PINS approach, they may not have focused enough on implementing school-based processes in the smaller districts. Thanks to that newfound knowledge, officials have begun to conduct more extensive training on truancy protocols within those schools.

Outcomes

These changes to Onondaga's PINS system have led to dramatic drops in the number of PINS youth placed in facilities or in non-secure detention pending a court date. (New York does not allow for youth committing status offenses to be placed in secure detention.) Some notable outcomes:

- In 2001, Onondaga County placed 24 youth out-of-the home on PINS violations. In 2012, the county placed 2. This reduction saves Onondaga more than \$2.2 million annually.
- In 2004, Onondaga County had 172 PINS admissions to non-secure detention. In 2013, the county had 52. This sustained drop in non-secure detention admissions enabled the county to reduce its 16-bed non-secure contract, which cost \$1.8 million annually, to a 3-bed contract, which costs \$340,000 annually.

- Through these savings, the county has been able to re-invest more than \$1.2 million annually in community programs and services that benefit PINS youth and youth in the juvenile delinquency system. Such programs—including comprehensive therapeutic interventions such as Functional Family Therapy (FFT) and Multisystemic Therapy (MST)—ensure that the behaviors leading to PINS involvement are adequately addressed and treated.

Reflections

Set clear goals and frame success: In conducting Onondaga’s in-school truancy hearings, county officials sought to make goals for individual student attendance as clear and concrete as possible. Too often, they realized, courts and schools issue vague directives to truant youth such as “Start attending school”—orders that are not only ambiguous but also unrealistic, if they presume 100 percent attendance from a nonattending student. As such, probation officials have encouraged in-school truancy hearing teams to develop more precise, achievable goals for the students appearing before them. Such goals may be based on improvement—i.e. a student attending 50 percent more school in a coming month—or on concrete steps, such as attending a certain number of tutoring sessions.

To find a solution, first identify the problem: Onondaga County officials were able to stimulate local buy-in for their reform movement because they were able to prove that there was a problem: they presented hard data on the high numbers of PINS petitions and subsequent placements. This information—coupled with nationwide data on the harms of formal court processing for low-risk youth—convinced school officials and community members that Onondaga needed to reform its practices.

Related Resources

Check out the following resource related to Onandaga County’s status offense system reform effort at <http://www.statusoffensereform.org/library>:

- What Do I Do Now? A Resource Guide for Parents Experiencing Problems with their Children