



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.

Gloucester Township, New Jersey

POPULATION: 64,634

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Suburban

The Call to Action

In the early 2000s, Gloucester Township, New Jersey's approach to juvenile delinquency was much like other neighboring jurisdictions: zero-tolerance school policies, suppressive police responses that most often resulted in arrest, and few alternative support programs. The Gloucester Township Police Department (GTPD) made efforts to build positive relationships with youth through in-school drug awareness programs similar to D.A.R.E. and a Society Improvement Program (SIP), which familiarizes elementary students with law enforcement and safety. However, such programs did not address the behavioral problems that many youth faced. Outside of these programs, officers were only called into schools to handle youth in the midst of crisis and, with only two detectives on the juvenile team and few resources at hand, they lacked the capacity to respond in ways other than arrest. They relied on child and family services and the court system to serve kids already in crisis and had few opportunities to properly service youth at risk of delinquency.

Officers like Harry Earle—then part of the juvenile unit—were frustrated with the limited, punitive responses available to them and identified a need for alternative programs that would help youth avoid arrest. They tested potential solutions, such as asking youth to review and complete an informational packet on the consequences of delinquency after being brought to the precinct. Ultimately, however, GTPD felt these initiatives were too small in scale and sought a more comprehensive diversion program that could serve the full scope of youth's needs.

The Change Process

When Earle became chief of police in 2010, he was determined to improve police responses to crime in the community. His vision included taking an overall community policing approach and establishing police-accessible diversion programming for youth at risk of already engaging in delinquent behaviors. He developed the Community Relations Bureau (CRB), a unit specifically aimed at building ties with and offering support to the community. Though CRB began as a small team, they worked with officers outside of their unit to change the department's overall mindset and culture.

While community policing discussions developed, Chief Earle also partnered with a social worker and former teacher, Michelle Selfridge, who was well-connected with local social services to help develop services for at-risk youth. With strong backing from Mayor David Mayer, Earle and Selfridge began collaborating with school superintendents and

leaders of the Juvenile Unit of the Camden County Prosecutor's Office to map out a network of community-based responses to kids in trouble.

The Model

Today, community policing underlies all GTPD policies and action, including its community-wide collaborative response to youth violence and crime. Officers are encouraged to understand and address the social disorder and risk factors that fuel crime. At the core of this effort is the Gloucester Township Violence in Society Initiative Operational Network (GT VISION) program, which provides officers with resources to divert youth away from arrest and towards appropriate community services. Youth that come into contact with police are often referred to or dropped off at a Family Resource Center (FRC), which serves as a hub for the web of GT VISION programs. At FRC, a social worker assesses youth and family needs and connects them to services—including FRC programs (such as youth and family counseling and youth peer support groups) or referrals to a list of community partners. Officers also have the option of diverting at-risk youth to age-appropriate educational programs that inform them about the potential consequences of crime and system involvement.

Communication and collaboration between agencies and stakeholders is an important component to GT VISION. Each week, members of the GTPD Juvenile Unit, the Community Relations Bureau Commander, DARE Officers, the Operations Commander, and the Investigation Bureau Commander meet for the "Juvenile Unit (JU) Huddle," where they discuss and share information about youth and all known contacts with police. After reviewing each individual case, the team refers the case to the appropriate officer and notifies school principals of the arrest, so that in-school services can be provided as needed. GTPD also holds a regular roundtable discussion within the agency for officers and front-line supervisors to discuss and plan the Township's strategies for addressing prescription drug abuse and related crimes.

GTPD also identifies and intervenes in harmful home environments through its runaway and domestic violence initiatives. Both programs emphasize early detection of high-risk factors through careful screening at first contact with police. Through Project MARRS (Missing At Risk Response Strategies), all GTPD officers receive ongoing training on how to respond to and manage a missing person incident. Chief Earle and his team developed a set of tools that officers use to better understand and record a runaway youth's history with law enforcement and the level of safety, violence, and drug abuse within the home. Domestic violence cases are handled by specially-trained "domestic violence detectives" who prioritize providing services to children who may have witnessed abuse in the home. They work closely with Juvenile and Family Services Unit to review the family's needs and connect them to community services.

Reform Successes

Beyond the numbers, GTPD's community policing platform and GT VISION initiatives have transformed the role of officers, so that they may provide support and partnership rather than punishment. Officers are now trained to better understand and address the risk factors underlying status offenses and delinquency. They work closely with schools and community service providers to connect youth and families to resources rather than sending them to court. Since the implementation of GT VISION programs in 2010, recidivism rates for first time youth offenders has dropped by approximately 25 percent.

GTPD's work with runaway youth through Project MARRS has been particularly successful. Before program implementation, GTPD research determined that more than 90 percent of runaway youth—many of whom were determined to have some form of dysfunction, such as domestic violence, within the home—have had multiple missing person incidents. Now, runaway youth that come into contact with police are connected to support services, and Gloucester Township has seen a 30 percent decline in the number of juvenile missing persons reports between 2009 and 2013.

Reflections

If necessary, start out small: Reform discussions in Gloucester Township began with a few juvenile unit officers who wanted to develop alternative programs and tried to do so by developing informational packets used to divert youth brought to the precinct. While small, the program had immediate and visible results that later motivated Chief Earle's department-wide efforts and grew into a community-wide response.

Get police buy-in: Gloucester Township's successful police diversion programs were driven from within the police department, led by the department's chief, and based on a community policing platform. Chief Earle asserts that police buy-in is essential to developing and implementing effective reforms at the precinct-level, and securing that buy-in may take time and effort from within law enforcement. Even with the chief's backing, the Community Relations Bureau and GTPD leadership were strategic about expanding the community policing and police diversion discussions and culture.

Monitor program performance: The various stakeholders in Gloucester Township—including law enforcement, schools, courts, and community members—all affirm that GT VISION programs have positively altered the outcomes of at-risk or delinquent youth and their families. Chief Earle and GTPD have worked hard with community agencies and service providers to constantly reexamine, improve, and expand services. Many neighboring jurisdictions looking to make similar reforms have turned to GTPD for model programs and technical support. Yet, despite GTPD's confidence in the program's impact, a lack of program evaluation and data has made it difficult to assess and provide hard evidence of program benefits.