



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.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

POPULATION: 107,239

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Suburban

The Call to Action

Before police commissioner Robert Haas's arrival in 2007, the Cambridge Police Department (CPD) did not have a specialized juvenile unit or the resources to provide officers with effective options to respond to youth crime and misbehavior. Although the department did have school resource officers, they were not involved in the school's day-to-day activities or issues, and they were unable to flag and address early signs of students' needs. When youth came into contact with police, officers' only options were to send them away or to arrest them—either ignoring their underlying issues or escalating low-level and status offenses.

The Change Process

Once Haas became Cambridge police commissioner, he created a Youth and Family Services Unit. He invited leaders from Cambridge Public Schools the Department of Human Services (DHSP), the Cambridge Health Alliance, and local organizations to help select ideal candidates from within CPD. The team looked for juvenile detectives and new "youth resources officers" (YROs) that demonstrated a commitment to serving youth, an understanding of behavioral issues, and accepted the high levels of paperwork required to document youth plans and progress.

While creating the unit, the hiring group realized they needed more cross-agency collaborations. They continued holding regular meetings to discuss their shared experiences with youth in trouble. Over the next few years, the "Safety Net" meetings increased to twice a month and led to the development of a collaborative network of support services to which the new juvenile police unit could direct youth and families. James Barrett, a psychologist with the Cambridge Health Alliance, took a lead role in coordinating and finding ways to fund Safety Net services.

Beyond system development, the Safety Net team capitalized on the stakeholder expertise at the table to review and address individual youth cases. They developed created a "release of information" form that gave officers parental consent to share case information at Safety Net meetings. Now, the team could develop comprehensive and individualized service plans that could be met with an effective web of services and resources.

By 2012, Safety Net's success gained state and city support and, through a cost-sharing agreement with the police department, it garnered enough funding to increase Barrett's involvement and expand the program's capacity.

The Model

In addition to providing diversion services for youth in trouble, today's Safety Net program provides preventative services for youth in school who display concerning behavioral patterns. Safety Net has four primary components: the stakeholder team to which cases are directed for service planning, juvenile detectives that handle cases of youth engaged in "potentially criminal incident or behavior," YROs that lead early interventions for students, and the network of services that holistically address youth's needs. Safety Net also collaborates with various youth centers across Cambridge to coordinate local services and connect Safety Net staff and officers to community members.

The program relies on law enforcement's discretionary power to divert youth to Safety Net rather than to arrest and direct them towards court involvement. Officers, schools, youth center staff, parents, or mental health professionals can refer cases to the program. (Courts do not yet use Safety Net for diversion.) The stakeholder team reviews all cases and assigns them to either an SRO or detective—based on whether it is a police diversion or intervention case. A CPD social worker accompanies the assigned officer to make an initial home visit, where they 1) obtain information sharing consent, 2) interview the youth and family, and 3) conduct a risk/needs assessment. The Safety Net team uses this information to develop a service plan that is supervised by the assigned officer. In intervention cases, the YRO actually serves as the primary case manager who provides support and guidance throughout the service plan—taking on a highly involved role that is unlike typical school resource officer models.

Reform Successes

Under Commissioner Haas's leadership and with the guidance of partners such as the Cambridge Health Alliance, Cambridge's juvenile detectives and YROs better understand youth needs and risk factors; they believe that arrest should be avoided when possible. Safety Net allows just that, by ensuring that youth will be connected to effective services. Since the Safety Net program began in 2007, Cambridge has seen a 27 percent decline in youth arrests—from 54 arrests in 2007 to only 15 in 2015.

Beyond numbers, Cambridge now benefits from improved trust and collaboration between the community, law enforcement, schools, and community service providers. Safety Net and Haas's changes to the police department have altered the way students, teachers, and families view law enforcement and youth now have supportive and trusting experiences with school officers rather than associating them with punishment and negative consequences.

Reflections

Get everyone on the same page: Because schools were hesitant about increasing the presence of uniformed officers on campus, it was important for Barrett and other Safety Net members to reach out to individual school leaders and faculty to explain the principles and benefits of the new YRO role. Once schools understood the new approach, they were more willing to incorporate officers in

daily programming, allowing students, teachers, and families to become comfortable with the new officers.

Set up information sharing capabilities to support collaboration: The parental “release of information” form was vital to Safety Net’s ability to discuss and take on youth cases. However, Safety Net also worked closely with schools to develop information-sharing agreements that would the team access to school records to fully understand youth cases and inform academic and school-based plans.

Equip officers with the information and skills to succeed in their new role: According to Haas, shifting from the traditional police role to that of a supportive case manager can be “like learning a new language” for officers. To support this development, the Safety Net thoroughly trains officers and provides ongoing support and consultations. Officers review their caseloads with Cambridge Health Alliance counselors to gain insight into youth and family behaviors and needs. While there may be a steep learning curve in adjusting to the new role, officers are encouraged once they see how the program improves their work and the positive impacts on youth and families.

Communicate and build trust with families: Safety Net relies on families’ willingness to share their information and participate in services, but families are often rightfully hesitant to voluntarily become involved with police and legal systems. The program works with schools, youth centers, and community service providers to reach out to families and communicate Safety Net and officers’ *supportive intentions*.



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