

Risk Assessment Instrument Begins to Show Results

It's a bit quieter at the Juvenile Detention Center these days.

The reason: fewer detainees.

In January and February of 2006 and 2007, on any given day there were an average of 83 juveniles at the center. In that same period this year, the average daily population was about 59 young people—a drop of almost 30 percent.

The most likely reason is the hard work of the members of JDAI, including the team that put together the new Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI), which was implemented on January 2, 2008.

The RAI is an objective tool to help determine which juveniles really belong in detention, and which do not. This is critical, because juvenile detention has been shown to have negative impact on young people.

The screening tool is applied when a juvenile is brought into the Juvenile Detention Center. It examines a number of factors including, current offense(s), prior offense history, failures to appear before court history, and aggravating/mitigating factors. Each of these is assigned a point value, which determines an overall score. This score identifies two risks:

- Public safety risk—the risk that the juvenile will commit another offense prior to adjudication and disposition of the case.

- FTA risk—the risk that the juvenile will fail to appear in court after release (called “FTA”). This risk is also sometimes referred to as “flight risk.”

Based on the score, a juvenile is either released to the custody of parents or other adult, placed into an alternative to detention, or into the Juvenile Detention Center.

The RAI was crafted by a cross-disciplinary team that included representatives from Saint Paul and suburban Ramsey County police, the Juvenile Detention Center, the Courts, Ramsey County Attorney's Office, Ramsey County Public Defender's Office, Ramsey County Mental Health Services, Ramsey County Human Services, Juvenile Probation, and the schools, among others.

RAIs are a key part of Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiatives (JDAI) across the country. These initiatives, funded by Annie E. Casey Foundation, help local systems change the way they work with juvenile offenders. RAIs are locally designed, and they vary in scope and format from site to site.

A cross-disciplinary team

Juvenile Detention Center Superintendent Steve Poynter chaired the committee that developed the Ramsey County RAI. “Representation from all areas of the

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Commissioner Carter: “Every Interaction Is an Opportunity.”

Ramsey County Commissioner Toni Carter believes JDAI is “one of the most important things Ramsey County could do.”



Commissioner Toni Carter

“We’ve now amassed a lot of information about young people and crime,” says Carter. “And amongst all the predictors of a life of crime, the greatest is whether a person has spent a day in juvenile detention.”

Research by Annie E. Casey Foundation (sponsor of JDAI) and others has shown that alternatives to juvenile detention make a lot of sense for young people and for the community as a whole.

“If we are looking to improve public safety, we want to make certain that we make the best judgment about who should and who should not be in detention—especially since detention is a predictor of participation in future crime. So to increase public safety, we want to be very careful not to put kids in detention who don’t need to be there.”

Carter praises the work of JDAI and of the committee that created the Risk Assessment Instrument, or RAI. “I’m really thrilled that we have the RAI in place. We are working very hard with the police, the community, the public defenders, and the schools to be sure that we are doing the best we can to protect the public safety—by ensuring the best outcomes for our young people.”

Every time we interact with a young person, we have an opportunity, says Carter. “This new approach gives us an opportunity to use our interaction to best influence their lives in the future. We analyze not just what the juvenile has done. We look at the best way to get them moving on a positive trajectory.”

Risk Assessment Benefits Juveniles

Perhaps the worst thing you can do for an impressionable (and scared) young person who has made a mistake is sit him or her down next to someone who has made a career of such mistakes.

Yet that's exactly what we've been doing for years in our Juvenile Detention Center (JDC).

Molly Bruner knows. Currently a Planning Specialist with Ramsey County Corrections, she spent quite a bit of time as a Community Corrections Worker at the JDC. Bruner also has served on the committee developing the Risk Assessment Instrument (RAI), and innovative new tool for corrections workers.

Juveniles get picked up by police for all kinds of reasons. Some may have been in trouble at school. Some may be caught in the process of a property offense, such as tagging with graffiti. A few may be involved in episodes of violence.

Until this January, juveniles at the JDC who arrived with new offenses went through the same process, regardless of the public safety risk they presented. "Juveniles would be brought into the JDC," explains Bruner. "There, they would be

searched. First a pat down, followed by a metal detector screening, and finally an unclothed search. They would shower and dress in JDC-issued clothing." Then they would be put into a unit with 12 to 16 other youths, grouped by gender and age.

On the unit, they would wait for a court hearing, held within 36 hours. At the hearing, the next step for the young person would be determined. That step might be release pending trial, or it might be more detention pending further court hearings.

The result of all this is that on average, a juvenile stayed in detention five days. During this time, they received some educational, gym, and other programming. But basically, time spent in detention is time spent falling behind on educational and community commitments, and time out of work if the youth was employed. This sets the young person up for more failures.

"Ultimately, risk assessment helps ensure that we are holding kids for the right reason."

— Molly Bruner, Planning Specialist, Ramsey County Corrections

Bruner notes that under this system, juveniles with very

minor offenses might be grouped with "some real heavy hitters. I remember a first-time offender in JDC who was about 12 years old. I found an older kid trying to recruit him—telling him how to get drugs, where to get guns. As staff, we tried to monitor this, but you can't catch everything when there are 12-16 kids on a unit—there are just too many conversations going on at a time."

With the new Risk Assessment Instrument, things are changing. "Let's look at that same 12-year-old—a kid who has never been in trouble before," says Bruner. "The kid comes into JDC. They are still put through the search process. But instead of dressing in JDC clothing and going into a detention unit, they get their clothes back and go to an assessment unit." There, a specially trained person administers the Risk Assessment Instrument.

"It's very objective," states Bruner. "We don't have to ask them too many questions to score the RAI. We find out about their health, whether there is a risk of suicide. Through the use of Ramsey County databases, staff scores the assessment objectively to determine risk of recidivism and failing to appear at court."

With the RAI, the 12-year-old would quickly be returned to his parents, explains Bruner. He would not be sitting in detention



Molly Bruner

with a person set on teaching him the wrong way to live.

Research shows that the more a youth is exposed to juvenile corrections, the more likely s/he will to stay in the system. So keeping low risk youth away from detention makes sense. Bruner notes that other cities that have implemented JDAI have shown a decrease in detention with the use of risk assessment tools while maintaining public safety. There's also some evidence of decreases in recidivism for youth diverted to alternatives –to-detention that keep youth in their communities.

Keeping a kid out of JDC also saves money, says Bruner. "Those resources can be put to use elsewhere—for example, in neighborhood programs that keep kids busy and out of trouble."

"But ultimately, the RAI helps ensure that we are holding kids for the right reason."

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juvenile justice system is the strength of this process,” he says. “We had knowledgeable professionals who represented their agency very well at the table. We had interesting and difficult conversations where a great deal of listening and learning about each other’s role took place. This resulted in increased trust and empathy for the roles and jobs of each agency that interacts with our juveniles.”

Over a 20-month process, this team looked at the various roles of each of their agencies. They debated and they listened. They studied RAIs developed by other communities and visited other Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiatives. Notes Poynter, “Our visit to Cook County, Illinois, convinced me that the RAI would work. I thought, ‘they’re so big, and they’ve had this in place for some time. If they can do it in their complex system, we can surely do it in Ramsey County.’”

In Cook County, the RAI successfully reduced the detention population. Furthermore, says Poynter, Cook County put in place a number of alternatives to detention, such as evening reporting centers. Juveniles are picked up at their home and transported to centers for programming and supervision. Ramsey County plans similar types of alternatives as the initiative unfolds.

Increasing objectivity, reducing disparity

A benefit of using the RAI is that it reduces the subjective decisions about who goes to detention. Says Poynter, “The instrument is designed to be objective. When making such an important decision about a child’s life, it is our responsibility to be as fair and as objective as possible.

The RAI committee is just now getting the first data from use of the

new instrument. As more information comes in, the committee will be asking questions to improve the RAI. The committee will ask, Do we need a different format? Do we need other data? How do we want to periodically review this so that we are always using it the same way?

One hoped-for outcome to the RAI process is good data to address disproportionate minority contact in Ramsey County. About 80 percent of youth in Ramsey County detention are people of color, as compared to 41% of the total population of youth in the county. “The data we gather from the RAI will help guide our work in the area of disparity and look closely at this in terms of kids of color,” says Poynter.

Changing the system

The lengthy meetings to develop the RAI did more than produce an assessment instrument. They set in motion changes across the agencies that interact with young people.

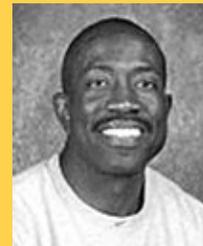
The hard work has been worth it, says Poynter. “I can’t say enough about the people who have helped create the Ramsey County RAI. This essentially became a second job for everyone on the team.”

The collaborative RAI development process is a first for Poynter. “It’s the first time in my 32 years that I’ve seen this much collaboration and representation. This work is sustaining—it’s going to be around for a while. This is really about systems change. It’s about reform. We needed it. That’s why I’m involved in it. That’s why I feel good about it. I really hope people understand and appreciate how much work the members of this committee have done. They have contributed a great deal—all to benefit our kids.”

Voices...speaking out

Police officers, detention counselors, probation officers, victims, and juveniles: These are the voices of those on the frontline of juvenile justice and detention. Each newsletter we feature one of their voices. This is the voice of Lucky Rosenbloom, a Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) Staff member and Social Studies Teacher. Special thanks to Mr. Rosenbloom for this contribution.

Young people sometimes make foolish mistakes. When their mistakes put them into juvenile detention, they miss five to ten days of school. They fall behind. They perceive there is no return. Further criminal activity and involvement with more serious offenders seem acceptable because they’ve been removed from their positive peers in school and local recreation centers. So, when a minor offense results in lock-up, it causes major problems for that child.



Lucky Rosenbloom

As a social studies teacher in public and charter schools and as detention staff at JDC, this disturbs me. A good youth that made a stupid choice winds up in detention and shifts, sometimes into a sense of helplessness that result in worse behaviors.

JDAI is not about protecting hardened criminals, and is not a message to law-abiding citizens that juveniles who commit crimes are more important or have more rights than law-abiding victims. JDAI is about preventing lower level offenders from becoming more serious offenders. This is where the JDAI can best serve our community. Compassion must be shown toward of our young people in trouble.



RAI cross disciplinary team meeting

As a social worker for the past 24 years I watched as we have over built the strong arm of our law in response to drugs and violence in our cities. I can understand the fear that drove us here. I have looked in the eyes of children and adults who feel they need a drug as much or more than they need love, opportunity and hope. I have sat with children armed with guns. I have spoken to children on the run, fearful that the lack of place and meaning they feel at home somehow makes all the risks they take on the street worthwhile. This should scare us. We are losing these children and all their potential worth.

I worry our addiction to punishment has blinded our ability to find real solutions to the public health crisis that this is. Institutionalization is not our answer. Our need to control and punish appears only to lead to further institutionalization, at high cost to us in terms of public dollars and human lives.

When I came to social work through the door of art therapy I was young and had two faint ideas guiding me towards this profession:

- 1) I had a faith that self expression was a part of our human journey to healing and self discovery;
- 2) The field of social work taught child development and I had a knowledge that no other work would mean more to me than the opportunity to one day be a parent. I was never disappointed in the content of my profession. It is rich in the essence of what it takes to raise

healthy children in a complex world of choices, opportunities and risks.

What has been disappointing to witness has been the real disparity in how we use this professional knowledge with different segments of our community. Children of color make up a vastly disproportionate segment of incarcerated and institutionalized youth. We know now with research that this is not rehabilitation but rather a pipeline to prison. Our urgency to interrupt this has to be heard and to be felt if we are going to find the urgent solutions that we need.

In the past we viewed parenting as if on a continuum between leniency and punishment. What we have learned is that neither end of that range offers the reality of what children need. To thrive in this culture of infinite choices and risks we must all develop complex internal realities capable of seeing vision, following dreams, developing patience and perseverance and making difficult decisions. This requires a sophisticated parenting that finds a lovely balance between support and inspiration on one hand and safety and accountability on the other.

Neither leniency nor punishment has proven to produce good outcomes.

And yet as a society we consistently deliver punishment as a response to our child development issues. We have over built our institutions of control and we have underdeveloped our public skill to hold children accountable in the context of relationships that demonstrate hope and support for their future.

It is important also that we see our current policy and practice through a historical lens. Our children certainly do. Data shows that African American, American Indian and Latino children are in our criminal justice system at the most disproportionate rates and receiving our most limited and restrictive sanctions. These are children who have to reconcile a painful and violent history in our country and have the least faith in our hope for their future. We consistently give them our strongest arm and weakest support. This picture should not make sense to us; it is a recipe for disaster.

The solution is within our reach and our JDAI/DMC work can show us the way:

- We need to engage all our children currently in the system in a wake up call to ensure they know they have a calling and a purpose as gifted, free, healthy, contributing members of our community.
- We need to be certain our criteria for bringing children into the system or for sanctioning those already in are completely objective.
- We need to examine every decision point in our juvenile justice system for bias that puts children of color at disadvantage.
- We need to consciously and aggressively seek the voice and genius of those segments of our community who fear our system most, our African American, American Indian, Hmong, Latino and recent

immigrant communities for they must be true partners in shaping a system they experience as just. They also bring unique world views to the table that will inform our responses to the challenges we find most baffling.

- We need to prepare and orient these segments of the community to be full partners at the table.
- We need to balance the role of law enforcement in our communities with a probation system that is not driven to sanction but rather driven by child development and family development approaches to their work. We can put high level social work supervision in our probation offices.
- We need to inspire our partners in community based organizations to build "with" the communities they serve not "for" them.
- We need to draw on the practices of restorative justice in our families, at all levels of the system and within our schools to find constructive responses to challenging behavior.
- We need our JDAI/DMC work to be contagious. Let's do the difficult work to reflect on the decisions within our reach that are adding to the problem not constructing the solution. Then we can hold this progress up as examples for families, schools, business and all other segments of our community to inspire their own self reflection and action.