



Data Informed Decision-Making in Juvenile Justice

What is Data and Why is it Important?

Data can be any information collected by the court, probation, and other juvenile justice providers using different measures, tools, and assessments. There are many ways data can be collected in the juvenile justice system. For example, staff often collect considerable amounts of information about a youth during intake. Intake data may include data such as the youth’s age and race, number of previous contacts with the courts, number of days they have been in placement, or score on a trauma assessment.

Juvenile justice professionals use data every day to make individualized decisions for the youth in their caseloads. They may use that data to determine things like what treatment program would best fit the youth’s needs and whether a diversion program may be effective. Data can be collected across the entire court system to inform decision-making processes for families and the community served by the court. In turn, this can improve the effectiveness of the court and its services, while providing better outcomes for youth it serves.

Answering Key Questions with Data

Quality data can be used to answer a variety of critical questions within the juvenile justice system. Juvenile justice professionals should first identify which types of questions they would like to answer. This will allow them to determine if they have already collected data that can be leveraged to answer their questions or whether they need to begin collecting additional data.

Types of Questions The Juvenile Justice System Can Answer Using Data

Who are we serving right now?	How have we changed over time?	How are families being affected by us?
Collecting data about cases and the individuals involved will allow providers to better understand the population they are serving. For example, they can collect demographic information such as race, gender, and age which can tell them more about the specific people coming into the court system. They can also collect data about the case specifics including offense information, history of offending, representation, time spent detained, and services being provided to better understand trends within their courts, the types of cases coming in, and what type of support they are providing.	Systems can assess trends and changes in their work using the data they collect. One way to do this would be to examine demographic and case data to determine how the population they serve has changed over time. Courts can also assess their effectiveness by looking at how their decision-making during two points in the process relate to youth outcomes.	Beyond assessing basic outcomes, providers may be interested in better understanding how youth are affected by the justice process itself. Providers may gather this type of information through questionnaires or interviews with the youth being served. They may consider asking how the court could have better supported them. They may also ask if the youth felt the decisions made for them were fair? While these are just some examples, this type of questioning can help a provider understand their effect on youth and consider how to better improve the juvenile justice process.

Asking questions like these can help juvenile justice professionals ensure they are continuously improving and achieving better outcomes for the youth and families they interact with.

Quality Data and Decision-Making

When it comes to answering questions, the analysis and findings will only be as good as the data collected. For that reason, collecting quality data should be prioritized by the juvenile justice system. Most courts and probation are documenting and collecting a variety of data about youth and their cases through case tracking information systems. This type of data is particularly useful for completing reports that share information about the number of referrals to the court, demographic data about the youth being served, and general case outcomes. Juvenile justice professionals may also access publicly available data (e.g., [Statistical Briefing Book](#)) to see how they compare to other similar jurisdictions.

Jurisdictions should also consider collecting data through performance measures to assess their productivity, effectiveness, quality, and timeliness. There are resources available to help guide juvenile justice professionals in how to adequately measure performance using quality measures. One example of this is the [Fundamental Measures for Juvenile Justice](#).

Quality measures on performance data should be used to identify areas of strengths that should continue to be sustained and supported within the juvenile justice system. They can also use this information to determine which practices need to be adapted or changed to ensure better outcomes for the youth being served. Leveraging existing data and improving data collection measures will allow jurisdictions to assess new strategies and make informed decisions for continuous improvement.

Data insights can help jurisdictions run in a more cost-effective manner, use resources more efficiently, and provide quality services and resources to youth that can contribute to their desistance of future offending and contact with the justice system.

Real World Example

In September 2017, IOYouth (Improving Outcomes for Youth: A Statewide Juvenile Justice Initiative) was created by the National Reentry Resource Center (NRRRC) and The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to look at “Nevada’s Statewide Approach to Reducing Recidivism and Improving Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System.” In this initiative, the agencies took an extensive look at Nevada’s juvenile justice system using data informed assessment. They examined three different areas: (1) trends in the state and local juvenile justice systems, (2) the management, tracking, and evaluation of juvenile justice system performance and youth outcomes, and (3) the supervision and services provided to youth on probation, in facilities, and on parole. Their analysis yielded key findings and recommendations that can be used by the state to improve its current practices. Although this example is on a state-wide scale, smaller jurisdictions could engage in similar assessments of their own trends, performance, and outcomes to develop a strategic plan for improvement that may include policy and practice changes.

For more information on the IOYouth project see [here](#).

Additional Resources

- [5 Ways Juvenile Court Judges Can Use Data](#)- OJJDP and NCJFCJ
- [Data Driven Decision Making for Courts](#)- National Center for State Courts
- [Nevada’s Statewide Approach to Reducing Recidivism and Improving Outcomes for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System](#)- National Reentry Resource Center and The Council of State Governments
- [Juvenile Justice Model Data Project](#)- OJJDP and NCJFCJ

We are eager to hear from you! Contact us to learn more about how the Nevada Center for Juvenile Justice Innovation (NCJJI) can help you. Feel free to share this email with your colleagues and other juvenile justice stakeholders in Nevada. If you would like to add your email to our distribution list, contact Kristan Russell at krussell@ncjfcj.org.

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