

Initial Impact of Juvenile Assessment Center on Youth Pretrial Detention

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Abstract: This study examines the impact of the opening of a juvenile assessment center to assess and divert youth from further penetration of the juvenile justice system. Particularly, it examines the impact on the number and type of youth placed in pre-trial detention in a local juvenile detention home. Results indicate that youth processed through the local juvenile assessment center were significantly less likely to be placed into detention than youth not processed through the assessment center. Implications of this study and further research is discussed.

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The juvenile justice system is driven by two main goals: protecting public safety and the welfare and rehabilitation of young offenders who break the law. It must balance these interests, while preserving the rights of juveniles. Recent research on the effectiveness of diversion programs in meeting both of these goals has generated renewed interest in diversion programming for youth. These diversion programs are designed to limit youth penetration into the juvenile justice system by providing community-based interventions.

History of Diversion and Best Practices

The practice of diverting youth from the juvenile justice system has a long history in America. A landmark moment in juvenile justice reform was the 1967 President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice report and recommendations which included

alternatives for at-risk outside to be provided outside of the juvenile justice system (Models for Change Juvenile Diversion Workgroup, 2011). However, by the 1980s, advocates of a new get-tough focus challenged what they saw as leniency towards youth crime. As such, delinquency was viewed through a crime control policy lens, and it was argued that juvenile delinquency were a consequence of general permissiveness and the absence of a sufficiently punitive response (Butts & Mears, 2001; Feld, 1999). The crime control agenda had brought about an unprecedented increase in the incarceration of juvenile offenders (Irwin & Austin, 1994).

Twenty-first century research on diversion effectiveness has shifted public policy and programming toward prevention and diversion from youth becoming entangled in the juvenile justice system (Petrosino 2010; Lipsey, et. al., 2010; Dembo et. al., 2005a). This shift has focused on the extent to which communities increase their capacity to respond to crime and conflict and proposes a broader framework that replaces punishment and treatment as the primary currency of intervention. Further, practitioners and policy makers are calling for diversions that provide evidence based programs; reduce recidivism, reduce costs, and limit juvenile justice system intervention when appropriate. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008, Models for Change Juvenile Diversion Workgroup, 2011). These efforts have resulted in declining juvenile crime rate, revised juvenile justice policies, and a rebalancing approach to juvenile crime and delinquency. The result being a permanent reduction in crime rates of youth (Butts & Mears, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

Restorative justice is an alternative framework for justice system intervention, replacing or counterbalancing retributive justice. Whereas retributive justice ensures that each offender suffers a punishment in proportion to the harm inflicted on the victim of the offense, restorative justice provides a means for each offender to restore that harm or at least to compensate the victim even if the victim is only the general community. There are several programs and interventions that could be called part of the restorative justice movement. The number of these programs increased sharply during the 1990s, and research suggests that they may offer an effective alternative to traditional court processing for young offenders (Bazemore & Umbreit, 1995, 2001; McGarrell, Olivares, Crawford, & Kroovand, 2000).

Local Implementation of a Juvenile Diversion Program

In August 2013, Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office opened the Lafayette Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC), a centralized location to identify and meet the needs of youth and their families in order to reduce juvenile entanglement in the criminal justice system. The JAC opened with input from key criminal justice agencies through a task force. Since then, collaborative relationships have solidified with Lafayette Public School System (provides

personnel to share educational information on youth), Lafayette Consolidated Government (provides 50% of funds to maintain the JAC), and the District Attorney's Office (directs procedures for diverting youth).

In 2014, the JAC operated Monday through Friday from 7:00am to 7:00pm. All youth who were taken into law enforcement custody during JAC operating hours were processed through the JAC. When the JAC was closed, law enforcement officers could release the youth to their parent or legal guardian or transport them to the Lafayette Juvenile Detention Home (JDH). The JDH is a secure custody site for pretrial youth detention and youth awaiting transfer to Louisiana Office of Juvenile Justice custody.

All youth processed through the JAC undergo an assessment process as well as a consultative meeting with the youth, the youth's family and a case worker. Upon arrival, youth complete the Juvenile Inventory for Functioning (JIFF) and background information is collected (e.g., identification, school records, criminal records). Based upon results of this information, additional assessments may be conducted including Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument (MAYSI-2), Substance Abuse Subtle Screening Instrument (SASSI) and/or a drug screening.

This information is then reviewed by a licensed social worker, and their eligibility for diversion programming is determined according to a matrix. If eligible for diversion, a meeting with the youth's parents or legal guardian is scheduled. At the meeting, the youth is offered diversion and is enrolled in recommended programming if parents agree. If the parents or youth decline diversion, the youth is released into parent custody and the charges are forward to the District Attorney's Office for review for prosecution. If the matrix indicates that detention is necessary, the sheriff's office transports the youth to the JDH and key information is shared with them.

Purpose of Study

Criminal justice stakeholders including the Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office, Lafayette Consolidated Government and the 15th Judicial District Court expressed interest in determining the effectiveness of the JAC. Using an action research framework, the Lafayette Parish Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee along with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Picard Center collaborated on a series of studies to determine the impact of the JAC on the local juvenile justice system. Actions research is data collection and situated within the context of implementation and is typically completed by individuals affiliated with the implementation (Rigsby, 2005). While action research has become more widely used in some social sciences, there is less research applying its principles and methods to criminal justice. In the past few years, this research framework has begun to be used with more frequency. The general purpose of this study is to determine the impact of the JAC on youth placed in secure custody at the JDH.

Methodology

Through action research principles, a research design to study the impact of the JAC on the juvenile justice system was prepared and vetted, and the methodology including data collection and analysis is detailed below.

Research Questions

As stated earlier, the main research question is: What is the impact of the Lafayette Juvenile Assessment Center on justice-involved youth? Specific questions to be answered in this study are:

1. How are justice-involved youth processed by local law enforcement officers?
2. What is the impact of the JAC on the number of youth placed in pre-trial detention at JDH?
3. What is the impact of the JAC on the number of youth enrolled in pre-trial diversion?
4. What type of offenses are youth charged with, separated by youth enrolled in diversion and youth placed into detention?

Population and Sample Description

For this study on the impact of the JAC on youth placed in secure custody at JDH, the population and sample are all youth with contact with a local law enforcement agency within Lafayette parish (county) in 2014. The contact would result in either a summons with custodial release, transport to the JAC or transport to the JDH. Youth is defined as any individual under the age of 18 years. All youth meeting this criteria were included in the sample with the exception of youth who transported to a medical facility or Lafayette Parish Correctional Center (jail). This was less than 1% of the youth in this study.

Data collection

Staff at the JAC collected information on all youth with local law enforcement contact whether it results in a summons with custodial release, transport to JAC or transport to JDH. This information is entered into Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office data system referred to as "The Module". This information is also entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Information collected includes, but is not limited to, demographic information, current charge information, school records, and results of JAC assessment and pre-trial disposition (i.e., whether youth is placed in diversion, detention or regular juvenile justice court proceedings).

Staff at JDH also collected similar information on all youth placed in secure custody at JDH. This information is collected in various Microsoft Excel Spreadsheets. Some of these

spreadsheets are used for internal record keeping and some are used for reporting to various government agencies such as Department of Child and Family Services, Office of Juvenile Justice and Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement.

To prepare for data analysis, the researcher gathered the pertinent spreadsheets from both JAC and JDH through secure file transfer. The following steps were taken to clean the data.

1. JAC spreadsheets were reviewed for missing, incomplete or conflicting information on key data points. The key data were: name, date of birth, age, race, gender, current charges, previously adjudicated, date of arrest, and pretrial disposition (diversion, detention, court proceeding). An attempt was made to locate missing and incomplete information as well as resolve any conflicting data. If this attempt was unsuccessful, the record was removed from the sample. Youth transported to a medical facility or jail were removed from the sample.
2. JDH spreadsheets were reviewed for missing, incomplete or conflicting information on key data points. The key data were: name, date of birth, age, race, gender, current charges, date of arrest, date of entry into JDH, and date of release from JDH. An attempt was made to locate missing and incomplete information as well as resolve any conflicting data. If this attempt was unsuccessful, the record was removed from the sample. Youth in JDH from an out of parish placement were removed from the sample.
3. The JAC and JDH spreadsheet were matched on youth placed in secure custody at JDH by name, date of birth, date of arrest and current charge. An attempt was made to locate missing and incomplete information as well as resolve any conflicting data. If this attempt was unsuccessful, the record was removed from the sample.

Analytic Strategy

In order to answer the research questions, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were completed by researchers. Once the final sample was created, descriptive statistical analysis was completed to answer the research questions. Inferential statistics were also completed on this data. Two-tailed t-tests were completed on the pretrial disposition data to determine if variances in referrals to JDH was statistically significant.

Results

How are justice-involved youth processed by local law enforcement officers?

Lafayette Parish had 947 juvenile contacts with law enforcement in 2014. 63% (n=594) of these youth were processed through the JAC. It is important to note that the JAC is only

open Monday through Friday from 7am to 7pm. When the JAC is closed or otherwise not available, law enforcement officer can either release the youth into the custody of their parent or legal guardian (i.e., custodial release) or send them to the JDH. In 2014, 159 youth were custodially released and 194 were sent to JDH outside of JAC operating hours.

Youth processed through the JAC undergo a booking process (photo taken and fingerprinted), complete multiple screening assessments, and meet with an officer and parent or legal guardian to review results and any diversion options. In 2014, 332 of the 594 youth processed through JAC accepted diversion and were enrolled in appropriate services. 99 youth declined diversion and had their charges sent to the District Attorney's office for juvenile court processing. 143 youth were sent to JDH after JAC processing. Figure 1 below illustrates the processing of juvenile who have contact with the juvenile justice system.

What is the impact of the JAC on the number of youth placed in pre-trial detention at JDH?

Data analysis of youth not processed through the JAC indicates youth were sent to JDH 55% of the time in 2014. However, youth processed through the JAC were sent to JDH only

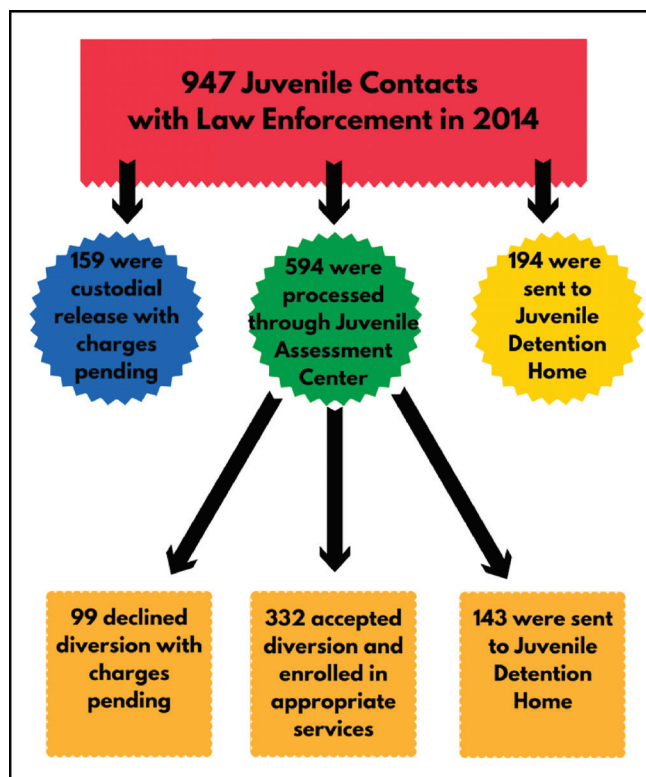


Figure 1: Flow Chart of Youth with Juvenile Justice Contact

24% of the time; a difference of 31% (see Figure 2). This difference is extremely statistically significant ($t=10.098$; $p<0.0001$). From a slightly different perspective, JDH provided secure care for 387 youth in 2014. 87% of the detained youth are facing charges in Lafayette parish, while the remaining 13% are being detained at another jurisdiction's request. Of the 337 youth placed in pretrial detention at JDH, 50% of these youth were brought directly to detention by law enforcement officers, and 37% were assessed by JAC personnel before being brought to JDH. When compared with 2013 youth detention data, there was an 8% reduction in the number of Lafayette parish youth placed in pretrial detention in 2014 (2013 $n=367$; 2014 $n=337$).

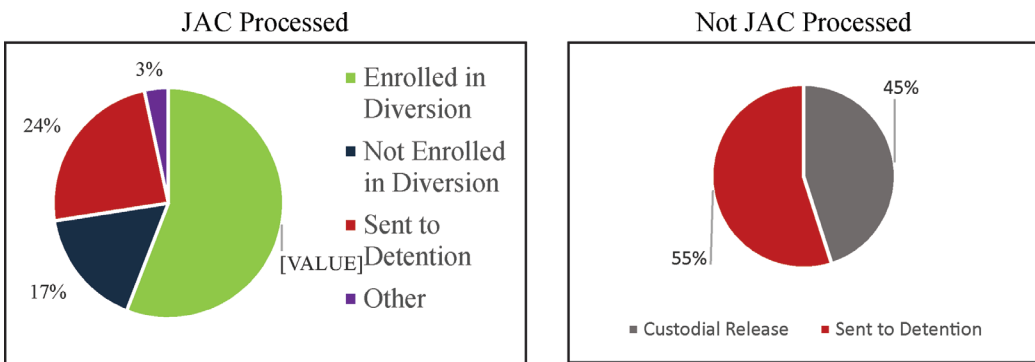


Figure 2: Disposition of Justice-Involved Juveniles Processed Through JAC (N=594) and Not Processed Through JAC (N=353)

What is the impact of the JAC on the number of youth enrolled in pre-trial diversion?

56% of youth processed through the JAC are enrolled in diversion programs which can significantly minimize juvenile justice contact. In 2014, 332 youth had the opportunity to enroll in diversion programming targeted to address the root causes of their juvenile delinquency. Programs to address issues such as anger and aggression, substance abuse, academic failure, family conflict are provided to youth enrolled in diversion programs. Most youth that successfully complete the diversion programs have no further contact with the juvenile justice system for the offense that led them to the JAC.

What type of offenses are youth charged with, separated by youth enrolled in diversion and youth placed into detention?

In 2014, Lafayette parish youth were charged with a range of thirty-three different offenses. Some offenses had only one youth charged such as murder and simple arson. Others had multiple youth for a specific charge. For example, 23% of youth with juvenile justice contact were charged with some form of disturbing the peace, a non-violent misdemeanor. It is

important to note that youth may be charged for more than one offense at a time, so only the primary or most serious charge was reviewed for this report. Table 1 below lists the most frequent primary charges for youth. This was divided into three categories: overall youth, youth who entered into diversion and youth who were detained.

Table 1: Most Serious Charges by Type of Youth

| <i>Overall Youth</i> | <i>Diverted Youth</i> | <i>Detained Youth</i> |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Disturbing the Peace | Disturbing the Peace | Simple Burglary |
| Theft | Theft | Warrants |
| Simple Battery | Simple Battery | Contempt of Court |
| Simple Burglary | Simple Burglary | Aggravated Battery/ Assault |
| Unauthorized Use of a Moveable | Possession of Marijuana | |

Since 2010, the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement has categorized juveniles offenses into five categories for analysis (Violent, Property, Non-Violent, Drug-Related, and Status). The large majority of youth in Lafayette parish are charged with either property crimes (31%) or other non-violent offenses (49%) as their most serious offense; and only a small percentage (8%) are charged with a violent crime as their most serious offense. When looking at the type of crimes based upon whether the juvenile was diverted or detained, a different picture for violent crime emerges. Only 1% of diverted youth were charged with a violent crime, while 18% of detained youth were charged with a violent crime. This may indicate that JAC screening tools for diversion disallow eligibility for youth accused of a violent crime. Court violations also seem to result in a high level of detention rather than diversion (18% detained versus 1% diverted). Please see Table 2 for more details.

Table 2: Distribution of Juvenile Offenses by Disposition

| <i>Type of Offense</i> | <i>Overall Youth</i> | <i>Diverted Youth</i> | <i>Detained Youth</i> |
|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Violent | 8% | 1% | 18% |
| Property | 31% | 28% | 32% |
| Drug-Related | 5% | 7% | 3% |
| Other Non-Violent | 49% | 63% | 29% |
| Court Violations | 7% | 1% | 18% |
| Status | 0% | <1% | 0% |

Using a different analysis, offenses were grouped into two categories: violent and non-violent. Non-violent charges for this analysis included property, drug-related, status, court violations and all other non-violent charges. Again, it is observed that 99% of youth who

were diverted have been charged with a non-violent charges. This compared to 82% of youth who were detained have been charged with a non-violent crime (18% charged with a violent crime). See Figure 4 for an illustration.

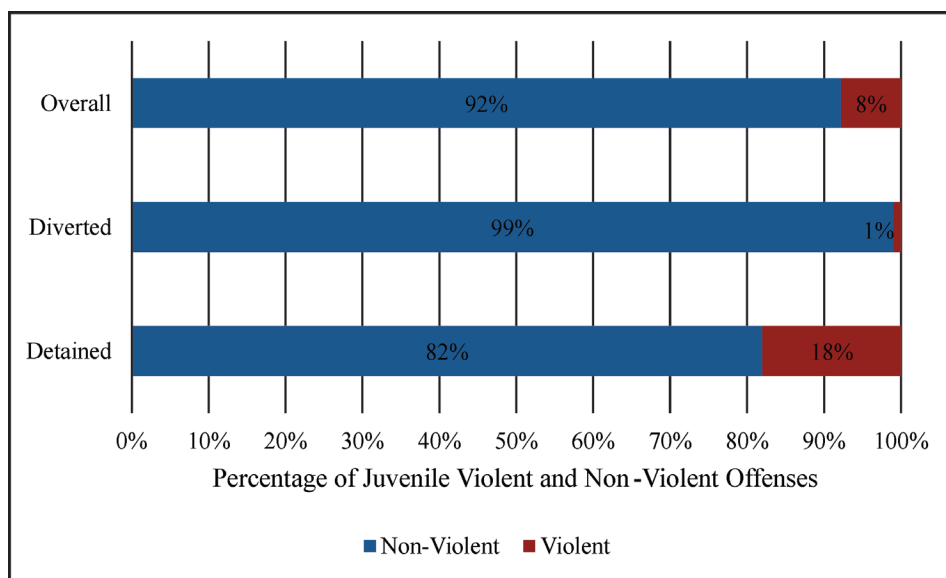


Figure 3: Distribution of Juvenile Violent and Non-Violent Offenses by Disposition

Summary

The opening of the Juvenile Assessment Center in 2013 has allowed law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies an additional options for addressing juvenile crime. Research suggests that limiting youth contact with the juvenile justice system through diversion processes and programs can be beneficial to the youth, their family, the community and the tax-payer (Butts 2011;, Dembo et. al, 2005b; and Hobbs et. al., 2013). Youth and their families get needed services and supports. Through reduced recidivism, communities are safer. Providing appropriate, community-based supervision and intervention is much less expensive than detaining youth in secure custody. While, the Juvenile Detention Center serves a necessary purpose in providing local, secure pretrial custody for youth, most youth who commit a crime do not need pre-trial detention. Significant findings of this study include:

- In 2014, JAC processed 65% of justice-involved juveniles. This was done while only operating Monday through Friday 7am to 7pm.
- Justice-involved juveniles processed through JAC were much less likely to be placed in detention (31% difference) and had an increased chance of avoiding court intervention through participation in diversion programs.

- Overall, 92% of juvenile crimes are non-violent. 1% of diverted youth charged with a violent offense and 18% of detained youth are charged with a violent offense.
- Disturbing the Peace (a more subjective offense) was the top primary (most serious) charge against juveniles. Most of these youth were enrolled in diversion programs.
- Simple burglary was the most common primary charge among youth that were detained.

In summary, justice-involved youth may be processed through the JAC, released into parent or guardian custody, or sent to JDH. Most youth processed through the JAC are eligible for pretrial diversion programs and are less likely to be sent to JDH. The opening of the JAC has allowed law enforcement officers additional options to meet the needs of justice-involved juveniles and public safety.

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