

Data-Sharing Efforts Aim to Improve Child Welfare, Juvenile Justice Outcomes

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Charles Rotramel kept seeing the same problem again and again in his role leading Houston reVision, a non-profit agency that works with at-risk youth.

Many of the kids he works with have been part of both the juvenile justice system and the child welfare system, making them what are known as “crossover” or “dual-status” youth. But it was difficult to actually determine how many of his kids fit that description.

Because the data from the two systems were long kept separate, held separately between local and state agencies, it was a struggle for Rotramel and other non-profit workers in the field to know for sure what, exactly, a child was up against when they first encountered him. That’s part of the reason why Rotramel is now spearheading an effort to share data between agencies and non-profits working with juveniles that he hopes would build upon the recent success of an inter-agency data sharing system.

“The kid has a lot of reasons not to say that they’re (in) one or the other,” Rotramel said, referring to the child welfare system or juvenile justice system. “So the accuracy of the information is exceedingly limited.” The incomplete picture makes it harder for workers

to get a complete understanding of a child's life, and it can make things harder on the child himself.

Challenges for “crossovers”

Often, Rotramel said, “crossover kids” facing a court date don't identify themselves as part of Child Protective Services. “No one flagged that for the juvenile justice system, and the caseworker from the child welfare system doesn't show up because [the child] is embarrassed to say he is in child welfare,” said Rotramel. “So he ends up in court with no parent representative, and he goes through the system without anybody visiting him, including the child welfare caseworker.”

Or, he said, a child with a mental health issue could have been receiving treatment through the child welfare system; once incarcerated, if no one knows about that history, he may go untreated.

“That's why the data is so important in order to get to that coordinated case planning,” Rotramel said.

He saw those sorts of gaps frequently, but he was never sure exactly how many kids — or which ones — overlapped between the juvenile justice system and the child welfare agency.

So he started a task force earlier this year with representatives from the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department and the Harris County Protective Services. “There's a tremendous amount of enthusiasm about this whole project and the agencies are really committed to it,” said Rotramel. One of the first priorities: data-sharing.

Building on past success

Various confidentiality regulations make that a complicated process, particularly when sharing information with non-profits, as opposed to other public agencies. But that sort of system — one that shares information only among public agencies — is already in place after years of effort. Rotramel says he'd like to see something for nonprofits that mirrors it.

Like workers at Houston reVision, county workers in the child welfare and juvenile justice agencies were running into headaches. Kids would have to go through the same intake process over and over at different departments, and caseworkers couldn't easily see where else in the system a child had previously been. Harris County's effort, which brings together data from juvenile justice, protective services and mental healthcare providers, began more than a decade ago after a report found that there were gaps between the systems. In 2003, then-County Judge Robert Eckels began organizing the agencies.

But it took years to produce a tangible result, explained Joel Levine, executive director of Harris County Child Protective Services, because the county realized it needed new state legislation to enable the kind of data sharing it had in mind. In 2011, the county was finally able to get a bill passed that would allow for the implementation of the Harris County Juvenile Information System several years later in 2015.

The hope was that agencies could avoid duplications, like repeating assessments or intake interviews to get a sense of an individual's situation each time a child came to a new agency.

Still, limitations restrict the type of data that can be shared. "It's a pretty small slice of information that's put out there," said Matthew Shelton, deputy director of the county's Juvenile Probation Department. But, he said, it's already making a difference.

The information service joined the efforts of three agencies: Harris County's Child Protective Services; the Children's Assessment Center, an organization that works with sexual abused children, and the Juvenile Probation Department — as well as the county's Department of Education and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. By this fall, information from the Harris Center for Mental Health should be integrated into the system. And Levine and Shelton are hopeful they will be able to work with school districts in the future. They also hope to have a way to track referrals for each kid as he or she moves through the system. And there's still the issue of figuring out just how many kids are in both the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system.

Data limitations

Because the system is set up like a search engine, there's no way to conduct a data analysis with the information that would allow agencies to see trends and patterns or even how many crossover youth exist.

Still, data-sharing between juvenile probation, juvenile justice and child welfare offices is a relatively new effort, according to Shelton. When Shelton attended a national training session a year and a half ago, he said, "nobody was doing that."

Nationally, a push to better coordinate information began in the early 2000s, but, according to the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ), only a handful of states integrate and share the data at the state level.

In the end, those efforts — including Harris County's and Rotramel's work — are intended to help create better outcomes for kids. Levine and Shelton envision a database capable of analysis that can help fuel grants. And Rotramel is hopeful for a system that will do a better job of connecting youth, particularly dual-status youth, to support and resources. "Unless we know the scope of what we're dealing with," said Rotramel, "there's no way to develop solutions to it."

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