Intervening to prevent criminal justice involvement

The Oregon Youth Authority Feeder System Study

Physicians are able to identify patients who are at risk for a heart attack or other health problems by assessing an individual’s current health, family history, and behaviors (e.g., cholesterol levels, tobacco use, and amount of exercise). Once a patient’s risk factors are determined, a doctor might prescribe certain medications or other interventions that reduce risk and increase the person’s chance of living a healthy, normal life. This medical model enables doctors to: 1) use data collected from patients to determine the likelihood they will face serious health problems given their individual- and family-level risk factors, and 2) provide interventions that prevent these health problems from occurring or worsening whenever possible.

Within the social service and criminal justice systems, however, a similar model does not yet exist to provide early diagnosis, prevention, and intervention for youth engaged in risky behaviors (e.g., skipping school, using drugs and alcohol) or experiencing other risk factors (e.g., lack of parental supervision, a family history of abuse). Typically, intervention does not occur until a youth commits a delinquent act.

What if, instead of waiting for problems to occur, the current system could adopt a variation of the medical model that would allow providers to: 1) use data to determine the likelihood that children and/or families will face serious problems given their collective risk factors, and 2) provide interventions that prevent these problems from occurring or worsening? That is the intention of OYA’s Feeder System Study — to use historical and current data from education and social/human service systems across Oregon to identify children and families at risk for serious problems, including criminal justice system involvement.

Project goals

The Feeder System Study seeks to identify the behaviors, risks, and protective factors that predict the likelihood an individual will become involved with the criminal justice system. The study has three goals:

- Use data to determine family and child characteristics, education issues, and social/human service usage patterns that impact the likelihood of individuals becoming involved in the criminal justice system in Oregon.
- Collaborate with other state agencies and local partners to develop data-driven recommendations based on the findings to help prioritize resources that: 1) prevent or reduce involvement in the criminal justice system, and 2) increase positive outcomes for children and families in Oregon.
• Move resources from expensive “end of the line” correctional systems (e.g., OYA and the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC)) and invest in more cost-effective “up-front” social/human service, education, and health care programs that prevent entry into the correctional system.

Project data-gathering processes

The Feeder System Study gathers data from Oregon’s social/human service agencies, the education system, and criminal justice agencies. Official data-sharing agreements are in place with the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS), Oregon Health Authority (OHA), Oregon Department of Education (ODE), and Oregon State Police (OSP). Staff from the Integrated Client System Data Warehouse (ICS), a unit within DHS, are facilitating data matching across the multiple data systems. Once all data are merged, ICS staff will remove all individual- and family-level identifiers before data are delivered to OYA and DOC researchers. This will ensure that no individual or family can be identified.

OYA also will include data from any other state and local social/human service agencies and criminal justice departments (e.g., county juvenile agencies, local law enforcement, and county human services agencies) that are interested in participating in this project. The more data that can be compiled regarding individual- and family-level social service access, school attendance, and contact with the criminal justice system, the more accurate and useful the eventual analyses and recommendations will be.

Project limitations

The Feeder System Study has been designed to protect individuals’ privacy. The data analyses will not provide agencies the opportunity to identify social/human service usage patterns for individuals or families in their care and/or custody. The data-sharing agreements also do not circumvent existing confidentiality restrictions and data-sharing limitations between and within agencies. All data are presented in aggregate form and are de-identified prior to delivery and analysis. Researchers do not have access to identified data and are not authorized to share raw data with external partners.

Project timeline

The Feeder System Study is expected to be a multi-year project that will go through many iterations. The first batch of data was received in December 2013, and additional data will continue to arrive and be analyzed for several years. As more data become available, researchers will merge new data with existing data, analyses will continue, and findings will be shared as they become available.