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Author(s):	Hanna Love and Samantha Harvell with Teresa Derrick-Mills, Marcus Gaddy, Akiva Liberman, Janeen Buck Willison, Mary K. Winkler
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Understanding Research and Practice Gaps in Juvenile Justice

Early Insights from the Bridge Project

Hanna Love and Samantha Harvell
with Teresa Derrick-Mills, Marcus Gaddy, Akiva Liberman, Janeen Buck Willison,
and Mary K. Winkler
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The research base on what works to prevent juvenile justice system involvement and improve outcomes for youth has grown significantly over the past few decades, but research and practice gaps persist. Current knowledge does not always reach the practitioners and system stakeholders who work directly with system-involved youth and could benefit from it most. Several institutional, organizational, and structural barriers can prevent these stakeholders from accessing and applying research principles and best practices in their day-to-day work. To address this gap, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Urban Institute (Urban) are collaborating on the Bridge Project, an effort to translate juvenile justice research into actionable policy and practice changes by developing innovative, practitioner-informed products and dissemination strategies. The Bridge Project brings researchers and juvenile justice professionals together to identify areas where research is not fully informing policy and practice, with the larger goal of creating practitioner-friendly, application-ready products to guide juvenile justice reform efforts.

In the first year of the project, Urban and OJJDP developed a systematic approach to research translation informed by implementation science and insights from practitioners, training and technical assistance (TTA) providers, researchers, and experts in the field. Urban researchers

- conducted literature and resource scans to identify existing efforts in the field and assess the availability of rigorous research;

- synthesized implementation science literature to ground translation efforts;

- collaborated with OJJDP to determine the grant programs or TTA efforts best positioned to implement tools; and

- held in-depth focus groups and interviews with practitioners and experts to identify the most pressing research and practice gaps and learn how research can better inform policy and practice.

This brief presents findings from these discussions and summarizes the most pressing research and practice gaps, the barriers practitioners face in accessing and implementing research, and the audiences that could benefit most from research translation tools and products. Grounded in the insights and perspectives of those who work directly with youth or in the juvenile justice field, we identify six primary, overlapping focus areas in need of research translation.

Although many practitioners are aware of the value of research and evidence-based practices, few resources exist to help them apply research-informed practices in ways that respect the intersecting identities and developmental needs of system-involved youth.

BOX 1

Methodology

The Urban Institute gathered information for this brief between December 2015 and June 2016 through roundtable discussions and in-depth, semistructured interviews with practitioners, TTA providers, and national experts. Urban conducted four in-person roundtables with a total of 23 participants: two with stakeholders who attended the December 2015 Second Chance Act Conference and two with TTA providers at OJJDP's quarterly providers meeting in January 2016. Participants were notified of the roundtable opportunities by e-mail before the conference or through event materials and either responded to the e-mail or showed up at the appointed time and location. The research team also completed 32 in-depth phone interviews with 34 stakeholders in the field. We spoke with key informants to create a list of potential interviewees, and the research team purposively sampled based on region, organization type, and focal area within juvenile justice to capture diverse perspectives. We conducted 17 interviews with national experts (e.g., policy experts, juvenile justice funders, and representatives of national membership organizations), who brought their unique experiences to the conversation; 11 with state or local stakeholders (e.g., law enforcement, youth corrections, and direct service providers); and 6 with researchers. We used content analysis to identify common themes and recommendations across the interviews and focus group discussions.

Where Are the Most Pressing Research and Practice Gaps?

Although respondents discussed a wide range of potential topics, several themes emerged across system actors, practitioners, TTA providers, and national experts. Interviewees identified six gaps that must be addressed to expand and strengthen research-informed practice:

- Applying developmental research to practice

- Implementing risk/needs assessments

- Engaging youth and families

- Matching youth to services, improving case-planning practices, and engaging probation officers

- Implementing sustainable reentry practices

- Operationalizing evidence-based practices

Some of these focal areas overlap, but each suffers from distinct research and practice gaps.

Applying Developmental Research to Practice

Nearly a third of interviewees said guidance is needed on how to integrate adolescent development research into work with youth at each stage of the juvenile justice system. Although they noted that developmental science has informed recent Supreme Court decisions, they argued that the developmental approach is not yet consistently used in everyday interactions with system-involved youth. Probation officers, for instance, may set goals for youth based on court-imposed mandates rather than acknowledging and rewarding achievements toward developmentally appropriate benchmarks. Similarly, the court process could be restructured to truly reflect best practices grounded in research on adolescent development. Interviewees said taking a developmental approach is not about implementing a single program but translating research on adolescent development to inform stakeholder interactions with youth.

Implementing Risk/Needs Assessments

A similar number of interviewees discussed the need to improve implementation of risk and needs assessments. Interviewees generally agreed that assessment tools have become a commonly adopted and accepted evidence-based practice across jurisdictions. But interviewees noted that assessments are not necessarily used to inform decisionmaking as intended. They pointed to multiple challenges, including a lack of familiarity with the research or lack of buy-in to the process, that results in frequent overrides of instrument scores, failure to distinguish between risk and needs (contributing to the unnecessary processing or incarceration of high-need youth), and infrequent use of assessment results

to match youth to appropriate services. Interviewees said training is needed for judges, probation officers, and other key stakeholders positioned to incorporate results in their decisionmaking.

Engaging Youth and Families

A quarter of interviewees identified youth and family engagement as an area needing further research and translation. Although juvenile justice stakeholders may be aware of the importance of family engagement, interviewees said caregivers are still largely shut out of the juvenile justice process. When caregivers are included, their participation is typically by mandate. Interviewees did not see mandated involvement as true engagement and felt the field was slow to recognize that "family engagement" may mean different things to different youth. Several interviewees noted that research from other disciplines, such as education or child welfare, might provide helpful strategies to apply to the juvenile justice system.

Matching Youth to Services, Improving Case-Planning Practices, and Engaging Probation Officers

Nearly a quarter of interviewees discussed the need to ensure that youth are matched to appropriate services based on their unique risks and needs. After diversion or release decisions are made, practitioners may not know which youth services are most effective or when programs should be used. Interviewees also emphasized the role probation officers play in reducing further system involvement for youth. Interviewees believed probation officers often have their own rules for engaging kids based on standards of accountability and court-imposed sanctions. As mentioned above, probation officers might instead set developmentally appropriate goals for youth that may prevent future system involvement. Many interviewees also noted that although research supports keeping youth in the community and matching them with appropriate services, there are no clear guidelines on how to do so.

Implementing Sustainable Reentry Practices

Several interviewees mentioned reentry practices as an area where research is not effectively translated. Many of their concerns overlapped with the issues above—interviewees were unsure how to incorporate family members into the reentry process, how to create developmentally appropriate reentry practices, and how to design reentry systems that create lasting support networks. Ensuring that youth have a support network in place as they move from detention or placement back to a community setting is critical to future success, especially for youth transitioning to adulthood.

Operationalizing Evidence-Based Practices

All interviewees were familiar with evidence-based practices, but several explained that although evidence-based practices are often promoted or required to access funding, practitioners do not always understand how to effectively operationalize them. Many stakeholders do not know what practices or programs to select, when to adopt them, or how to properly implement them with the youth they serve.

Who Would Benefit Most from Research Translation Tools?

Interviewees emphasized that tools aiming to change policy and practice would be most effective if targeted to specific stakeholder audiences. Research points and practice recommendations must be tailored to an actor's role and provide sufficient guidance on best practices and how to implement them. The audiences most frequently cited as priorities for research and practice translation tools were probation officers, judges, and legislators and policymakers.

What Barriers Do Practitioners Face in Accessing and Translating Research?

Generally, interviewees said practitioners are receptive to research and open to incorporating research findings into their work, but they identified a number of barriers that prevent practitioners from accessing or translating research. Interviewees cited two common barriers to access:

- **Capacity limitations.** Practitioners are often too busy to seek out new research findings and may struggle to assess the quality and relevance of new studies. Several interviewees pointed to resources like the OJJDP website and listservs as helpful tools for vetting and disseminating research findings, but many said that even these resources can be overwhelming to navigate given the breadth of topics covered.

- **Information presentation.** Interviewees also cited the presentation of research findings as a barrier. The language of research is often inaccessible, and interviewees suggested that findings should be written concisely, total two pages or less, and include actionable instructions for implementation. Academic research was seen as particularly inaccessible. Interviewees cited the distance between researchers and practitioners as a problem and suggested that researchers may be communicating with each other more than they communicate with practitioners.

Interviewees identified four barriers to translating this research into daily practice:

- **Lack of organizational commitment to research.** Interviewees noted that the organizational structure of a workplace can impede research translation. To incorporate research into practice, organization leaders must be committed to evidence-based practices and willing to devote funds and staff time to training. Interviewees said that investment in implementing evidence-based practices and tracking outcomes at the organization, local, and state level can be inconsistent.

- **Securing buy-in from key stakeholders.** Even when research is available, translation can be difficult because of lack of stakeholder buy-in, insufficient funding for materials and training, or inadequate mechanisms for institutionalizing and sustaining reforms. Several interviewees

recalled criminal justice stakeholders, particularly judges, probation officers, and attorneys, having difficulty consistently applying research-based principles. These are the stakeholders often best positioned to implement evidence-based practices. Many interviewees said training targeting these stakeholders is needed.

- **Incorporating training and reforms into everyday practice.** Interviewees suggested it is often difficult to sustain research-informed programs, practices, or initiatives because of limited funding, staff turnover, and insufficient integration of evidence-based practices into organizational review processes, among other factors. Organizations must not only implement trainings and reforms but must also change their policies to ensure these reforms are routinely put into practice.

- **Organizational ability to change.** Multiple interviewees explained that organizational capacity can hinder change even when leaders are receptive to reform. They emphasized the importance of securing self-sustaining funding mechanisms and not relying on grant-based programs, which are subject to funders' shifting priorities and may not allow practices to be fully implemented or sustained.

Considerations for Translating Research and Practice

Several overarching themes emerged across our interviews to guide the project's approach to research translation. First, practitioners argued that a "products-plus" approach incorporating **technical assistance** is needed when implementing any tool. Many felt that resources placed on a website or given to organizations without implementation assistance are rarely used and that research translation efforts as a whole could benefit from targeted outreach to TTA providers during product dissemination.

In terms of dissemination strategies, interviewees suggested that **tools be interactive and take new forms**. Several interviewees did not think that guidebooks, webinars, and other online toolkits are viable given how many existing web-based publications go unused. Some saw utility in hands-on resources, like quick reference cards for stakeholders, while others said well-designed, web-based tools would be most effective.

Finally, interviewees stressed that **all tools must recognize the life experiences and intersecting identities of system-involved youth.** Youth involved in both the juvenile justice and child welfare systems, LGBTQ youth, youth transitioning to adulthood, youth with mental health treatment needs, and youth who have experienced trauma or abuse in the home were all identified as specific populations in need of improved treatment and care. Interviewees did not specify which strategies they would like to see implemented with these youth but did speak to the importance of acknowledging intersecting identities when identifying research and practice gaps.

BOX 3

Where Has Research Successfully Been Translated to Practice?

Interviewees highlighted two areas where they have seen widespread uptake of research and subsequent changes in policy and practice as a result. These examples may provide lessons about how to translate research and the conditions necessary to support system-wide change.

- **Rethinking youth incarceration.** Over the past 10 years, youth incarceration rates have plummeted, falling more than 50 percent in many states.[a] Although some of this decline can be attributed to declining crime and admissions, interviewees noted that systems nationwide have limited youth incarceration, informed at least in part by research indicating that it is ineffective in preventing recidivism and can actually worsen outcomes for youth and communities.

- **The influence of developmental research on Supreme Court decisions.** Although interviewees said additional work is needed in other areas of reform, they noted that research on adolescent development has influenced recent Supreme Court rulings on cases involving the death penalty and life without parole.

These examples represent successful research uptake at the system level, but interviewees emphasized that day-to-day practices with youth have been slower to change and that additional work is needed to facilitate change at that level.

[a] "Easy Access to the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement," National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, National Center for Juvenile Justice, accessed November 1, 2016, https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezacjrp/.

Conclusion

In the first year of the Bridge Project, Urban and OJJDP developed a systematic process for identifying and translating research grounded in implementation science and positioned to change policies and practices (Derrick-Mills and Winkler 2016). At every stage of these efforts, the developmental approach emerged as a pressing gap between research and practice. Although most practitioners are aware of the importance of incorporating findings from developmental research into their work with system-involved youth, many noted a lack of resources that outline how to do so.

In the next phase of the project, Urban and OJJDP will implement the newly developed process, define principles of developmentally appropriate practice at various points in the justice process, and develop and disseminate resources to align adolescent development principles with the everyday practice of those working with system-involved youth. For each system process point, Urban will (1) conduct a systematic literature review to identify relevant research, (2) set minimum criteria for inclusion based on methodological rigor, and (3) synthesize findings across the literature base to define evidence-informed, developmentally appropriate practices. We will then identify communities, agencies, and organizations whose work aligns with these practices and partner with them to understand the agents of change and determinants of success for their initiatives. Urban, in consultation with stakeholders and in close collaboration with OJJDP TTA providers, will develop resources to help practitioners and TTA providers embed developmentally appropriate practices in their work and evaluate the impact they have on service provision and youth outcomes. As suggested by practitioners,

resources will be targeted to specific audiences (e.g., law enforcement or probation officers, court personnel, or community service providers) and informed by critical lenses, such as racial and ethnic disparities, service provision for justice-involved girls, or the unique needs of LGBTQI-GNC youth.

Reference

Derrick-Mills, Teresa, and Mary K. Winkler. 2016. *Bridging Research and Practice for Juvenile Justice: Systematizing the Approach.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute. http://www.urban.org/research/publication/bridging-research-and-practice-juvenile-justice-systematizing-approach.

About the Authors

Hanna Love is a research assistant in the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. She project manages the OJJDP-funded Bridging Research and Practice to Advance Juvenile Justice and Safety project, and her areas of research include state and local justice reform efforts and improving justice system responses for survivors of violence.

Samantha Harvell is a senior research associate in the Justice Policy Center and the co–principal investor for the Bridge Project. She also oversees assessment of local and state sites involved in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative.

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ABOUT OJJDP

Juveniles in crisis—from those who commit serious and violent offenses to victims of abuse and neglect—pose a challenge to the nation. Charged by Congress to meet this challenge, OJJDP collaborates with professionals from diverse disciplines to improve juvenile justice policies and practices. OJJDP, a component of the Office of Justice Programs, US Department of Justice, accomplishes its mission by supporting states, local communities, and tribal jurisdictions in their efforts to develop and implement effective programs for juveniles. The Office strives to strengthen the juvenile justice system's efforts to protect public safety, hold justice-involved youth appropriately accountable, and provide services that address the needs of youth and their families.

810 Seventh Street NW
Washington, DC 20531

www.ojjdp.gov

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2100 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20037

www.urban.org