

Overview

The United States' juvenile justice system was founded a century ago with the enlightened goal of providing individualized treatment and services to children in trouble. In the 1990s, however, the boundaries between the juvenile and criminal justice systems began to erode. Virtually every state passed laws that placed more young people in criminal court, instituted harsher sanctions, and allowed adults and youth to be incarcerated in the same facilities. That is the background against which the MacArthur Foundation entered the field of juvenile justice grantmaking.

Background | Perspective

The rising rate of violent juvenile crime in the 1990s clearly called for new responses. But was it appropriate to treat young offenders as adults? Emerging evidence in the neurosciences seemed to confirm that children, well into their teens, are, in fact, different from adults. Other research pointed to the high individual and societal costs of the new legal measures, including increased recidivism, reduced educational and employment prospects, and troubling racial disparities. The Foundation entered the field with the ultimate goal of promoting a juvenile justice system that is rational, fair, and effective, and that is linked to other agencies and organizations. The system would hold young offenders accountable for their actions, provide for their rehabilitation, protect them from harm, increase their life chances, and manage the risk they pose to themselves and to public safety.

The first phase of grantmaking, which began in 1996, grew out of the Foundation's long-standing interest in youth development. Grants were directed at two efforts: advancing the scientific knowledge base; and fostering the development of appropriate laws, policies, and practices. The Foundation sought to give decision makers the tools that would allow them to make rational choices for individual juvenile offenders—to assess their culpability, the possibilities for rehabilitation, and the risk of future, more serious offenses. Grants supported the establishment of the long-term, interdisciplinary Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice, as well as training, advocacy, policy analysis, and public education efforts.

These grants laid the groundwork for significant change in the field. But after five years, it was time to take the effort to another level. As our nation's juvenile justice system entered its second century, the Foundation launched an initiative to help states become models of juvenile justice reform.

Models for Change: A Framework

In partnership with its grantees in the juvenile justice field, the Foundation has developed a working framework for a model juvenile justice system.

The framework is grounded in eight principles that reflect widely shared and firmly held values related to juvenile justice:

- *Fundamental fairness:* All system participants—including youthful offenders, their victims, and their families—deserve bias-free treatment
- *Recognition of juvenile-adult differences:* The system must take into account that juveniles are fundamentally and developmentally different from adults
- *Recognition of individual differences:* Juvenile justice decision makers must acknowledge and respond to individual differences in terms of young people's development, culture, gender, needs, and strengths
- *Recognition of potential:* Young offenders have strengths and are capable of positive growth. Giving up on them is costly for society. Investing in them makes sense.
- *Safety:* Communities and individuals deserve to be and to feel safe

- *Personal responsibility*: Young people must be encouraged to accept responsibility for their actions and the consequences of those actions.
- *Community responsibility*: Communities have an obligation to safeguard the welfare of children and young people, to support them when in need, and to help them to grow into adults.
- *System responsibility*: The juvenile justice system is a vital part of society’s collective exercise of its responsibility toward young people. It must do its job effectively.

Building on these principles, the framework defines goals, practices, and outcomes against which actual systems can compare themselves. In areas in which actual systems fall short or depart radically from this concept of the ideal, it is hoped that the framework will both stimulate and give practical direction to reform efforts.

Grantmaking Strategy

The initiative seeks to develop replicable, system-wide changes in states that can serve as models for reform in other jurisdictions. The states—Pennsylvania, Illinois, Louisiana, and Washington—were chosen based on a variety of criteria, including their political and fiscal commitment to reform, support for reform both in and outside the juvenile justice system, and the likelihood that other states would follow their lead.

In each state, a “lead grantee” organization is responsible for identifying specific areas in which change is needed to move a state closer to a model system. Working with the Foundation, the lead grantee will develop an initial work plan for reform efforts, convene the relevant parties, and collaborate with state and local groups and leaders who will be involved in shaping and implementing those reforms. An advisory board of key individuals and groups will assist in clarifying reform goals and objectives, outlining strategies, and monitoring the progress of the work.

Because system change requires coordination and documentation, the Foundation also has provided a grant to the National Center for Juvenile Justice to broaden the perspective and “connect the dots” within and across states. Other national grantees—including some of the nation’s leading experts and practitioners in juvenile justice—will serve as a resource network for all states. (See “The National Resource Bank” insert.)

Advancing the Models

Efforts in targeted states cannot yield models of successful system change unless they are studied, documented and explained to the field. Ensuring that the work of the Models for Change initiative in each state has an impact beyond that state’s borders calls for two basic kinds of efforts: efforts to document, assess, and understand the process of change; and efforts to spread the news about it. A range of vehicles and strategies will be used to develop and disseminate information about the initiative—the knowledge it generates, the innovations it fosters, the results it achieves, the lessons it teaches, and the possibilities it opens up—to a national audience. In addition to reports and briefs, other ways of promoting systems change to juvenile justice audiences may include organized visits to pilot sites, outreach to the media, and the launching of a Models for Change website.

As systems change efforts begin to show results, the Foundation will encourage the expansion of those efforts. The National Center for Juvenile Justice will develop materials and resources that can be used by other states, and communication activities that create interest and demand. But progress will also come organically, as the first states produce a critical mass of individuals and groups that serve as emissaries of reform. Success across different states will demonstrate that reform doesn’t depend on a charismatic leader or an unusual alignment of forces. It will help other states see that barriers to systems change can be overcome—that there are many pathways to reform.