



Juvenile Probation Initiatives in California and Their Effects

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Over the past ten years, county probation departments across the state of California have undertaken a number of major initiatives aimed at juvenile offenders and at-risk youths. These initiatives were part of a system-wide “sea change” from a focus on suppression, enforcement, and monitoring of youthful offenders to an emphasis on families and on rehabilitative and therapeutic approaches. While the importance of these efforts had been acknowledged, there had been no integrated description of these initiatives; nor had a broad review of the potential effect of this “sea change” on youth outcomes been examined. In 2005, the Chief Probation Officers of California asked RAND to help fill these information gaps.

Programs and Initiatives

Five major initiatives have affected probation departments in California during the past decade.

- **Title IV-A-EA.** Funding associated with the Emergency Assistance (EA) program of Title IV-A of the Social Security Act allowed probation departments to add services aimed at reducing juvenile crime, such as case management services, gang intervention programs, and parenting skills training. Title IV-A-EA funding for county probation departments was approximately \$150 million in fiscal year (FY) 1994/1995 and \$120 million in FY 1995/1996.
- **Juvenile Crime Enforcement and Accountability Challenge Grant Program.** In 1996, the Legislature initiated this program as a major effort to determine what approaches were effective in reducing juvenile crime. The Legislature provided \$110 million to help counties identify, implement, and evaluate locally developed community-based projects that targeted at-risk youths and young offenders. Two waves of challenge grants were awarded to 14 and 17 counties, respectively. County projects included a

Abstract

Over the past ten years, probation departments across the state of California have undertaken five major initiatives aimed at juvenile offenders and at-risk youths. Although these initiatives were concomitant with reductions in juvenile arrests and other positive outcomes, we cannot definitively attribute such observed statewide trends to these initiatives.

broad spectrum of interventions, serving more than 5,300 at-risk youths and juvenile offenders.

- **Repeat Offender Prevention Program (ROPP).** ROPP was undertaken by the Legislature in 1994 to respond to rising juvenile crime rates. Funding began in FY 1996/1997 and helped support multiyear demonstration projects in eight counties. The annual allocation has been \$3.8 million. Each county has developed its own programs, with an emphasis on a multidisciplinary, multiagency team-oriented approach. In addition to funding existing ROPP programs, the FY 2000/2001 state budget also provided \$5.7 million to support start-up activities for new projects in eight additional counties.
- **Comprehensive Youth Services Act (CYSA).** The Welfare-to-Work Act of 1997 created the CYSA to fund juvenile probation services. To support CYSA activities, California’s allocation of funds under the federal welfare reform act was increased by \$141 million in the first year and \$168 million in subsequent years, based upon probation departments’ claiming for services provided. Counties used funds to provide services and programs across the continuum of options, from prevention and early intervention

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through custody. In FY 2003/2004, over 40,000 at-risk youths received services; similar numbers received services while on probation.

- **Juvenile Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA).** In 2000, the California Legislature passed the act now called the JJCPA, which was designed to provide a stable funding source to counties for programs that have been proven effective in curbing crime among at-risk youths and young offenders. JJCPA currently supports 193 collaborative programs implemented in 56 counties to address locally identified needs in the continuum of responses to juvenile crime. Budget allocation for JJCPA was \$121 million for the first year and \$116.3 million for each of the next two years. In its third year, 106,055 youths were served.

Indicators of Change

Determining the effectiveness of statewide initiatives on statewide youth recidivism and other measures is not straightforward. Such an endeavor is difficult for a variety of reasons. We do not have the opportunity to “hold everything else constant” to measure the effects of such changes. Many other changes relevant to youths’ lives have occurred over the past decade in California, including major economic changes in the state, immigration policies, and perceptions of personal safety. Although we cannot draw firm conclusions regarding the effect of initiatives on outcomes, we note the temporal proximity between initiatives and outcomes that might suggest how the initiatives affected youths and their families.

Juvenile arrests and incarcerations in California have fallen over the past ten years, and teen pregnancies have dropped. The number of youths living below the poverty level has gone down, and high school graduation rates have increased. These positive measures are concomitant with probation initiatives, although California’s trend on many measures mirrors nationwide trends, suggesting that something other than these initiatives may be at

work. For example, the economy in California and nationwide (as measured by unemployment rates) improved during much of the decade examined. However, on certain measures, such as arrest rates and teen pregnancy rates, the decline over the past decade has been greater for California youths than for U.S. youths as a whole, suggesting that programs and initiatives in California may be having positive effects beyond the national trends. When we compared California with seven other large states with decentralized probation services, we found that each of these states—with the notable exception of Pennsylvania—experienced reductions in juvenile arrest rates over the past decade. All except Pennsylvania have instigated new initiatives during the decade in attempting to curb juvenile crime, but just as in California, we have not been able to directly link the initiatives to the reduction in arrest rates in any state.

Implications

The policy implications of this analysis are limited because we cannot confidently assert that the initiatives under consideration caused changes in juvenile crime and other outcomes across the state. Although we cannot tie statewide outcomes to these initiatives, it is important to note that evaluations of these initiatives have shown that criminal justice outcomes for program participants have generally been better than those for youths in routine probation programming. Such findings indicate the importance of this type of programming for at-risk and probation youths in California.

Our ability to understand how the delivery of different services under these initiatives affects youth justice and non-justice outcomes could be enhanced if better data were available on the types of youths who participated in the programs and the services that they received. With these data we could more definitely point to the program components that seem to make the biggest difference for youths with varying needs. ■

This research brief describes work done for RAND Infrastructure, Safety, and Environment and documented in *Accomplishments in Juvenile Probation in California Over the Last Decade* by Susan Turner and Terry Fain, TR-297-CPOC, 2005, 60 pp. (available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/TR/TR297>). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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