



## Listening is key when working with juvenile offenders and their families *Nora Charles<sup>1</sup> with Ashley Simons-Rudolph*



Figure 1. Prescription Drug Use: Don't Swallow your Career. Used under [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License](#).

“A main takeaway from this project has been how important it was for me to just listen . . . I spent 95% of my time listening and 5% talking. It was really key to do that, rather than trying to come in like some expert presenting my thoughts to them.”

Youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system are at increased risk for a range of negative outcomes. They are more likely to have low educational attainment, inconsistent employment, and continued criminal behavior. This is a concern for society at large, and especially for people who are social justice-oriented. We want to see at-risk youth, predominately youth of color and/or from lower-SES backgrounds, have better chances to succeed.

With early interventions, such as Juvenile Drug Court (JDC), long-term outcomes are likely to improve. A JDC is a special court docket for juvenile offenders aged 13-17 who have been diagnosed with a substance use disorder. This program can expunge the youths' criminal record with successful completion of substance abuse treatment and probation. However, programs such as the JDC are often underfunded and may be misguided in terms of both their empirical basis and their appropriateness for the communities with which they work.

We seek to improve the success of our local JDC by making it more responsive to the needs of the participating families. Researchers in the Department of Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi have partnered with a local JDC to get feedback from offenders and their families about barriers that interfered with the youths' probation compliance, as well as their perceptions about how well the JDC program met their needs.

### Highlights

**Early interventions are important for at-risk youth.**

**Often, programs addressing at-risk youth do not account for family dynamics and systemic barriers that prevent success.**

**Understanding and addressing barriers is vital.**

**Inviting open-ended discussion through research can facilitate this understanding.**

While important outcomes such as the successful completion of probation and fewer positive drug tests have been achieved, the effectiveness of the JDC has been limited. With a Community Psychology perspective, we sought to understand and address the structural barriers facing families and their communities that contribute to the lack of probation compliance and other negative outcomes.

## **Methods**

For the last year, we have been collecting data on parenting practices, youth personality and environment characteristics, and participant feedback about the JDC program. Including a community perspective in an evaluation of the JDC is both ethically important and more likely to yield success. Specifically, we asked JDC staff and families to provide both questionnaire and open-ended responses about what they see as positives, negatives, and barriers in the JDC system. Additionally, research team members attended biweekly staff meetings to learn about problems JDC staff members were encountering. They also met with the families individually to obtain their feedback, explaining that they were trying to improve the JDC program for current and future participants. Most families were highly receptive to this and happy to discuss their experiences. More than one parent remarked that they thought the researchers were asking good questions!

## **Early Results**

- Parenting practices such as monitoring, providing positive attention, and being consistent with discipline are associated with better juvenile probation compliance.
- Youths exposed to more delinquent peers and whose parents are more accepting of delinquency exhibit poorer compliance with probation.
- Systemic problems such as limited public transportation, lack of childcare options, and inflexible parental work schedules impact youths' ability to comply with probation.

### **What Does This Mean For?**

**Practice**—Family dynamics are important for youth success. Our data suggests increased effectiveness if the JDC changes their intervention model from “12-step lite” to a family-focused treatment.

**Social Action**—Systemic barriers compound the difficulty of the JDC process. It's hard enough to get to weekly counseling, meet with your probation officer, etc. without your mom's car breaking down or the bus running off schedule. Many juvenile justice-involved youths face these kind of barriers, and fixing some of those issues may improve compliance with probation and reduce future delinquency.

**Policy Makers**—Policy makers can better understand the importance of supporting and helping families with children involved in juvenile justice. These families are often overwhelmed and struggling, and they may be treated poorly by some in the system. We can get much better family buy-in, and ultimately better youth outcomes, if we treat these families with interest and respect. This includes listening to their needs and allocating appropriate funding to address barriers to success.

For more information: <http://riskybehaviors.weebly.com/current-research.html>

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<https://www.communitypsychology.com/listening-is-key-when-working-with-juvenile-offenders-and-their-families/>