

Increasing Alternative Sentencing in the Juvenile Justice System Through a Partnership Between Public Defenders and Social Workers

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This study evaluated the effectiveness of a partnership between public defender attorneys and the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program. An outcome was to increase alternative sentences that match the rehabilitative needs of juveniles in court. Sentencing outcomes of youth receiving the social work program ($n = 116$) were compared to youth receiving conventional public defender representation ($n = 94$). A logistical regression analysis found that juveniles represented by attorneys with social workers were nearly three times more likely (odds ratio = 2.72) to receive alternative sentences than those without social workers when controlling for prior record and charge severity.

A staggering 1.5 million youth were processed through the juvenile justice system and nearly 31 million youth were under the jurisdiction of juvenile courts in 2009 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2012). Among the most perplexing of challenges for all parties involved in the juvenile justice system is the need to identify and implement effective sentencing responses that will reduce and/or eliminate recidivism and rehabilitate

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juvenile offenders, while also addressing the safety and welfare needs of the larger community. Despite a recent trend toward more punitive systemic responses, public opinion tends to support the utilization of juvenile justice approaches that address the multiplicity of factors that often are the underlying catalyst of youthful offending (Nagin, Piquero, Scott, & Steinberg, 2006). This perspective dovetails with recent research that suggests that alternative, non-institutional sentencing holds great promise for achieving the core philosophical goal of juvenile justice, which is rehabilitation (Lipsey, Chapman, & Landenberger, 2001).

An opportunity exists for individuals who come into contact with the legal system to have a positive therapeutic experience. In addition, there is recognition of the detrimental consequences associated with confinement, such as violence and abuse of the juvenile while institutionalized, little to no impact on juvenile recidivism, and substantial amounts of tax dollars wasted on correctional facilities (Mendel, 2011). It is unclear how often alternative sentencing options are used within the juvenile justice system, so encouraging and facilitating greater use of alternative sentencing approaches has become an increasingly important and relevant goal.

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of a partnership between public defenders and multiple social work field education programs. The Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program was designed to increase the likelihood of alternative sentencing decisions for youth in the justice system. Of particular relevance to the current project is the relationship between social workers and public defender attorneys. For many youth who come from families with limited resources, these two groups serve critical roles at various times throughout the youth's involvement with the juvenile justice system. However, use of traditional, often punitive, approaches to youthful offending tends to separate the work of social service and legal agents. Thus, consideration of alternative sentencing options increases the likelihood that these entities may work in tandem as they consider all aspects of each individual case.

This study provides a comparison of case outcomes of youth who received input from the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program to youth who did not receive input from the program. Juveniles who receive alternatives to detention are sentenced to recommended treatment resources that meet their therapeutic needs. The program draws on social work's holistic approach to bio-psycho-social assessments and treatment to provide public defenders with sentencing recommendations that have the greatest potential of deterring future delinquent or criminal behavior by focusing on root causes in alternative sentencing plans. The study advances the knowledge of social work services in a relatively unexplored arena; one that creates a new point of contact for juveniles in the criminal justice system during their public defender legal representation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Juvenile Rehabilitation Programs: What Works?

There is evidence to support that programs designed to promote rehabilitation options as alternatives to secure detention have reduced juvenile recidivism (Feldman, Males, & Schiraldi, 2001; Mason, Chapman, Chang, & Simons, 2003; Rodriguez, 2005). Past research indicates that these rehabilitative programs in the justice system have had a positive impact on efforts to reduce juvenile crime across the country. For example, the Juvenile Sentencing Advocacy Project was implemented in the Miami, Florida, Dade County Public Defender Office to advocate for rehabilitative sentencing outcomes for youth who were transferred to adult court (Mason, Chapman, Chang, & Simons, 2003). Findings in the study suggest that participation in the rehabilitation goals of juvenile court rather than retribution goals associated with adult court significantly decreased recidivism rates of juveniles who were transferred to adult court.

Similarly, a restorative justice program in Arizona that focused on sentencing juveniles to a community-based diversion program for rehabilitation rather than standard supervision was also able to decrease reoffense rates (Rodriguez, 2005). Yet another program, the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) supported by the Casey Foundation reduced the numbers of youth in secure detention while decreasing the re-arrests rates of youth in Oregon and Chicago (Feldman et al., 2001). Following the JDAI program, jurisdictions in Maryland and Washington, DC. were targeted to release large numbers of juveniles from secure confinement due to juvenile detention center overload and disproportionate minority confinement (Feldman et al., 2001). The findings by Feldman et al. suggest that a decrease in secure detainment in favor of other community-based alternatives was likely to increase rehabilitation and unlikely to jeopardize public safety.

Focus on Status Offenders

In addition to reducing recidivism rates, other rehabilitation programs for court sanctioned juveniles have been designed to intervene specifically with status offenders. *Status offenders* are juveniles charged with offenses due to being underage, such as truancy from school, running away, and being beyond school and parental control. The Juvenile Structured Day Program (JSDP) is a day treatment program specifically designed to target youth with truancy problems in the North Carolina juvenile justice system (Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin, 2007). An evaluation of the program found that one out of four youth charged with truancy who participated in the JSDP experienced no further contact with the juvenile court after completing the program (Yearwood & Abdum-Muhaymin).

The Unruly Respite Care Program located in a large midwestern metropolitan county is another juvenile court program designed to respond to the needs of status offenders by placing them in services assessed by the Global Assessment Risk Device to be the best treatment options, such as family therapy, educational counseling, substance abuse, and peer group support (Gavazzi, Yarcheck, & Lim, 2005). The Gavazzi et al. study found that underlying family and school-based problems placed status offenders at greater risk for delinquency, and that compared to males, females were at greater risk for a variety of these underlying problems (i.e., abuse and neglect). This study suggests that juvenile status offenders, especially females, would therefore benefit from community-based services that address those family and school-based problems that may contribute to the delinquency.

Social Work Field Education in Public Defender Organizations

Early literature suggests that social work involvement in public defender organizations creates a pivotal opportunity for the profession of social work to positively influence the treatment and rehabilitation of juveniles in the justice system (Ashford, Macht, & Mylym, 1987; Senna, 1975). Skills in interviewing individuals and families are valuable areas of expertise that social workers can provide in the legal representation of youth (Ashford et al., 1987). The educational background of social workers can also be an asset to the legal team and result in creative recommendations to public defender attorneys and courts that might not otherwise be considered. For example, a cornerstone of social work education is its focus on understanding human behavior within the context of the social environment. This approach leads social workers and social work students to consider a multiplicity of factors when assessing a client, including biological, psychological, and social factors that may impact the youthful offender. Further, social work training guides social workers to recognize and engage relevant community resources that may effectively address the juvenile's needs. Finally, placing social work students in the public defender's office provides real world practice experience within the juvenile justice system, while assuring that students have the benefit of field supervision while they are in their role of student.

ALTERNATIVE SENTENCING SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program was a collaborative project between social work field education programs at multiple universities and the Public Defender system in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. The Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program

was implemented as a result of funding from a federal juvenile block grant. A goal of the Juvenile Accountability Block Grant was to establish programs for the assessment of risks and needs of juveniles in the justice system (<http://djj.ky.gov/grants/federal.htm>). The Kentucky Public Defender system was awarded Juvenile Accountability Block Grant funds to place undergraduate and graduate social work students with public defender attorneys so that they could work on juvenile cases exclusively. The Alternative Sentencing Social Work Education Program is evaluated based on alternative sentencing outcomes that match the rehabilitative needs of juveniles.

Representatives from the Department of Public Advocacy and social work educators from the participating universities were involved in multiple think-tank sessions in the planning phase of the project. The data was collected during the grant funding period from 2004 to 2006; however, the outcomes from data collected informed the public advocacy field education program that remains an active field placement for social work students to date (2013). From 2004 to 2006 a total of 29 students participated in the field education program with 13 students placed during the 2004/2005 academic year, and an additional 16 students placed during the 2005/2006 academic year. All students worked on multiple cases throughout the semesters and some student completed two consecutive semesters of work with the program.

Students were recruited by social work field educators and subsequently awarded stipends in the amount of \$1,500 dollars per semester as an incentive for completing their field education placements with the Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy. During the implementation phase of the program, social work students from seven field education programs that include University of Kentucky, University of Louisville, Morehead State University, Northern Kentucky University, Western Kentucky University, Kentucky State University, and Brescia College were involved. These social work students were geographically placed in 16 counties across the Commonwealth of Kentucky located near their respective universities. Those counties where social work students were placed corresponded to the locations of the juvenile court jurisdictions included in the study.

Students placed in the field education program were required to attend preplacement orientation and training conducted by the Public Defender agency on topics such as juvenile laws and how to collaborate effectively with public defender staff. In addition, all of the students received supplemental supervision from experienced professional social workers either inside or outside the agency. The students also simultaneously participated in a field learning seminar at their respective institutions as part of the educational requirements of their individual social work programs. The public defender attorneys are appointed to provide legal representation for the majority of juveniles that come into contact with the

legal system. Juveniles are entitled to have an attorney appointed to represent them if they are petitioned as delinquent (*In re Gault*, 387 U.S. 1, 1967; *Gideon v. Wainwright*, 372 U.S. 335, 1963).

Students in the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program used their practice knowledge to establish necessary rapport, interpret legal jargon, and gather important information from the juvenile and/or juvenile's family. The social work students conducted extensive biological, psychological, and social assessments on youth coming into contact with the justice system during legal representation. Standardized instruments prepared by the Department of Public Advocacy were provided to the students to conduct the assessments. The assessments determined if the juvenile had any confounding issues, such as mental health problems, chemical dependency, experience of abuse and/or neglect, or school problems that might be relevant to the decision-making process. The social work students collaborated with the public defender attorneys in preparing detailed alternative sentencing plans for the Court that addressed the issues that were detected in the assessment. The students used practice skills to link juveniles to community resources by making referrals for treatment services that matched the rehabilitative needs of the juveniles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Therapeutic Jurisprudence

Therapeutic jurisprudence provides a theoretical lens through which to view sentencing practices in the legal arena. At the very essence of the therapeutic jurisprudence model is the view that the legal system provides an opportune venue in which to promote positive therapeutic outcomes for those who come into contact with the system. In this study, therapeutic jurisprudence offers a framework in support of the rehabilitative nature of the alternative sentencing plans produced by the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Program for youth in court.

The concept of therapeutic jurisprudence is a multidisciplinary approach to law that draws upon insights from the fields of psychology, sociology, social work, criminology, and criminal justice (Wexler & Winick, 2003). Therapeutic jurisprudence emerged in the area of mental health law about 20 years ago and was first introduced by Wexler and Winick (1990) as a framework to effectively address the needs of individuals who suffered from mental illness during their involvement in involuntary commitment and guardianship hearings. Those mental health hearings initially applied the therapeutic jurisprudence model to assist the courts in making better therapeutic decisions when considering the removal of one's personal freedom and/or rights for psychiatric reasons (e.g., confinement in

a psychiatric hospital) or physical/mental incompetence reasons (e.g., appointment of a guardian for an adult). The therapeutic jurisprudence concept has evolved greatly over the last several years as it has been applied to many other legal specialties since its inception (McGuire, 2000). Petrucci (2007) summarized samples from studies characteristic of therapeutic jurisprudence, some of which include therapists and child protective workers, judges, mental health patients and professionals, drug and teen court participants, and court-ordered offenders. In addition, the summary of studies using a therapeutic jurisprudence perspective demonstrates its use across many diverse issues in the legal system, such as child protection, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, chemical dependency, and mental health.

Social Work and Therapeutic Jurisprudence

The fundamental principles of therapeutic jurisprudence are a good fit with the skills, values, and knowledge base of the social work profession. Social work professional ethics are closely aligned with the therapeutic jurisprudence perspective as well. Both the therapeutic jurisprudence framework and social work include an emphasis on forwarding social justice by advocating for the voices that are not typically heard (Madden & Wayne, 2003). Social justice is a guiding principle in the National Association of Social Work *Code of Ethics*, which states, “social workers should strive to ensure social change on the behalf of vulnerable or oppressed groups of people” (NASW, 2008). Many persons who come into contact with the justice system need advocates who can explore how systematic macro issues, such as poverty or lack of opportunities, are impacting the offense.

Further, social workers are positioned to advance therapeutic jurisprudence due to their frequent involvement in legal settings (Madden & Wayne, 2003) and the belief in the potential for each individual to change. Finally, an additional strength of social work is that it draws upon an ecological perspective to address both micro and macro issues while assessing varied types of therapeutic needs for those involved with the law (Brooks, 2006). The social work dual focus on the individual and the environment creates a shared language between social work and therapeutic jurisprudence. Social workers are trained to systematically and thoroughly evaluate the biological, psychological, and social needs of those involved in the legal system, and then link the individual with appropriate interventions, such as community-based treatment programs. Finally, therapeutic jurisprudence seeks to integrate research from the social and behavioral sciences, which coincides with the evidence-based practice approaches in social work (Petrucci, 2007). Core courses in the social work curriculum are designed to teach students to thoroughly evaluate client needs, identify evidence-based practice strategies to meet identified needs, and implement and monitor an effective treatment

plan. This formal education in evidence-based practice sets the stage for social workers to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of therapeutic resources for offenders. The combination of the position of social work to assist with the therapeutic jurisprudence approach, the alignment of professional ethical principles with the theoretical model, and the educational focus on evidenced-based practice are indicators of the potential for social workers to effectively implement the therapeutic jurisprudence model. Thus, the application of therapeutic jurisprudence principles by social work has a great deal to offer in the legal arena (Brooks, 2006).

METHODS

Study Design and Sampling Method

The study evaluated the effectiveness of the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Program in increasing alternative sentencing decisions for youth in court. A primary goal of the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program is to use a comprehensive bio-psycho-social assessment to develop alternative plans that will link the juvenile to treatment resources tailored to meet his/her identified needs. The court has the discretionary option of sentencing a juvenile to alternative treatment plans as opposed to confinement in a secure detention facility. Alternative sentencing decisions are final juvenile court dispositions consisting of probation or diversion combined with other treatment resources such as out-patient or in-patient treatment, residential care, and/or community-based services.

The instrumentation used for data collection was designed and administered by the public defender agency. Using the standardized data collection instrument developed by the public defender agency, data for cases referred to the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program were collected by the social work students involved in the field education program. In addition to assessment data collected by the social work students, data related to types and severity of charges were collected from public defender agency records. All juvenile cases assigned to the students in the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program from 2004 to 2006 ($n = 116$) were included in the study. Social work practicum students were assigned intervention cases by attorneys in each of the respective public defender offices. Completed data collection instruments for all juvenile cases receiving the intervention were then submitted to the agency program administrator.

A nonequivalent comparison group of youth who did not have access to the social work field program was also selected from the Department of Public Advocacy juvenile case files ($n = 94$). This comparison group was already similar to the intervention group on the elements of charge type

(i.e., status, misdemeanor and felony offenses) and having the same type of legal representation (public defense attorneys). A stratified-systematic sampling method was used to select the data for the comparison group. First, the data was stratified to select those cases that were sentenced in the same geographic regions as the intervention group and those cases that had final court dispositions during the same time frame as the intervention group (2004–2006). Next, a systematic selection method was used to pull the final sample of cases from the stratified sample discussed above (i.e., the same regions and time frame). All of the juvenile cases in the final comparison sample received conventional public defender representation without input from the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program. This means that juveniles who had conventional public defender representation had no social worker or social work student on their defense team to conduct assessments and present alternative sentencing plan options.

Sample Description

Table 1 summarizes the individual characteristics of juveniles in the sample. The juveniles ranged in age from 11 years to 18 years of age ($M=15.4$, $SD=1.53$). It should be noted that, although the 18-year-olds in the sample are not considered juveniles under Kentucky statutory law, those persons in the sample were involved in the legal system by committing juvenile charges prior to turning 18 years of age. The sample was predominantly male (68.1%), with females committing approximately one-third of all juvenile offenses. Further, a cross-tabulation of age and gender found the majority of charges committed by females involved youth who were either 15 to 16 years of age (52.2%) or 17 to 18 years of age (34.3%). Males had a greater number of charges within the younger age range of 13–14 (24.5%) than females (9%).

TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics of Juveniles

Demographics	Frequencies	Percentages
Age of juvenile ($n = 210$), $M = 15.4$		
11–12 years old	8	3.8%
13–14 years old	41	19.5%
15–16 years old	96	45.8%
17–18 years old	65	30.9%
Gender of juvenile ($n = 210$)		
Male	143	68.1%
Female	67	31.9%
Race of juvenile ($n = 206$)		
Caucasian	172	83.5%
African American	25	12.1%
Biracial	9	4.4%

A majority of the sample was Caucasian (83.5%), and the remaining portion was identified as African American (12.1%) or biracial (4.4%). Given that most of the communities in the study are not racially diverse, the racial composition of juveniles mirrors the lack of diversity seen in the communities in which these youth reside. Estimates from the United States Census Bureau (2008) indicate that African Americans represent between 5% and 9.9% of the total population in Kentucky. This suggests that the sample of African American youth in the study is larger overall than the population of African American youth residing in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Legal descriptive factors were obtained from the total sample of juveniles cases involved in either the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program or the comparison group. The majority of cases in the sample were either status offenses (38.60%) or public misdemeanor offenses (41.9%). A smaller percentage of the juvenile cases involved public felony charges (18.6%). Status offenses in the study are defined as actions of which the child is accused which if committed by an adult would not be a crime, while public offenses are actions that would be considered criminal if committed by an adult (Kentucky Unified Juvenile Code, 2012). Status offenses include beyond control of school or parents, habitual runaway, truant from school, and tobacco and alcohol offenses for underage minors; while examples of public offenses are assault, theft, and drug possession (Kentucky Unified Juvenile Code, 2012). Just slightly over half of the sample had no prior charges (53.2%). However, approximately 47% of the youth had prior juvenile charges ranging from one prior (16.2%), two priors (11.0%), or three or more prior offenses (19.7%).

Description of Juvenile Issues Assessed by Social Work Field Education Students

Social work field education students completed assessments that examined biological, psychological, and social concerns of juvenile cases in the sample. These concerns identified by the social workers were then presented to the court by public defense attorneys along with alternative sentencing plans designed to address those problems. Mental and/or physical health needs (55.6%) were assessed as the most frequent problems faced by youth in the juvenile justice sample. Mental illnesses such as psychosis and clinical depression were common problems facing youth in the juvenile justice system. Closely following these mental health issues, nearly half the juveniles in the sample (41.7%) were determined to have educational issues. These educational issues involved youth with underlying difficulties such as behavioral or learning problems in the school environment. Drug and alcohol abuse by the juvenile (20.4%) and child maltreatment victimization by caretakers (19.4%) were also identified as common issues. Some of the youth were struggling with multiple bio-psycho-social issues at the point of contact with the justice system.

It is important to recognize the differences in juvenile delinquency cases based on those actions committed by juveniles versus cases that involve something that has been experienced by juveniles that are outside of their control. Outside issues such as juveniles who are being abused (20%) and/or suffering from a form of mental illness (56%) are frequently identified in juvenile court cases. Given the difference in levels of culpability associated with divergent factors that may bring youth into the juvenile court system, it is reasonable to conclude that the consideration of such issues assessed and presented to the courts by the social workers can make a difference in the sentencing of youth.

Measures

The primary focus of the study was to examine the impact of the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program on alternative sentencing outcomes in juvenile court cases. To that end, the analysis focused on comparing outcomes of cases where the juvenile was assessed by a social work student in the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program (coded ASSWFEP = 1) with cases where the juvenile did not receive an assessment by a student in the program (coded ASSWFEP = 0). In addition, based on past research, the legally relevant factors of current charge severity and prior offense history were included as control variables. The severity of the current charge against the juvenile was an ordinal level measure ranging from less serious to more serious juvenile offenses (status offenses = 1, public misdemeanor offenses = 2, public felony offenses = 3, and transfer to adult cases = 4). A juvenile's prior record of number of juvenile charge(s) was also assessed as an ordinal measure and coded (0, 1, 2, 3, or more) in the analysis. The dichotomous outcome variable is a single item that captured the alternative sentencing decision of the juvenile court (yes = 1 and no = 0). Alternative sentencing decisions are final juvenile court dispositions consisting of probation combined with one or more of the following: restitution, out-patient or in-patient treatment, residential care, and/or community-based services.

Analytic Plan

Because of the use of a dichotomous outcome variable and dichotomous and ordinal predictors, binary logistic regression was viewed as the most appropriate analytic technique for this analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Specifically, binary hierarchical logistic regression was used to predict the log odds that a juvenile would receive an alternative sentence, while controlling for relevant covariates. Prior to conducting the logistic regression, data were examined to assure that analysis assumptions were met. All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v18.0.

RESULTS

Logistical Regression Analysis

A hierarchical binary logistical regression analyses was conducted to test the following research hypothesis:

Hypothesis: Juvenile offenders with similar cases who receive legal representation with input from the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program will have greater odds of receiving alternative sentencing decisions than those in the comparison group, controlling for charge severity and prior juvenile record.

To test this hypothesis the control variables charge severity and prior juvenile record were entered in the first logistic regression model predicting odds of receiving an alternative sentencing decision ($\chi^2 = 6.4$, $df = 4$, $p \leq .05$, Nagelkerke $\chi^2 = .053$). Although prior juvenile record approached significance, neither charge severity ($\beta = -.341$, Wald = 2.1, $p = .14$) nor prior juvenile record ($\beta = -.597$, Wald = 3.0, $p = .08$) was a significant predictor of likelihood of receiving an alternative sentence at the $p < .05$ level.

After controlling for prior juvenile record and charge severity in the first model, the second model included the dichotomous predictor representing involvement in the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program or the comparison group. As shown in Table 2, odds of receiving an alternative sentencing decision were significantly greater for juveniles in the social work field education program compared to juveniles who were not part of the program (model $\chi^2 = 14.41$, $df = 3$, $p \leq .001$, Nagelkerke $\chi^2 = .116$). Juveniles receiving input from the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program were nearly three times as likely to receive Alternative Sentencing Decisions than juveniles receiving conventional representation when controlling for prior offense and current offense severity (Wald = 8.58, $p < .001$, odds ratio = 2.72).

TABLE 2 Final Regression Coefficients for the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program and Legal Control Variables on Alternative Sentencing Decision

Variables	β	Wald	Odds ratio	p value
Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program	1.00	8.58	2.72	.001***
Severity of charge	-.447	3.37	.640	.06
Prior record	-.597	2.84	.550	.09

*** $p \leq .001$.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program in increasing alternative sentences for youth represented by public defenders in juvenile court. A primary goal of the field education program is to increase the number of alternative sentencing decisions that match the rehabilitative needs of juvenile clients. From the standpoint of therapeutic jurisprudence, use of alternative sentences is desirable because it includes options that are conducive to treatment of the issues identified by the social work students during field placements. For example, in the assessments completed by the social work students, mental and physical health issues were found to be among the most commonly occurring problems faced by the juveniles in their assigned cases. In addition, many juveniles experienced problems with the educational system, drug and alcohol abuse, and child maltreatment victimization by caretakers. Taking into consideration these additional factors related to the specific juvenile involved in each case, alternative sentencing plans were then recommended to the juvenile courts.

Findings from the current study suggest that the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program had a positive impact on the number of alternative sentences for juveniles charged with status offense cases in particular. A publication by one of the largest national organizations for attorneys recommends that states reorganize their status offense systems to help protect youth rather than punish so they do not get jammed into the criminal justice system (Kendall & Hawke, 2007). Often there is not sufficient exploration into the reasons why juveniles are truant from school, exhibiting behavioral problems at school or home, or running away from home. Entering the often busy and overcrowded juvenile justice system might not allow these underlying issues contributing to the status offense to be assessed and subsequently addressed. This reality may be attributed in part to the absence of any professional who is specifically tasked with identifying concurrent factors that may have contributed to the juvenile's actions. While public defenders are accountable for the legal aspects of the juvenile's case, the presence of social workers provides an advocate for consideration of extralegal factors that may be relevant in a rehabilitative setting. The Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program coupled the legal focus of the public defender's office and the extralegal focus of social workers to produce an outcome that increased the utilization of alternative sentencing options. Thus, findings from this study are consistent with recommendations (Kendall & Hawke, 2007) for community systems to promote alternative dispositions to judges that are tailored to meet the unique needs of status offenders.

Studying the effects of the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program helped to sustain a continued partnership between

social work field education programs and the public defender system in Kentucky. These findings suggest that social workers have a relevant knowledge base and skill set to offer to forensic practice in juvenile court, and the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program continues to be a valuable field placement opportunity for social work students in Kentucky. Not only did the findings support maintaining the current field program, but they also had a positive influence on the development of a subsequent pilot project to hire social work graduates in the Commonwealth of Kentucky Public Defender system. The program was recently recognized by Harvard University (2013) as one of the top 25 innovative programs in the nation (www.ash.harvard.edu/Home/News-Events/Press-Releases/Innovations/Top-25-Innovations-in-Government-Announced2/Top-25-Programs).

Overall, findings from this study indicate that the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program successfully increased juvenile court judge's utilization of alternative sentencing options. In comparison to youth with similar legal cases who did not receive input from the social work field education program, those youth who received input from the social work students involved in the program were three times more likely to receive alternative sentences designed to address their rehabilitative needs. The combination of the increase in the number of alternative sentences recommended by public defenders working with the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Education Program and the fact that these increases were greatest for status offenders suggests that the addition of input from the social work students positively impacted appropriate use of alternative sentencing. Thus, this study increases our awareness and knowledge about the benefits of situating social work field education experiences within legal settings, and suggests the potential benefits that may be reaped by formalizing a partnership between social workers and attorneys in the juvenile justice system.

Limitations

Although findings from the study provide some useful insights and promising opportunities for the future, there are a number of limitations that warrant discussion. First, the use of nonprobability sampling techniques prevents us from generalizing findings to the juvenile justice population as a whole. For instance, there may have been something about the selected counties that makes them unique or different from other counties in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. All of the counties in the sample were selected due to being in the same geographical proximity of the Field Education Programs that placed social work students in this practicum. Notably, although the 16 counties were not randomly selected, there was a combination of both urban and rural jurisdictions in the study.

The data collection processes may also impose certain limitations on the study. Data collection involved multiple students who may have exercised varying levels of attentiveness during the data collection process. Relatedly, students collecting the data may have experienced differences in the level and quality of supervision available at their field practicum sites. In an effort to reduce this potential threat to internal validity, all students involved in data collection received a mandatory training on the data collection process and a standardized data collection instrument was utilized at all study sites. In addition, all students participated in a field education seminar while they were in the practicum, and therefore had the guidance of a qualified social work instructor throughout their involvement in the Social Work Field Education Program.

Implications for Forensic Research and Practice

Findings from this study have some important implications for forensic social work research and practice. Much of the previous research has focused on sentencing outcomes of adults involved in the criminal justice system (Caravelis, 2011; Curry, Lee, & Rodriguez, 2004; Demuth, 2003; Ulmer & Johnson, 2004). Although there are barriers to research in the juvenile justice system related to confidentiality of juvenile court records, these findings draw attention to forensic research on juvenile court outcomes. In addition, future research should be conducted to examine whether and for which populations alternative sentences work best once the juvenile has been referred to the community-based resources identified in the alternative sentencing plans. This has the potential to create more knowledge for legal actors in the juvenile justice system, e.g., attorneys, social workers, court designated workers, and judges about what type(s) of juvenile offenders would be best suited for alternative sentencing options.

Future research should also be conducted to better understand what specific skills and practices social workers bring with them that ensure more youth are placed in appropriate alternative sentencing programs. This type of research has implications for social work education's efforts to develop curriculum content that would enhance skills and knowledge in forensic social work practice. Findings suggest that interdisciplinary collaboration between public defender attorneys and social workers can be an effective model in the justice system for juvenile clients to receive sentencing in favor of rehabilitative. A vision to rehabilitate youth who come into contact with the juvenile justice system is embedded in the therapeutic jurisprudence framework that has been discussed, and this conceptual model is put into practice by the Alternative Sentencing Social Work Field Education Program. In summary, this study provides an evaluation of a forensic social work field education program in juvenile court. The findings of the evaluation help to increase our knowledge of what social work field education programs in the legal setting can accomplish.

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