

# The Big Idea

**Q** • How can OU researchers help first-offender juveniles forge a different path?

**A** • By developing a gamified smartphone app that builds life skills.

BY CHIP MINTY

**F**rom hopelessness and despair to violence and crime, David McLeod has seen it all.

McLeod joined a local police department at age 21 in his hometown of Little Rock, Ark—statistically one of the nation’s most violent cities. He witnessed many of society’s wounded souls follow drugs, alcohol and destructive behavior down a well-worn path to ruined lives.

Now 46 and associate director of the University of Oklahoma’s Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work, McLeod is spearheading an effort to help first-offender juveniles find order and direction in a world where guidance and support can be hard to find.

The former SWAT operator, detective and interrogator has encountered crime ranging from white-collar schemes to gang violence, child abuse and domestic homicide. But the kids he’s focusing on are only at the doorstep of the court system, and he hopes technology can divert them away from trouble to lives anchored by hope and resilience.

The criminal justice researcher assembled a team of OU scholars to meet teenagers on their own turf by developing a smartphone application that acts like a video game but functions like a mentor, holding students accountable, teaching

responsibility, and opening the door to self-assessment and independence.

“Young people who would be using this don’t have a lot of structure in their lives,” McLeod says. “They don’t have mentorship or adults who can help them get past adolescence. Or, maybe they do have adults in their lives, but those adults are in crisis as well.”

Through its gamified format, the system awards points for a variety of positive behaviors, such as attending classes, court and counseling appointments; keeping track of grades; and staying on top of other responsibilities. The app allows progress to be monitored by the court or school. By earning points, young people can clear their juvenile record and learn positive life skills in the process, McLeod says.

The project is funded through a \$30,000 collaborative grant from OU’s Institute for Community and Societal Transformation and the OU Data Institute for Societal Challenges, both

established in 2020 to reduce inequity and encourage community-engaged research.

McLeod says a prototype of the app will be ready for testing soon, and if the project is successful, the technology could



OU computer science doctoral student Jalal Saidi demonstrates the new smartphone app, which functions much like a mobile caseworker.



Erikah Brown

David McLeod, left, associate director of the Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work; Jalal Saidi; and Dean Hougen, associate professor of computer science, are among those developing a smartphone app that opens the door to self-assessment and independence for teens in the court system.

be employed by municipal courts, schools and others to help youths in crisis.

The idea of developing an app grew from discussions he had with officials at the Norman Police Department and Norman's municipal court system, as well as educators, mental health providers and community leaders.

Truancy, under-age drinking, vandalism, graffiti, and other low-level offenses often lead to contact with police and land young people in municipal court, McLeod adds.

"Diversion is a modern strategy that is being adopted by the criminal justice system, particularly for low-level offenses. When young people become engaged in the justice system, there should be alternative pathways for them to work their way out of it."

That's the objective McLeod is hoping to achieve with a team of colleagues: Associate Professor of Computer Science Dean Hougen, who is also an OU Lloyd and Joyce Austin Presidential Professor; OU Associate Professor of Sociology Connie Chapple; and computer science doctoral student Jalal Saidi. While community service and school suspension are traditional consequences facing young people in trouble, the team's app could offer a more positive and productive alternative, he says.

The app features a reminder function that notifies students of upcoming court appointments and meetings with counselors or social workers. "In a lot of these cases, parents may or may not be around to do that," he says. "Parents may have two or three jobs, and young people are more or less on their own."

Chapple, a criminologist, says many juveniles tend to have

limited societal support. "Many young people can't drive and they're dependent on adults for transportation, which can impact their ability to comply with court expectations."

The smartphone app works like a mobile caseworker, monitoring a young person's status and providing additional information that courts can use to assess behavior and compliance, she says.

Use of the smartphone technology could expand beyond first-offender juveniles, Chapple says. There might be opportunities to help young people facing more serious challenges in the juvenile justice system.

McLeod adds the app may also help teach life skills critical to success.

"Maybe a young person achieves the goal of working off their charges. That's wonderful, but there's more to it than that," he offers. "Say, a year or two goes by and they find they're in a tough spot again. Hopefully they can remember, 'Well, last time, I got organized and I was able to find my way out of it, so maybe I can apply those same lessons.'"

McLeod believes the app will help youths foster a sense of control over their lives and confidence that they can find productive solutions.

"We all do dumb things when we're in despair," McLeod says. "It's human, but hopefulness and resilience are essential, and despair is an avenue to criminal behavior."

*Chip Minty is a Norman-based writer and the principal of Minty Communications LLC.*