

Lessons Learned: Challenges and Strategies for Conducting Family-Based Intervention Research in Juvenile Justice Settings

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Greater than 60% of youths in the juvenile justice system have a diagnosable mental health disorder, with substance use–related and addictive disorders being among the most common mental health disorders.¹ Research studies have shown that family-based interventions targeting substance use–related and addictive disorders have two to nine times greater effect sizes compared with individual-based interventions.² Family-based interventions, most notably, functional family therapy,³ multidimensional family therapy,⁴ and multisystemic therapy,⁵ have been shown to reduce substance use among justice-involved youths. Given the complex and multiple demands facing justice-involved youths, conducting family-based research within juvenile justice populations can be challenging. This article provides insights into the operational challenges and innovative strategies to address these challenges to conduct family-based intervention research with reentry youths.

THE WORK BEFORE THE WORK

Challenge 1: Building Collaborations

Implementing research within the juvenile justice system requires building collaborations with many stakeholders who provide services to justice-involved youth on probation, including probation officers, defense attorneys, educators, mental health teams, and personnel in social service agencies. Thus, research conducted in this setting should engage the multiple systems of care charged with the welfare and rehabilitation of these youths as well as the communities affected by justice involvement. One primary challenge lies in the complexity of the system. This includes the different roles and often conflicting fiduciary responsibilities stakeholder groups may hold from each other (eg, treatment, behavior monitoring, legal boundaries). Notably, the range and multiplicity of stakeholder entities pose a significant

challenge in developing consensus around priorities of what youths' needs are and the best approaches to address those needs. Furthermore, given the high staff turnover rates in the juvenile justice system,⁶ building sustainable and meaningful collaborations entail ongoing follow up.

Strategy. Adequate preparation must be purposefully included as part of the research timeline and goals. At the outset, the research team should clearly identify mutual benefits with stakeholder partners. One way to showcase mutual benefits of research, which will ultimately increase their buy-in, might be to hold information sessions where the researchers solicit feedback from stakeholders to ascertain their needs and wants. Whereas reducing recidivism and ensuring community safety are typically a high priority for justice system providers (eg, probation and the court system), frontline staff who work in juvenile corrections and detention setting might prioritize rehabilitation and control (eg, regulating behavior). Beyond legal demands, families might seek improved school outcomes for youths and reduced family conflicts. Accordingly, highlighting multidimensional benefits across stakeholders is essential.

A family-centered community-based participatory research⁷ approach can also be used to reflect needs and preferences of justice-involved families to inform the implementation process. Accordingly, intentional processes should be established at the outset to give all stakeholders an opportunity to contribute to the research process by helping to frame practice-relevant research questions and focus the research teams' priorities on feasibility of implementation and meaningful inquiry. During these sessions, the research team should also try to identify community representatives and court-related decision makers invested in the research process to serve as champions, as they might facilitate a potentially arduous process in working through system challenges with the research team. Identifying and working

closely with early adopters, leadership, and opinion leaders in the field is an important way to secure initial buy-in. One way of sustaining initial buy-in is to include a form of service in the research plan where the research team provides ongoing technical reports (eg, interpretation of findings) to stakeholders that may be useful for their practice. These purposeful initial steps will provide greater access for researchers to on-ground information and support as needs arise during the study duration.

Challenge 2: Human Subjects

In any research study, a human subjects review committee or institutional review board (IRB) must approve the steps and scope of the research process. IRBs are charged to ensure safety (eg, that research procedures do not lead to undue distress) and equity (that all participating youths have an equal chance of benefiting) in evaluating the human subjects protections. Because youths involved in the juvenile justice system are considered one of the most vulnerable groups requiring protection from abuse and exploitation,⁸ risks and benefits of participating in the research study need to be carefully addressed at the outset. When research is conducted in juvenile justice facilities, many IRBs also have a prisoner representative who determines whether provisions for this vulnerable population are appropriately addressed.

Owing to these protections, collecting data from justice-involved youths often requires an extensive review from the human subjects committee, which can take a significant amount of time. In some jurisdictions, collecting primary data from justice involved youth is prohibited entirely. Relatedly, the research team often has to obtain a secondary approval through the court and probationary systems.

Strategy. Most importantly, ample time for human subjects review committee approval should be built into the research timeline. The specific steps taken to ensure privacy and confidentiality of participants and protected information collected throughout the research process should be clearly explained, including clear procedures for data security, both primary and secondary data collected for the research study. Working closely with court/probation collaborators may also help identify and address some of the concerns IRBs might raise. Equally important is to ensure that all juvenile justice staff members understand and honor the voluntary nature of study participation (ie, cannot give extra incentive or punishment) so that no part of the research becomes coercive. This might require continuous training for stakeholders and participants around general ethics concerning the conduct of research.

THE ACTUAL WORK

Challenge 3: Research Design

Although randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are considered the gold standard in intervention studies, RCTs in juvenile justice settings may not be the most practical or ethical option. For example, the court and/or probation system may wish for all youths to get the intervention offered by research and find it unethical to withhold a promising and/or effective program from youths in the control group. Furthermore, RCTs require high levels of resources, support, and time. In almost all usual-care settings, these controlled environments cannot be replicated, leaving many systems and communities with unsustainable one-time-effective programs. Partnering with researchers for RCTs requires intensive time commitment and potential restructuring of procedures for many community and public systems. This may hinder willingness to partake in research, especially if the effect cannot be sustained.

Strategy. The researchers should work closely with stakeholders to highlight the benefits of RCTs and develop long-term sustainability plans. Alternatively, investigators and the research field as a whole might consider quasiexperimental designs that do not require randomization (eg, participant can self-select into the program), but maintain strong causal inference, including regression discontinuity design⁹ and interrupted time series design.¹⁰ Possibly, applying rigorous methodological approaches, such as propensity score matching¹¹ to identify matched comparison samples using institutional/administrative data, might be better suited in collaborating with court systems in usual-care settings. Furthermore, identifying matched comparison samples based on local knowledge (eg, Ford *et al.*¹²) might allow for a natural quasiexperimental study that prevents self-selection despite the lack of randomization. Historical analysis might also be used to compare a recent cohort of youths with cohorts of previous years (eg, Pullman *et al.*¹³).

Challenge 4: Recruitment, Engagement, and Retention

Recruitment, engagement, follow-up, and retention of families in research is a multistage process, often requiring preliminary and formative work and reconnaissance to determine the best strategy before initiation of the study. Justice-involved youths and their families face multiple probationary demands in the context of multiple social, economic, and structural challenges (eg, housing instability, poverty, discrimination). These youths and families may have little to no capacity to engage in voluntary programs not required by the court, compromising both recruitment and initial participation. This is especially true for settings and communities with lower resources. Youths and families

involved in the juvenile justice system might need additional support (eg, transportation, meals, childcare, incentives) for research participation.

Even after the initial participation and engagement, retention remains a challenge. Many families experience residential and phone instability. Some families have “pay as you go” phone plans, which often lead to disconnected phone lines. Research staff thus might need to travel to participants’ homes. Furthermore, recidivism during the probationary period is a common challenge to retention that impacts justice-involved youths. This process is thus time-intensive and requires adequate person power and staffing.

Strategy. Preliminary work should include several stakeholder meetings with multidisciplinary entities, families, and youths to get buy-in and identify the best recruitment and retention strategies. During this process, when, where, and how recruitment should occur as well as how the current research will benefit youths and their families should be discussed. Using youth/peer and adult family member/parent recruiters can help facilitate higher buy-in. Partnering with the court system might also enhance research participation rates. This collaboration, however, must be followed by extensive ongoing dialogue that participation or nonparticipation will not help or hurt youths’ legal proceedings. As part of maintaining regular contact with families, social media can be one effective platform. Social media avenues may allow researchers to locate participants with fewer interruptions based on phone plans, especially with young people checking on their social media accounts frequently throughout the day. Finally, conducting a pilot feasibility study that sets up internal agreements and research infrastructure can demonstrate the ability to successfully recruit the intended sample, deliver the intended intervention, and collect the planned data. Pilot feasibility trials are an important step for designing and implementing high-quality studies.

Strategies for assisting youths and family members to attend assessment and intervention sessions warrant special consideration. This may include providing transportation, meals or snacks, and childcare to remove barriers to enhance feasibility of participation. Additionally, incentivizing youths and family members to attend intervention as well as assessment sessions may be considered. This is a complex decision that requires balancing the ethical conundrums of providing sufficient motivation for participation but not providing unduly large and potentially coercive incentives. Furthermore, the selection and type of incentives matter, including preferences for gift cards or cash and escalating incentives from baseline to completion. All of these facets related to how to incentivize and with what amount and

frequency need thoughtful vetting and oversight from the supervising IRB.

Sustainability and scalability of these trials is critical for the field to make more evidenced-based family interventions available for justice-involved youths and their families. Yet, the challenge remains in balancing multiple goals: achieving high adherence to the intervention and good retention with follow-up assessment with the real-world realities in which monetary incentives for attending treatment are not the norm. This highlights the need for funders to endorse innovative strategies, particularly as it pertains to structuring recruitment and participation incentives that take the resource-strained contexts of participants into account.

DISCUSSION

Although implementing family-based intervention in juvenile justice settings is challenging, families play an essential role in youths’ lives. Therefore, it is critically important to identify strategies to address the various barriers and challenges that impact engagement of families in intervention.¹¹ In this article, our goal was to highlight what we have encountered as some of the most consistent and critical challenges working with youths and families in the juvenile justice system and offer potential strategies to overcome these barriers.

Whereas more research is needed to improve understanding of implementation barriers in juvenile justice, work force development also needs to be considered as part of the overall solution. Growing a competent workforce of service providers and researchers committed to the well-being of youths and families involved in the juvenile justice system will help improve the ongoing challenges faced by this community. Additionally, funding opportunities that support partnerships between county agencies, systems of care, and research institutions to troubleshoot barriers and develop strategic dissemination models can facilitate sustainable research-informed practice. Researchers interested in addressing the needs of this population should cast a wide net in terms of seeking funding opportunities to support their work. Examples of agencies that fund justice-focused research that may not typically be considered include, but are not limited to, the Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Institutes of Justice, Office of Victims and Crime, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, William T. Grant Foundation, and the MacArthur Foundation.

In summary, this article provides an overview of challenges and strategies for conducting family-based research in juvenile justice settings. By offering practical solutions across

various challenges, we hope this article encourages more researchers to thoughtfully engage in research and practice that improve outcomes for youths in the juvenile justice system.

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