

# 5 Ways Juvenile Court Judges Can Use Data

Judges use information every day to inform decisions about individuals or cases, but not all judges apply that same information to making decisions about the practices in their courtroom or jurisdiction. For example, judges use information about an individual youth's educational status to determine appropriate services for that youth, but may not compile education data for all court-involved youth and look for patterns. This information helps to direct resources and system improvement efforts and to set baselines for evaluating policy or practice changes. Data collected in courtrooms every day can be aggregated and viewed differently to paint a picture of what is happening in that court and community. Here are five important ways that judges can use data:

01

## Align decisions with evidence-based practices

Judges want to support the best interests of youth who come before the court, but how can they be sure that their court's procedures align with what research says works? Data can describe a court's overall functioning, replacing anecdotes with objective answers. For example, research has shown that courts achieve better outcomes when they divert low-risk, first-time offenders. Looking at the number of youth eligible for diversion by age, offense, and diversion decision helps judges see how many and which type of youth are eligible for and receive diversion as well as which type of youth are eligible but are not being diverted. This information allows judges to objectively assess whether their routine decision making aligns with evidence-based practices.

02

## Support positive outcomes for kids

The juvenile court exists not only to hold youth accountable, but also to support them to grow into productive, law-abiding adults. It's impossible to know whether policies and practices are resulting in positive outcomes for justice-involved youth without collecting and analyzing data. Data collected from assessments and interviews with the youth and family can inform court decisions and data shared by partnering agencies, like schools and community providers, can help judges understand how youth change as a result of interventions and see if the court is achieving its goals. Understanding which youth succeed in which programs can help judges match youth with the response that is likely to produce the best outcomes.

03

## Identify opportunities for improvement

Looking at the same measures over time can point to processes that could be improved, identify potential solutions, and set baselines. Data empowers court staff and stakeholders to suggest opportunities for new policies or practices that may be more efficient, lead to better outcomes, or ensure fairness. Anecdotal evidence might start the conversation, but objective data helps to direct efforts in the most impactful and efficient way. By using data to identify opportunities for improvement, judges can be sure that their often limited resources are leveraged wisely.

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“In many cases, I use data to educate the community to better understand what issues and challenges we see every day in my courtroom. I can describe my court's processes with data. I can explain in depth the children who come through my courtroom, what their demographics are, what offenses they committed, the challenges they are facing, the variety of services they require, and the complexities of decisions I make. This information is critical to have as I describe the intricacies of juvenile justice needs not only in my court but throughout Ohio. Finally, data collection is critical as our court applies for national, state and local funding to meet the needs of the children and families that we all serve.”



**THE HONORABLE  
ANTHONY CAPIZZI**

NCJFCJ PRESIDENT  
MONTGOMERY COUNTY JUVENILE COURT, OHIO

## 04

## Measure improvement efforts

The last two decades have seen numerous juvenile justice system improvements in jurisdictions across the country. Judges should know whether changes in courtroom practice are being implemented as designed and if they are having the intended impacts. For example, a jurisdiction that recently started using a validated risk assessment tool can regularly monitor the proportion of staff trained in administering the assessment, the proportion of youth assessed in a timely manner, and the degree to which the results were incorporated into case management decisions. After ensuring proper implementation, youth outcomes can be differentiated across risk levels or types of needs. Objectively monitoring practice changes not only assures they are implemented as intended, but clearly demonstrates related court activity to stakeholders, including funders, policymakers, and the public.

## 05

## Tell the story of juvenile justice

Not only can the data collected and used by courts tell the story of juvenile justice locally, but it can also contribute to the broader story of juvenile justice at the state and national levels. State and federal agencies make important funding decisions that support practice, policy, and research. The more resources courts invest in research and planning locally, the better able they will be to contribute high quality data to state and national data collections and the broader picture of juvenile justice. Sometimes judges hesitate to trust their court's data because they are not satisfied with its quality and afraid that inaccurate data will paint a false picture of their jurisdiction. One way to improve the quality of data is to analyze, use, and discuss it. The more data are used, the better their quality will become.



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Most judges don't want to hear that they aren't doing something very well. Our position is that if we know there is an issue, we can address it and create better outcomes. After examining our initial data, it was clear that our jurisdiction had historically had a high detention rate. Once we knew this was an issue, we actively learned how to balance the youth's need to remain in the community against public safety. By using a structured detention assessment instrument, we became consistent in our detention decisions. This led to a significant decrease in detention and commitment rates. Our jurisdiction is now seen as a model within our state for maintaining some of the lowest detention and commitment rates without negatively impacting public safety.”



### THE HONORABLE SHERI C. ROBERTS

CHIEF JUDGE, ALCOVY JUDICIAL CIRCUIT COURT  
NEWTON & WALTON COUNTIES, GEORGIA

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The OJJDP Juvenile Justice Model Data Project aims to enhance the quality and consistency of juvenile justice information and to increase its appropriate use in policy and practice decisions by providing guidance to states and jurisdictions on data improvements. The Model Data Project is a collaboration between the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the National Center for Juvenile Justice, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA), the Council of Juvenile Correctional Administrators (CJCA), the Performance-based Standards Learning Institute (PbS), and researchers from the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (FLDJJ).

## CONTACT

Teri Deal, Senior Research Associate  
Email: [tdeal@ncjfcj.org](mailto:tdeal@ncjfcj.org)  
Phone: 412-246-0846

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