

The Los Angeles County Juvenile Probation Outcomes Study

Executive Summary

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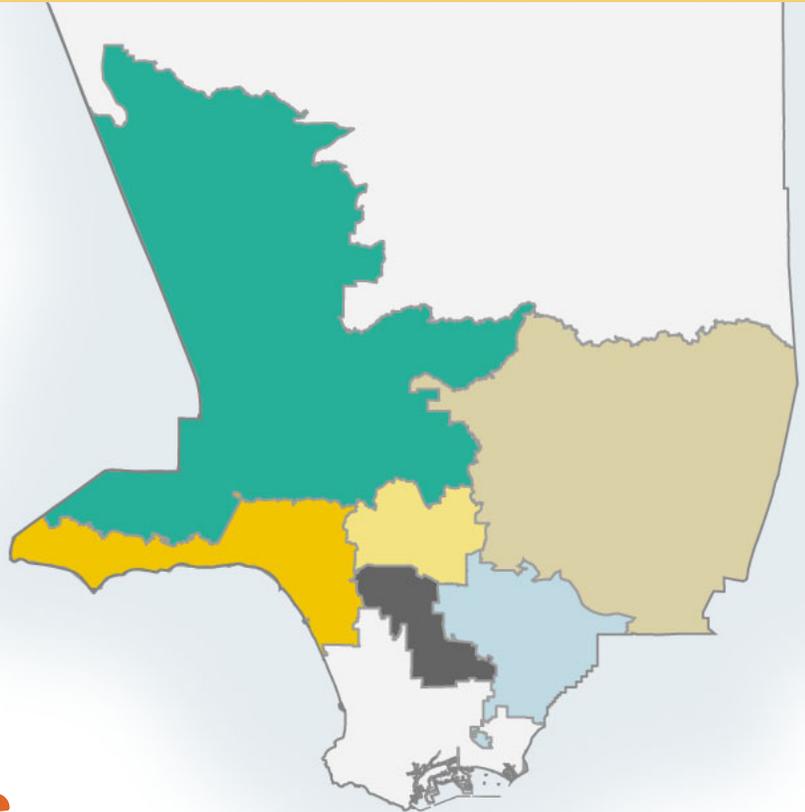
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Study Significance

Why is this study important for Los Angeles County?

We believe this study is significant and important to the County for several reasons.

- ① It represents what can be accomplished when researchers, practitioners, and advocates work together to address key practice and policy issues collaboratively.
- ① The commitment and cooperation of several County Departments including Probation, the Department of Children and Family Services, the Department of Mental Health, and the Los Angeles County Office of Education produced a unique and comprehensive picture of youth exiting from suitable placements and camps—one that documents their trajectories and illustrates the challenges these youth and their families face before and during their involvement in Probation.
- ① This study examines these complexities in a comprehensive way, calling for a united vision for juvenile justice in Los Angeles County that combines the need to
 - build strong data infrastructures within juvenile justice and across partner agencies,
 - use data to drive practice and policy decisions, and,
 - facilitate multi-systems coordination and collaboration to ensure the risks and needs of system-involved youth and families are matched to effective services.

While we know this study only marks the beginning of a much deeper conversation needed by practitioners, policy makers, advocacy groups, community providers, parents, youth, and researchers, we firmly hope it provides the necessary foundation to inspire all key stakeholders to develop a comprehensive and coordinated plan to positively impact well-being of youth and families in Los Angeles County.

Study Overview

What was the purpose of this study?

To capture and tell the story of youth placed in Probation suitable placements (i.e., typically group homes) and Probation camps in order to inform practice and policy decisions intended to improve system responses and prevent involvement with Probation.

How did this study capture these stories?

Data were collected and analyzed from the Los Angeles County Probation Department, the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH), and the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE). Data were drawn from Probation's database and paper case files to capture as much information about the youth's trajectory before, during, and after their placement. Data from other County agencies were then used to augment Probation data. Additionally, eight in-depth case narratives were produced to provide a qualitative appreciation for their experience in Probation.

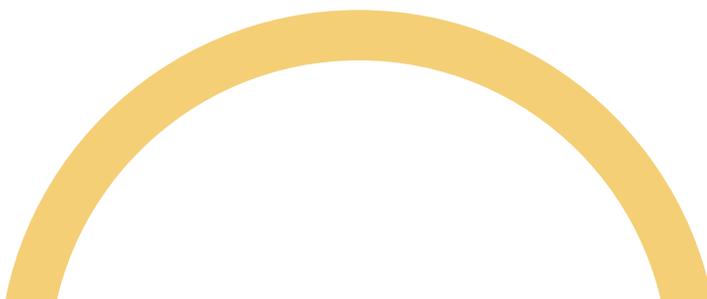
Who were the subjects of the study?

A random sample of 250 youth was taken from all suitable placement exits between January 1, 2011 and June 30, 2011, and a random sample of 250 youth was taken from all camp placement exits between July 1, 2011 and December 31, 2011. Data for all these cases were drawn from information systems maintained by Probation and DCFS. From these

samples, 50 youth were drawn randomly from each cohort for additional data collection using paper case file reviews. Additionally, DMH and LACOE data were provided for these cases.

Who completed this study?

In 2012, the W.M. Keck Foundation funded the Advancement Project to support a unique practice-policy-research partnership comprised of representatives from Advancement Project, the Los Angeles County Probation Department, researchers from California State University Los Angeles, School of Criminal Justice & Criminalistics and the University of Southern California, School of Social Work, and the Children's Defense Fund-California to conduct a study examining the characteristics and experiences of youth exiting from suitable placement and camp placement in Los Angeles County. A Research Roundtable was also convened to provide on-going feedback to the research team and Advancement Project. Eminent Southern California researchers from a number of related disciplines reviewed study methods, initial findings, and overall conclusions of the study, while practitioners from partner departments shared information on current operations and data available in their department's information systems.



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Why was this study completed?

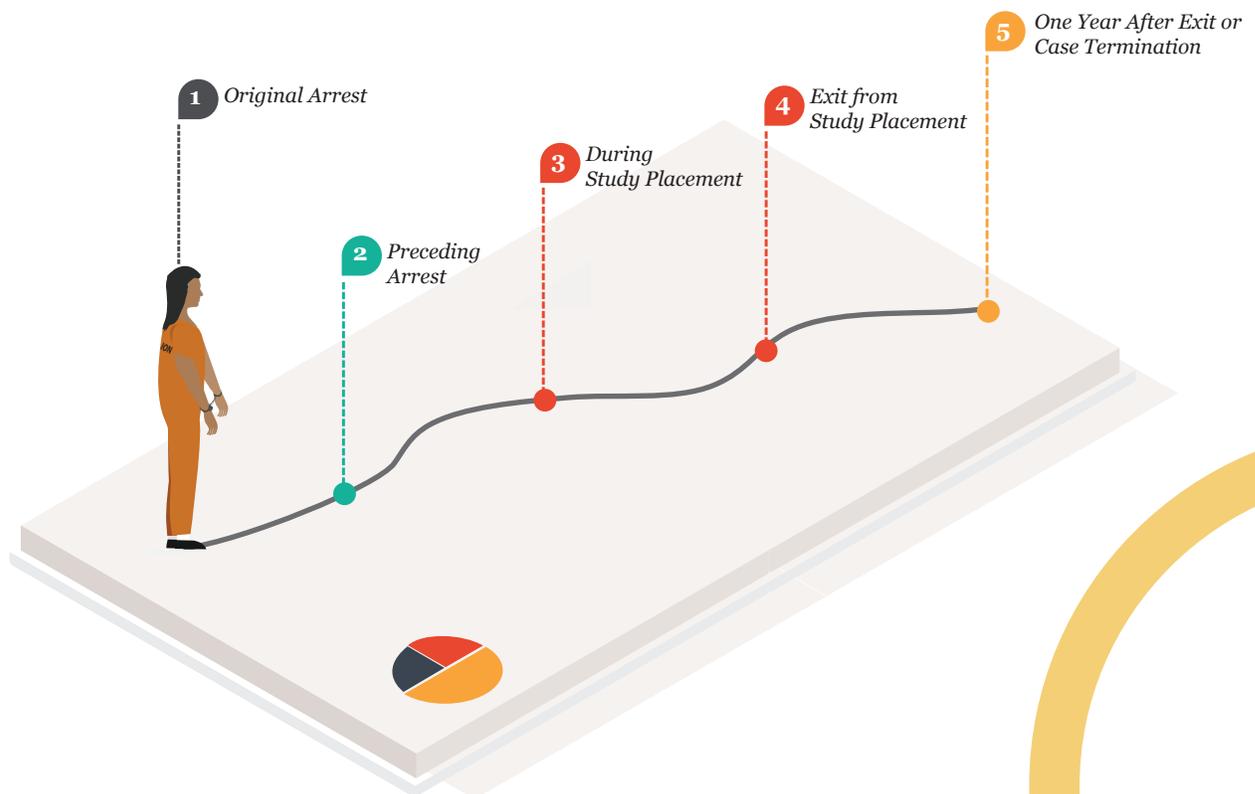
A number of efforts related to juvenile justice exist in Los Angeles County, but unfortunately, outcomes for Probation-involved youth are not produced consistently, and projects rarely have data to understand issues confronting Probation-involved youth from a comprehensive perspective. These shortcomings are largely due to inadequate or underutilized data systems combined with limited to no connection between County agency databases. This study focused on the data challenges that exist in Los Angeles County while simultaneously using available data to “make the case” that better use of data is critical to improving the well-being of children and families. Specifically, the current study produced in-depth descriptions of deeply involved Probation youth:

- identify how agencies, communities, and families can better prevent youth entry into the juvenile justice system;
- provide insight into how to prevent youth who enter the juvenile justice system from reaching the point of being placed in out-of-home care (suitable placement) and/or Probation camps;

- provide direction on how to build an integrated and coordinated response system that would address the complex needs of youth and families, particularly those who penetrate deeply into the system; and,
- identify key outcomes that can be measured consistently and regularly (e.g., annually) by Probation, LACOE and allied County departments.

What does the report include?

This report begins by providing an overview of the need for and purpose of juvenile justice data as well as the current structures of data collection in Los Angeles County (Chapter 1). Next, it examines the characteristics and situational contexts of youth exiting from suitable placements and juvenile camp placements during 2011 (Chapters 2 & 3). Eight in-depth youth case histories taken from Probation records are presented to illustrate the context within which these youths’ stories unfold from the perspective of the Probation Officers who supervise and oversee youth in the system (Chapter 4). Based on the findings presented in this report, Chapter 5 presents recommendations to improve practice through targeted reform and improved use of data.



Main Findings from the Study

What were the main findings of the report?

- Using data across multiple systems (Probation, DCFS, DMH, and LACOE), the study illustrates the intersection of these agencies for youth and families—often involvement that precedes their deep penetration into the Probation system. When these youth enter Probation, for example, many youth and their families have already been in contact with other agencies and have struggled with issues of poverty, violence, and criminal justice involvement.
- Nearly all of the case file youth had at least one DSM-IV-TR diagnosis, and half of these youth struggled with substance use. By the time youth reach Probation, particularly Probation placements, their educational history was riddled with irregular school transitions, poor academic performance, and behavior problems at school. Many of these youth were also credit deficient. LACOE data indicate that school performance was improved and credits were increased when they are in placement. Finally, youth who were involved in the child welfare system had numerous referrals to DCFS prior to their involvement in the delinquency system.
- Probation placement orders are not typically the first disposition received by the youth. Most of the youth in the study had been Home on Probation and were placed in suitable placement or camp after receiving a Probation violation or new charges.
- Probation youth receive a range of services while under supervision. In particular, suitable placement and camp services focused on the youth's mental health needs (individual counseling), family engagement (family counseling), and substance abuse services (alcohol/drug education and treatment); however, youth in suitable placements received more services related to family counseling than youth in camp placements during and after their placements.
- Recidivism data for youth in both cohorts showed that new arrests and sustained petitions are highest between youths' original arrests and their placement. This time period represents an opportunity to focus efforts on providing front-end support and services to youth (and families) at their original arrest.
- Probation Officers involved in this study expressed the importance of conducting case file reviews for training purposes. Analyzing previous cases provided a unique opportunity to view youth and families from a comprehensive point of view and to identify what was effective with a particular case and/or what should have been done to achieve more effective outcomes.

Highlights from Report Recommendations

What were key recommendations of the study and how did they relate to the findings?

- By the time these youth enter Probation placements, they face a number of challenges beyond problem behavior, including (but not limited to) abuse at home, educational failure, mental health problems, and substance abuse issues. It is critical to recognize and address the gaps in Probation service programming but also to step back and consider how multisystem approaches can be built to prevent delinquency from occurring and reduce its escalation when it does occur.

Report Recommendation: Create a comprehensive continuum of care including supports, services and coordinated responses from County departments and community partners. Key stakeholder groups, including youth and families, should be invited to discuss the report findings and identify policy and practice changes needed to effectively address current challenges and support for positive youth development.

- Many of the Probation-involved youth have needs that are served by other departments – before, during and after their exit from Probation supervision – these youth fare better when County departments coordinate and collaborate toward achieving the same goals.

Report Recommendation: The Board of Supervisors should authorize the CEO to establish a cross-departmental Juvenile Justice Data Systems Task Force that includes the Chief of Probation, Director of DCFS, Director of DMH, Director of DPSS, Director of DHS and Director of DPH, and Supervising Judges of the Juvenile Division of the Los Angeles County Superior Court, as well as external stakeholders, researchers with subject matter expertise in best practices for juvenile justice systems, the Chief Information Officer (CIO), and other experts in data technology, to review current data systems and make short and long term recommendations to develop an integrated County youth data system. The Task Force would submit a final report and set of recommendations around implementing an integrated data system to the Board of Supervisors for approval and then continues its involvement by providing oversight and monitoring of implementation.

- While youth and families have multiple needs, case file reviews revealed that sometimes family risks and needs are not thoroughly assessed. This was a result of irregular home visits, lack of family contact, and minimal family engagement. Another significant barrier is the limited access to interagency data - it was difficult to identify if other systems were serving the same youth based on Probation data alone.

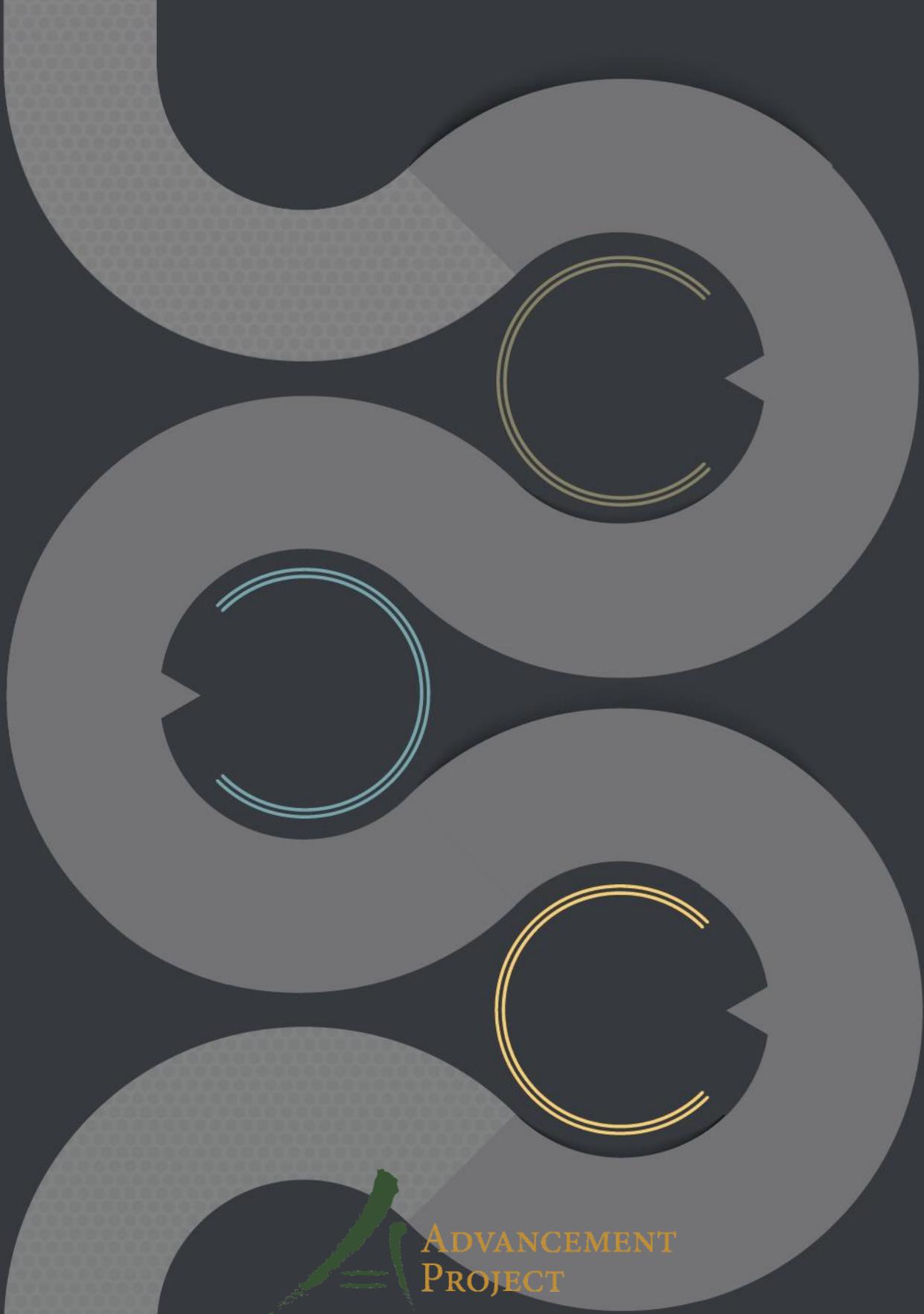
Report Recommendation: The report provides a number of recommendations related to establishing a DPO training improvement committee to review and update existing protocol to address barriers to service delivery. This includes training protocols that offer opportunities for case file review and discussions; integrating specific performance standards to ensure accountability and consistency across DPO supervision practices (such as needs assessment, appropriate service referrals, documentation); conducting a comprehensive review of available services and interventions for Probation-involved youth and families; and reviewing the use of LARRC as a risk assessment tool for effective case management by matching services to the specific needs of youth. To augment these efforts, creating a way to interface critical agency data systems so information relevant to case management and assessment are available across agencies.

- The main source of critical information on youth backgrounds and needs was contained in PCMS case notes. These notes are not completed in a consistent manner and are not suited for deriving outcomes over time on youth progress. The use of case notes for all information related to a case is a significant problem because it does not provide a viable and valid way to case manage youth, and it is impossible to produce outcomes in aggregate form to evaluate and inform practice.

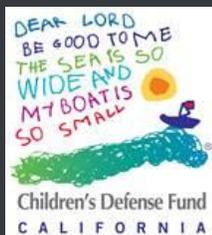
Report Recommendation: These recommendations include the need for better use of information systems within Probation. The Chief of Probation should lead an internal task force that includes Probation leadership as well as external stakeholders and technology experts to advise on developing performance-data systems. In particular, the report provides a number of recommendations related to re-programming PCMS so it facilitates case management (i.e., aligns with practice rather than making data entry a cumbersome process), internal use of data to drive practice and policy decisions, and report key outcomes regularly and consistently. To assist in this process, the report calls for the development of a research unit (internally within Probation or through partnerships with outside researchers) to assist with these processes. A suggested starting point for key outcomes is shown on the next page.

Suggested Key Outcomes for Regular and Consistent Reporting

Outcome Type	Suggested Measures
Risk Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk and Need Factors • Protective Factors • Risk level
Other System Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact level with DCFS • Contact level with DMH • Contact level with DPSS
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrollment • Attendance • Performance • Status (i.e., credits and graduation/completion status) • Behavior at schools • Irregular school transitions
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental health problems • Treatment status • Progress over time
Substance Abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance abuse problems • Treatment status • Progress over time
Stability in Living Situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where is youth living? (family home, relatives, other) • Is their living situation stable and safe? • Any history of protective services (referral, substantiation, open cases, foster care placement)
Family Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type of relationships/levels of support with family members • Level of conflict • Participation in family counseling or other services
Positive Support Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is youth connected to positive adult role models? • Does youth have a support system to help him/her succeed? • Is youth involved in prosocial activities?
Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What services were recommended? • What services did youth receive? • How long did the services last? • Youth participation in recommended service? (e.g., attending, not attending, completed service, terminated from service) • Amount of service youth received (i.e., dosage) • Is targeted behavior improving?
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment history • Vocational education or aspirations
Recidivism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New criminal arrests • Sustained petitions for criminal arrests



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