

Foreword

The MacArthur Foundation is proud to have engaged for more than a decade in efforts to stimulate, support and sustain juvenile justice system reform through the Models for Change initiative.

Our work in juvenile justice began in 1996, at a time when the lines that separated the juvenile and criminal justice systems had become increasingly blurred, and young offenders were being treated more and more as though they were adult criminals. The significant individual and societal costs of these “get-tough” measures received little public scrutiny. In response, we adopted an approach that emphasized research on development during adolescence—the transitional period when a person is no longer a child but not yet an adult—in the belief that a better understanding of this period of growth could have significant policy implications. The MacArthur Research Network on Adolescent Development and Juvenile Justice oversaw a number of high-profile research studies establishing the profound developmental differences between adolescents and adults, and exploring the justice implications of those differences. A long-term effort to translate these findings into policy and practice was the natural next step, and in 2004 the Models for Change initiative was launched.

From the beginning, Models for Change sought to assist and accelerate *national* reform momentum, helping move the country toward more rational, fair, effective, and developmentally appropriate responses to young people in conflict with the law. As a practical matter, however, our strategy needed to take into account the complex state and local variations in the juvenile justice landscape, and the need for a broad range of system reform models to suit these varying conditions. The Models for Change approach was flexible, collaborative and opportunistic: meeting state and local systems where they were, helping them to address their own reform priorities, working in a variety of issue areas, and taking advantage of naturally occurring structures and opportunities.

Assessing the impact of such an approach is necessarily difficult, particularly over a long period that saw significant progress in juvenile justice nationally. The Models for Change evaluation was accordingly structured to yield useful learning regarding the process of change, rather than to draw precise causal inferences between Foundation investments and specific outcomes. Needless to say, however, the Foundation is profoundly gratified by the important advances we have witnessed in juvenile justice during the Models for Change years, from landmark Supreme Court decisions citing developmental research, to widespread and sustained reductions in incarceration and formal processing of youth, to a host of state laws and local policies and programs that reflect a new understanding of what it means to be “smart on crime” where youth are concerned. While there is still plenty of work to do to ensure that youth in trouble with the law receive fair, effective, and developmentally appropriate justice, the basic paradigm has shifted, and we are hopeful that the striking progress we have seen in juvenile justice will continue into the future.

We embrace the conclusions of this report. Information from the evaluation of Models for Change has informed and significantly affected our design of the Safety and Justice Challenge initiative, which is a broadly similar effort to stimulate and support national reform momentum in the criminal justice area. One important insight emerging from the Models for Change evaluation is simply that it is extraordinarily difficult to mount a completely retrospective evaluation of an ambitious, long-term, nationwide systems reform effort of this kind. Accordingly, a national evaluator has already been engaged for the Safety and Justice Challenge, and evaluation perspectives and needs have been incorporated into the design and implementation of the initiative from the beginning. Other key takeaways that have affected the structure of the Safety and Justice Challenge include the need for a

national intermediary to oversee multi-jurisdictional systems change efforts; the benefits of engaging national “strategic ally” organizations early in the initiative; and the utility of a small range of “hard target” indicators to serve as primary measures of progress.

After so many years of active support for juvenile justice reform and system improvement, and as the Foundation narrows its focus in an effort to help bring about even greater impact, the Foundation departs the field with regret, but also with confidence that our partners are well-positioned to carry on the work. Through Models for Change “legacy” grantmaking that began in 2012, we have supported efforts to secure and sustain juvenile justice reform progress in the places where we have worked, to capture and communicate all that has been learned and achieved there, and to stand up independent resource centers capable of spreading that learning and progress more broadly.

We hope that our efforts have contributed momentum to a wave of national juvenile justice reform that will continue to build for years to come.

Julia Stasch
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