Research shows that incarcerated young people who maintain positive relationships with loved ones are more likely to address treatment needs while in juvenile justice placement facilities and refrain from additional justice system-involvement after they return to the community. In February 2010, the Family Justice Program of the Vera Institute of Justice embarked on Families as Partners, a research and technical assistance project with the Ohio Department of Youth Services (DYS) that sought to promote better outcomes among incarcerated youth by helping staff draw on youths’ families as a source of material and emotional support.

Specifically, project staff aimed to encourage visits and correspondence between youth and their families by integrating the Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool (JRIT) into staff practices. The JRIT is a modified version of the Relational Inquiry Tool that the Family Justice Program developed for use in adult facilities. Although research on the project’s outcome will continue until 2013, initial findings signal the importance of family, broadly defined, to detained young men. Researchers also found that the JRIT showed promise in helping staff learn about placed youths’ family and other positive social supports.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

Working at two DYS facilities for young men, project staff surveyed 133 youth and interviewed 22. The survey and interview questions focused on the youths’ ability to stay connected to their loved ones, their perception of family support, how comfortable they feel discussing family with facility staff, and their reactions to the JRIT process.

“*My family tried their best to visit me, even when it cost $250 because gas is so expensive. Talking and listening to them calms me, especially if I had a bad day.*”

—A young man incarcerated at a DYS facility
FINDINGS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

Almost all survey respondents (98 percent) reported receiving support from family during their incarceration, including expressions of encouragement and appreciation as well as financial support. The interview responses described positive effects from such support. “[H]aving family support motivates me to know I got something to go home to," said one respondent, characteristically. Youth reported that families provide them with motivation, security (knowing they have a home to return to when they leave the facility), and hope for their future—whether it holds the prospect of going back to school, getting a job, or applying to college.

Incarcerated youth reported that phone calls and letters are the most common ways they stay in contact with their families. They cited cost as the biggest challenge to maintaining phone contact. Visitation was also important; those who received more visits reported feeling happier with their relationships and more connected and committed to family members. Forty-three surveyed youth did not receive visitors. These young people reported distance from the facility (70 percent) and transportation difficulties (21 percent)—for example not having a car or the inaccessibility of the facility by public transportation—as obstacles for visitors. Half of the respondents who had visitors mentioned distance as the reason they were not visited more frequently. (The average length of stay for youth incarcerated at DYS facilities is seven and one-half months.) One young man said that after he was transferred farther from his home, his family had not visited because of the cost of gas. “My parents don’t have a land line so I can’t call them, but they always find a way of getting in touch with me,” he said.

Figure 1 illustrates the visitation rate at one DYS facility according to the school districts where their families resided. Youth whose families lived closest to the facility (located in district 11) received the most visits.

Young men also reported difficulty maintaining contact with their children. Sixteen of the surveyed youth reported having children, and 10 said they did not have any contact with their children.
FAMILIES AS PARTNERS

FINDINGS REGARDING YOUTH ATTITUDES TOWARD STAFF

The majority of youth reported having positive relationships with facility staff. Many indicated that they turned to staff to discuss how they will stay motivated to succeed after their release and believed staff tried to help them (see Figure 2). After the training and implementation of the JRIT, 79 percent of youth at both facilities reported that staff asked how families and friends are supportive. (At the facility where pre-training data was available, this number increased from 62 percent before the project to 76 percent after the JRIT was implemented.)

None of the youth reported a negative experience completing the JRIT. Many described it as a positive experience. Some said that the interaction improved their perceptions of the staff member who asked them the questions. Some said that the interaction gave the staff member a better understanding of the young person. Many young people also reported that the JRIT helped them reflect on their support system and acknowledge what their loved ones do for them.

Not surprisingly, youth who felt staff had listened to them and kept their discussions private were more likely to say they felt comfortable talking with staff about their family. Their responses to the JRIT process were more positive when staff administered it in a way that was consistent with Vera’s training—in a private setting, using active listening skills, and following up on important information.3 “I felt like we bonded,” said one young man. “[The youth specialist] spoke about his family some. I talked about cookouts and so did he. I think we both looked at each other differently after that.”

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Figure 2: Young Men’s Relationships with Staff: Responses to the Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool (n=133)

Figure 3: Changes in Facility Policies

> Implementation of the JRIT
> Creation and distribution of a new, more readable orientation packet
> Family participation in monthly treatment team meetings
> Weekly phone calls home at facility’s expense
> Revision of visitation policy to include siblings and increase visiting hours
> Inclusion of families at sporting events
DISCUSSION

As a result of Vera’s research and consultation, both facilities changed their policies to make it easier for young people to maintain important family relationships (see Figure 3). The Families as Partners project created more opportunities for staff and youth to interact with families—for example, by inviting families to facility-sponsored events and by allowing more people to visit for longer periods of time.

DYS integrated the JRIT into staff practice at the two participating facilities, which now routinely use the tool. Vera’s surveys and interviews show that the JRIT, when reinforced by greater efforts to engage families, can have the desired effects—building rapport between youth and staff and prompting young people to think about the external resources available to them. DYS’s ongoing commitment to creating a family-focused environment in the state’s juvenile justice system shows promise as a means to foster lasting benefits for Ohio’s youth and their families. Vera will continue to work with DYS in its other facilities and will publish a report on that work in the future.

ENDNOTES


2 Some youth listed more than one obstacle.

3 The JRIT training covered active listening skills such as making eye contact, paraphrasing, limiting nonverbal cues and nodding, and allowing for silence.