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Aggregate Correlates of Status Offender Case Outcomes Across Counties

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This article examines the petitioning and adjudication outcomes of juveniles taken into custody for drinking, truancy and ungovernable behavior offenses across 67 Alabama counties. Outcomes of these cases reflect social and political arrangements, as well as involve the least culpable of all offenders, status offenders. Aggregate family poverty, prosecutorial caseload, presence of social workers and police presence are key variables in juvenile court decisions across counties.

Keywords: juveniles, Alabama, counties, punishment, low risk

Many organizations such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and American Bar Association (ABA) have spoken out against excessive punishment of status offenders. Harsh punishment for status offenders is the problem under consideration in this article. Such processing may have negative consequences for juveniles as well as communities (Jennings, Gibson and Lanza-Kaduce, 2009; Osgood, 1983; Spergel, Reamer and Lynch, 1981; Rubin, 1979). In this article, we examine aggregate factors expected to affect contextual variation in the outcomes of status cases.

Feld (1991) advanced the idea of understanding the importance of jurisdictional context on juvenile court processing. There are socio-economic factors such as aggregate poverty, inequality, single parent households and racial composition specific to any area that may affect aggregate delinquency within areas (Jarjoura, Triplett and Brinker, 2002). These same aggregate variables have been used to predict court outcomes for juveniles (Hay, Fortson, Hollist, Altheimer and Schaible, 2007; Feld, 1991).

The structural and economic resources available to the courts within certain areas prove themselves valuable predictors of whether cases are formally processed (Feld, 1991). One variable that has not yet been considered in the literature, however, is the effect of the presence of social service resources on juvenile court outcomes. In this article, we test whether the amount of funding allocated to juvenile social services across counties is an indicator of the ability of courts to divert certain low risk juveniles. Such resources include a large local tax base and ability of the court to utilize social workers. In this article, we explore whether access to such resources contribute more to court decisions than is generally thought.

Some research also indicates that political sentiments, demographic and economic factors affect court processing (Bowers and Waltman, 1993). We recognize that localized ideologies (such as conservatism) may also define areas and operate as a catalyst for how certain jurisdictions are predisposed to

negotiate with offenders. In this article, we add an indicator of juvenile social services to examine status case processing, while holding constant some of the more traditional aggregate variables used to explain outcomes in court processing.

Literature Review

Previous work explores factors affecting prosecutorial and judicial decision-making in juvenile courts. Feld's (1991) seminal work points out several individual and aggregate-level characteristics that potentially affect petitioning and adjudication decisions. According to Feld, there is a need for contextual sentencing analyses in juvenile justice because sentencing disparities are linked with areas: "Studies which analyze and interpret aggregated data without accounting for contextual and structural characteristics may systematically mislead and obscure, rather than clarify defining individual characteristics..." (Feld, 1991, p. 160).

Understanding geographic variation is important, especially in the processing of status cases, because as Ulmer and Johnson (2004, p. 137) note: "The possibility of such a justice system presents a dilemma: on the one hand, fundamental civil rights issues, on the other, notions of democracy. If the sentence one receives and the grounds for that sentence depend on location, then the notions of equal justice that underlie most Western legal systems may be undermined." Most studies of contextual variation in sentencing have focused on adults due to limited data availability for juveniles.

Literature Review: Contextualized Sentencing Studies

Contextualized sentencing refers to external factors that influence sentencing (Muncie 2008; Feld, 1991). Early research examining political contextual effects focused on sentencing for criminal cases in a single political jurisdiction or state (Peterson and Hagan 1984; Kuklinski and Stanga, 1979). Feld (1991) adapted this idea to the juvenile justice system, adding the idea that factors such as cultural homogeneity and ruralness across counties affected processing formality. Many studies since indicate that local decisions may also be affected

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by aggregate and jurisdictional level politics at small levels of analysis, such as counties and cities (Helms and Jacobs, 2002; Huang et al., 1996; Kuklinski and Stanga, 1979).

Savelsberg (1994) argued that the influence of public opinion on punishment in a populist direct democracy such as the U.S. reinforce an expectation that local political values will be a key punishment determinant. Contextual sentencing research from Huang et al. (1996) supported a hypothesis linking political conservatism to enhanced punishment decisions across a wide range of felony cases in the state of Georgia. Other studies have contributed support for political environment effects on legal decision making as well (Cook 1977; Waltman and Bowers 1993; Erickson, Wright, and McIver, 1987).

Contextual Sentencing and Political Ideology

The centerpiece of contextual sentencing analyses has usually been law and order politics, which is usually measured by aggregate conservative voting preferences (Carmichael and Burgos, 2012). Law and order politics, which emphasize an aggressive crime control agenda are usually thought to preside in Republican jurisdictions (Helms and Costanza, 2010, Jacobs and Helms, 2001). Because strict crime control politics is often associated with punishment, both criminal and juvenile sentencing will be more severe in those areas. Democratic versus Republican politics within certain jurisdictions often provide the focus of such research and jurisdictional political preference has been shown to impact adult sentencing (Barnes, Sloss and Thaman, 2009; Bowers and Waltman, 1993).

Prosecutorial Caseload and Juvenile Social Services

Another influence on court outcomes is the courtroom work environment. Some have highlighted the importance of overloaded courtroom dockets on prosecutorial and judicial decision-making (Vogel, 1996). Independent of politics, it seems possible that the amount of adult crime (or more serious juvenile crime) in an area indirectly dictates the outcome of less serious juvenile cases. The importance of the courtroom workgroup (prosecutors, judges and defense attorneys) in making pretrial decisions (Haynes and Ruback, 2010) cannot be overstated.

Overloaded adult court dockets (stacked with more serious cases of crime) find less serious delinquents and status offenders beneficiaries of less harsh sentencing because prosecutorial caseload has reached unsustainable levels (Feeley, 1979). In most cases, prosecutors and juvenile judges have wide ranging discretion in making dispositions toward juvenile offenders. The juvenile justice system has the largest variation of dispositions in the United States (Janeksela and Miller, 1985). Alternative punishments doled out by the juvenile court system have ranged from everything from community service to physically binding children to their parents (Bonnie, 1995). In fact, much of the relevant literature here focuses on the large degree of discretion in the juvenile justice system among police (Novak, James, Smith and Engel, 2002; Southern Illinois University

Center for the Study of Crime, 1978), intake workers (Mulvey and Iselin, 2008; Shook and Sarri, 2007; Bell and Lang, 1985), prosecutors (Sanborn, 1996; Feely, 1979) and judges (Schrag, 1991).

Limitations of Previous Literature

Although there is no literature that makes it explicit, one would assume that certain areas are better equipped to mete out alternative punishment or divert cases away from formal processing. Some areas, for example, may receive substantial endowments from federal authorities to channel funds into preventative programs or educational programs. Some areas may have more social workers and associated social services present to facilitate such cases. Many contextual analyses have illuminated our understanding for why some cases are formally processed, but do not examine the court's ability to provide alternatives to formal process. Specifically we are concerned with how those counties' level of social support for at-risk juveniles might affect court processing in context. We look at outcomes of status offenses; something that has rarely been done in contextual analyses.

Theory and hypotheses

The research presented here assesses whether certain contextual variables help to predict punishment patterns for status offense cases that were adjudicated across 67 Alabama counties and reached final disposition in 2001. Drawing from the aforementioned literature, several hypotheses are created for status offense outcomes. The theory we offer is that juvenile processing is influenced by a convergence of factors that involve both county-level politics and resources, both of which vary by area. Among variables that we utilize are: the rates of police per thousand juveniles in an area, the size of prosecutorial caseload, the number of social workers and the amount of federal funding received by a county for drug-free programming. Many of these variables have been utilized at some points to explain court decision making, but rarely, if ever applied to status crimes.

This research examines aggregate level factors found to be of import in previous research of crime, and applies those factors to examining jurisdictional and contextual punishment for the least serious of juvenile offenders. Contextual indicators of punishment, such as police presence, prosecutorial caseload and social services provisions are also expected to show impact on juvenile petitioning and sentencing decisions.

First, we expect that *overall prosecutorial caseload plays an important role in the petitioning and disposition of status offense cases*. This hypothesis suggests a link between court resources and the outcomes of cases. Some research indicates that the prosecutorial caseload effects what is known as case-processing time, or the total number of days it takes for a case to reach one or more stages in the system, is the a commonly used measure of the pace of case progress (Steelman, Goerdt, & McMillan, 2000). Boyd, Huss and Myers (2008)

discuss the impact of lengthy case processing on the compromised quality of processing. To preserve case integrity, prosecutors in areas with overloaded dockets may ignore the more innocuous cases such as juvenile crime.

We hypothesize that in areas with a large prosecutorial caseload, status offense sentencing becomes a matter of common-sense, wherein both petitioning and sentencing are less likely to be carried out. In areas where there are a lot of arrests for adult crimes and/or index crimes, the importance and relevance of status offense cases will simply render such cases not important enough to bring to trial. We also hypothesize that a *high percentage of delinquency cases will result in less petitioning and dispositions for status offenders*.

Second, we expect family deprivation, linked to aggregate poverty, to play an important role in the prediction of status offense processing. Poverty has been found to affect sentencing decisions at the individual level (Wooldredge, 2007). Our primary hypothesis is that a higher percentage of households in poverty within a county will predict an increase in status offense punishment. Where areas are experiencing a great deal of poverty, families may simply not have the resources to appeal to the sensibilities of intake officers. Inversely, residents of areas with affluence can prove effectual in hiring attorneys that may have more influence on juvenile judicial decision-making. In addition, affluent families of troubled juveniles can also ostensibly afford to pay for private social services, for example, private drug rehabilitation facilities. As such, we expect the *aggregate level of poverty in an area to be positively associated with petitioning and disposition of status cases, along with length of stay*.

A fourth hypothesis is that *aggregate-level conservatism will be associated with most severe status offense dispositions*. There is a host of literature that focuses on the tendency of courtroom actors in law and order jurisdictions to support severe sentences (Helms and Costanza, 2009; Carmichael, 2012). In Alabama, the county prosecutor (or, district attorney) is directly elected by voters. The district attorney is responsible for appointing juvenile prosecutors, or may even act as the sole juvenile prosecutor in rural or small jurisdictions. We expect that these prosecutors will be responsive to their electorate.

We suggest that the average *age of status offense defendants within a given jurisdiction will affect the amount of cases that are brought to adjudication and likewise, sentenced*. There is much literature that shows juvenile courts are quicker to punish older juveniles than younger juveniles (Espinoza & Ek, 2011). This also appeals to a commonsense notion that older juvenile offenders are more dangerous than younger juvenile offenders. Therefore, we expect that in areas where the average age of juvenile defendants is higher, the level of punishment for status offenses will rise as well.

From Feld's (1991) work, we suspect that rural areas are less prone to formally process juvenile cases. There is some literature that indicates that the level of informal social control is higher in rural settings (Stanley, Henry, et al. 2011), however, we bear in mind that some research indicates urban jurisdictions are *less* likely to target status offenses at the policing

level (Decker, 1979). These factors may counterbalance each other.

A final hypothesis presented here revolves around the ability of the local government to handle cases informally through networks of social work services. We note that resource capacity should be under consideration at many levels. Government resources such as federal funding, number of people in social work professions and number of people in policing professions within counties should hypothetically provide alternative routes in regard to adjudication dispositions. For example, in an area with many social workers, there may not be a need to sentence a status offender to detention. Such a case may be diverted. That said, federal funding and manpower in policing could also be taken as alternative ways to measure a government's organizational capacity within its own jurisdiction. We hypothesize that *more governmental resources within an area will predict reduced status offense disposition*.

Data and Methods

To test hypotheses, this data set was aggregated from five sources and applied to a macro level study of Alabama's 67 counties. First, data on juveniles taken into custody and final disposition for Alabama juvenile status crimes were acquired from the Alabama Department of Youth Services (D.Y.S.). In 2001, there were a total of 20,674 juveniles taken into custody in the state of Alabama. Of those, only 1,285 were formally processed for a status offense. During 2001, Alabama ranked only slightly below the national average with 315 out of every 1000 juveniles incarcerated. Between 2003 until 2008, Alabama ranked above the national average for juvenile offenders in custody (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995).

Unfortunately, due to confidentiality issues, we were not allowed detailed demographic or criminogenic backgrounds on these individuals so Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was not possible. The status offenders were aggregated by jurisdiction and county-level data was pooled with matching data from the 2000 census. From the 2000 census the following variables were obtained: population between the ages of 10 to 17, total population, socioeconomic status, percent of unmarried teenage single mothers, percent of households on welfare, median household income and percentage of people in the area who listed their profession as social services.

In addition, data specific to adults were taken from the 2001 Uniform Crime Reports (U.C.R.) to assess general criminal activity. This variable is important in assessing overall prosecutorial caseload. It is notable that juvenile prosecutors, in most counties, do not strictly prosecute juveniles. In many counties, they are general employees of the prosecutor's office and are also needed to prosecute adult criminal activity. As one would suspect, the number of cases on dockets increases with the number of arrests that are made, these UCR statistics provide a proxy for prosecutorial caseload.

A fourth source of data was the 2001 Law Enforcement Management Administrative Statistics (L.E.M.A.S.). This survey provided an indicator of police presence at the county

level. A fifth source of data was each county's voting registries for the 2000 presidential election results, as provided by the Alabama Secretary of State Elections Division. Data on voting preferences are a standard measure of conservatism in some previous research (Huang, Finn et al. 1996; Bowers and Waltman, 1993; McCann, 2008).

Method. OLS regression models were used to analyze the county level model of contextual effects on status offense outcomes for two categories: petitioning (which refers to the decision by the court to press the juvenile into adjudication) and out-of-home placement (custody).

Operationalizing variables. The dependent variable was developed from disaggregated Alabama juvenile statistics on status offenses. For each of the 67 Alabama counties, we focused on three status offense types: truancy, liquor violations and ungovernable behavior. To better understand the impact of these different status offense types, we explain correlates of; percent petitioned within counties and percent out-of-home placement within counties.

Prosecutorial caseload is measured by the rate of UCR index crime arrests per 1000, plus the rate of arrests per 1000 of persons between ages 10-17. *Juvenile prosecutorial caseload* is measured by observing the percent of all delinquency (minus the status cases) cases petitioned within counties. Both variables factored together in factor analyses and were added together as a proxy for overall caseload. *Police presence* within counties is measured by the number of enforcement agencies per 1000 people aged 10-17 within counties. The number of police agencies reflects the complexity of the criminal justice system within a given county.

Political conservatism within areas has also proved to be important in many studies of contextual sentencing. We constructed a conservatism index from two variables that factored together: the Republican-to-Democrat ratio within a county plus the ratio of high social economic status citizens to low social economic status citizens. It was expected that conservatism would be positively associated with harsh sentencing decisions.

Factoring together, and combining, two variables taken from the 2000 census allowed the creation of a *family deprivation index*. These variables: percent of unmarried teen mothers within a county plus the percent of individuals in poverty within a county were expected to be more than a satisfactory indicator of family deprivation.

Two variables that factored together well: percent of labor force in social service professions within a county (taken from the 2000 census) as well as rate of federal drug free funding per

1000 juveniles (taken from the 2001 Law Enforcement Management Administrative Statistics) were taken together to indicate each county's level of juvenile social service support for its residents. We combined these measures into one single index indicating social support to reduce multicollinearity.

We also call this the *juvenile social support index* because it represents two facets of organizational capacity: preventative and treatment. It reflects the ability of each county to avoid formally processing status offenses. Federal money that has gone toward delinquency prevention probably represents a concentrated effort on the part of each county to address delinquency from a treatment perspective. The presence of social workers in a county provides the court system with more diversion options. In accord with the hypotheses, we expect that the higher the level of such resources within any given county, the less likely it will be that juveniles must face formal sanctions for status offenses.

Limitations of the Data. There are two key concerns that relate to the generalization of any analyses to come. First, it has been argued that Alabama is a patently conservative state. To this we concede that results may be limited to one region of the country. However, we point out Alabama is not alone, as many Southern states have traditionally been earmarked as bedrock areas for conservative politics and traditionalism (Regnerus and Sikkink, 1999). By keeping political ideology relatively constant, we can observe the influence of other variables.

Second, the data that were available to us did not allow us to test traditional hypotheses about individual-level characteristics and prosecutorial and judicial decision-making. For example, we do not know the race or juvenile history of status offenders detained in any given county. That said, there is need for further research of individual level hypotheses. However, we note the literature on prosecutorial and judicial decision-making for status offenders has hardly been developed and that this article can make a substantial contribution by considering aggregate level factors.

Results

In Table 1, two models are presented that represent the effects of our instrumental variables. The table shows the effects of these variables on percent of status offense cases petitioned (model A), percent of status offense cases adjudicated delinquent (model B). We also controlled for average age of juvenile status defendants within counties and whether counties were considered rural or urban by the census.

Table 1.
OLS - Percent of Status Cases Petitioned and Cases Adjudicated Delinquent

	Model A: Percent of Status Cases per 1000 Petitioned	Model B: Percent of Status Cases per 1000 Adjudicated Delinquent
	Beta	Beta
Adult Prosecutorial Caseload	-0.296***	-0.370***
Aggregate Family Deprivation Index	0.254*	0.473***
Social Support Index	-0.277**	-0.058
Conservatism Index	0.212	0.223
Rate of enforcement agencies per 1000 juveniles	0.274**	-0.038
Average age of Defendants	0.152*	-0.253**
Percent of all Delinquency (non-status) cases petitioned	0.338***	-0.232
Ratio of Urban to Rural residents	0.154	-0.025
R2	.52	.27
Adjusted R2	.45	.16
F	7.84***	2.68***

(*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$)

Our strongest model is model A, which explains 52% of the variance in petitioning. As expected, prosecutorial caseload

has a negative and significant influence (-0.296) on the decision to petition cases. The model also indicates that the social support index is a negative and significant predictor (-.266) of petitioning cases. Family deprivation (.234), rate of enforcement agencies per 1000 juveniles (.274), juvenile prosecutorial caseload (.338) and average age of defendants (.152) are all significant and positive predictors of the decision to petition.

In the general sentencing model (Model B), we see that only 27% of the variance in sentencing is explained by modeled variables. Family deprivation shows a strong and positive correlation (.473) with delinquent adjudications in status offense cases. Again, this seems to confirm much of what is known about the lack of integrity between the criminal justice system and the poor. Another notable finding is that overall prosecutorial caseload bears a significant and negative relationship (-.370) with guilty verdicts. The more adult cases that county courts have to prosecute, the less severe they will be toward status offenders.

An unexpected finding in the model is that the average age of juvenile defendants within counties proves to be significantly and negatively associated with guilty dispositions. This seems to contradict much of the literature of that suggests that older offenders are more likely to receive a delinquent adjudication, however it is important to note that the average age represents the average age of all juvenile defendants within any given county. Therefore, a higher average age for defendants in delinquency adjudications may translate into leniency for status offenders of all ages.

Table 2 presents delinquent adjudications disaggregated by offense type for three status crimes. The following models account for delinquent adjudications for truancy, ungovernable behavior and liquor violations.

Table 2.
OLS Models for Rates Adjudicated Delinquent by Disaggregated Offense Type

	Model A: Percent of Status Cases per 1000 Petitioned	Model B: Percent of Status Cases per 1000 Adjudicated Delinquent	Model C: Rate of Liquor Violation Adjudicated Delinquent per 1000
	Beta	Beta	Beta
Overall Prosecutorial Caseload	-0.293***	-0.329***	-0.275***
Family Deprivation Index	0.384*	0.510***	0.102
Social Support Index	-0.036**	-0.046	-0.070
Conservatism Index	0.179	0.203	0.345**
Number of enforcement agencies per 1000 juveniles	-0.101	0.046	-0.016
Average age of Defendants	0.307***	-0.227*	0.006
Percent of all Delinquency cases petitioned	0.329***	-0.066	-0.439
Ratio of Urban to Rural residents	-0.057	0.033	-0.026
R2	.23	.27	.37
Adjusted R2	.13	.17	.28
F	2.25**	2.74***	4.31***

(*** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$)

In the disaggregated model for truancy (model A), overall prosecutorial caseload, again proves a negative and significant (-.293) predictor of delinquent verdicts. Also, the average age of defendants within the county and percent of all delinquency cases petitioned proved to be negative and significant predictors of sentencing. It would seem that when counties have more to deal with, status offenses become less serious. Unfortunately, the model indicates this may not be true for the poor. The family deprivation index presents itself as the only positive and significant predictor of adjudicated delinquent. This model explains twenty percent of the variance in delinquent adjudications for truancy.

Similar results appear in the disaggregated model for ungovernable behavior in model B. Again, it appears that more deprived families within a county means significantly (.502) more delinquent adjudications for ungovernable behavior. This makes sense, as these families usually cannot afford professional counseling and treatment. The model also shows that the average age of defendants as well as prosecutorial caseload are both significant and negative predictors of guilty verdicts. This model explains 27% of the variance in guilty verdicts for ungovernable behavior status offenses.

Finally, in model C., the liquor sentencing rates model, we find overall prosecutorial caseload once again significantly predicts reduced guilty verdicts. One interesting finding is that conservatism in counties seems to lead to significantly more (.345) liquor sentencing. Inversely, we find that the overall prosecutorial caseload and percent of delinquency cases petitioned is significantly and negatively linked to guilty verdicts in liquor sentencing. In this model, 37% of the variance in sentencing minors for liquor offenses is explained.

Liquor policy is one policy area in which there is pronounced variation across Alabama counties. In fact, there are still a few counties in Alabama that are completely "dry", including Bibb County and Jackson County. However, collinearity with the "rural variable eliminates the influence of the "dry county" variable.

Discussion

From the above models, certain variables emerge that are worthy of further assessment. Among those are poverty, social support, police services, prosecutorial caseload and to a lesser degree, political conservatism. Status offenders who resided in areas with advanced levels of aggregate poverty are petitioned and detained most often. This is the first and most disheartening point of discussion. In this study, more deprived families in an area predicted a higher risk of status petitioning and also predicted more delinquent adjudications. This confirms what is already known about the way that the juvenile justice system has historically processed people in poverty.

It is recognized that people in poverty have fewer economic, political and cultural resources available to avoid formal sanctioning. This research confirms once again, that the trend toward severe punishment of the poor is clearly not limited to the adult level. American courts have many designations (i.e.:

Children in Need of Supervision, Minors in Need of Supervision, etc.) that can be applied to children in poverty. These designations are designed in part to reduce culpability. Simply put, a child in poverty is recognized by the government as "at-risk" for deviant behaviors. Ideally, children should be assisted by courts, and not subject to incarceration unless absolutely necessary.

Another finding worth noting is that more police agencies within counties means significantly more petitioning of status offenders. Conversely, more social support services, namely in the form of social workers and federal funding, predict less status offense petitioning across counties. This is a relationship that needs little dissecting. The presence of more police agencies (ie: sheriffs, constables, metropolitan police, etc.) probably indicates there is a greater chance of arrest for all offenders. In addition, more police agencies also probably means that law enforcement has more spare personnel to assign to petitioning cases.

Given the import of political contextual effects in much sentencing research (Bowers and Waltman, 1993) is worth noting that political conservatism may not play as strong a role in determining status case court outcomes. Aggregate political conservatism, as we measure it, plays a role as a positive predictor of liquor violation adjudications and nothing more. We expected that status crimes such as truancy and ungovernable behavior would also be affected more by political conservatism, but that did not prove to be the case. For some reason, only sentencing for alcohol offenses seems to be associated with net conservatism. Perhaps in particularly right-leaning jurisdictions, tradition and religion may influence prosecutorial decisions about liquor violations.

Finally, we find as expected that as juvenile prosecutorial caseload for *delinquency* increases, there are less severe consequences for status offenders. This is consistent with the overall impact of prosecutorial caseload discussed in the findings. As the number of cases that prosecutors must deal with increases, decisions to petition *status* cases are significantly reduced. Many counties are unwilling or unable to support diversion programs for status offenders (Bowers, 2002).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In a state where some counties have very little to offer in terms of programming, formal juvenile correctional systems may present itself as the only treatment option. In other words, a sympathetic judge or juvenile prosecutor may view juvenile detention as a more humane avenue for treatment because it is the only avenue for treatment in some areas. The alternative to the state juvenile justice system with its attendant risks, in many cases is to do nothing, which may be an unfair alternative for juveniles with behavioral problems or substance abuse issues.

Reforms that states and communities can utilize to divert status offenders away from their juvenile justice systems usually require federal or state assistance if they are to be substantial in their impact. However, since federal funding to many

rural counties is weak, we suggest looking for alternative avenues to implement best practices. One type of reform that has been successfully implemented in Florida, New York and Washington that we feel is likely to succeed in rural areas (in relatively poor states) involves community-based responses. According to reports (Vera Institute of Justice, 2013) such programs have proven successful in diverting status offenders. Such responses often rely on nonprofit organizations helping families in crisis. When youth engage in status offenses, police officers escort them to "respite centers" where they are safe and ostensibly away from negative influences. A caseworker then helps the youth and their family in obtaining necessary counseling and services.

Such alternative programs, because they are often sponsored by faith-based organizations as part of their charitable mission, would help to ease prosecutorial caseload. Such programs, of course, might be dependent on churches for survival. However, in rural areas, it is possible that religious organizations remain the strongest and best funded establishments. However, such reform while an improvement over the current system is far from perfect. Many of these areas still lack social workers, psychologists and trained counselors. Furthermore, many religious organizations may be unable or unwilling to fund case managers and other social services for dogmatic reasons. Such programs provide a viable template to divert children away from the juvenile court in areas where government unable to provide services.

Future research may want to examine if counties with few alternative programs or social welfare programs are using violation of probation to reclassify status offenders to delinquents in order to ensure their admission to the state juvenile justice system. Even well-meaning judges may see that there are more behavioral or psychological programs at the state level. However, once ensnared in the state juvenile justice system the consequences can be disastrous for the youth at risk.

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