

# Families as Partners: Supporting Incarcerated Youth in Ohio

RESEARCH BRIEF • JANUARY 2012

## Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool

The **Juvenile Relational Inquiry Tool (JRIT)** is a series of questions that help facility staff engage youth about their family and social support. It asks about the strengths of the individual and family and takes an average of 15 minutes to complete. The JRIT is intended to accomplish two things:

- > build rapport between staff and youth while providing information that may assist staff in programming and reentry planning; and
- > help young people think about the resources and support available to them.

The Ohio Department of Youth Services chose to have youth specialists (formerly referred to as juvenile correctional officers) administer the tool. These staff members are charged primarily with maintaining safety and security.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 correspondance 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**

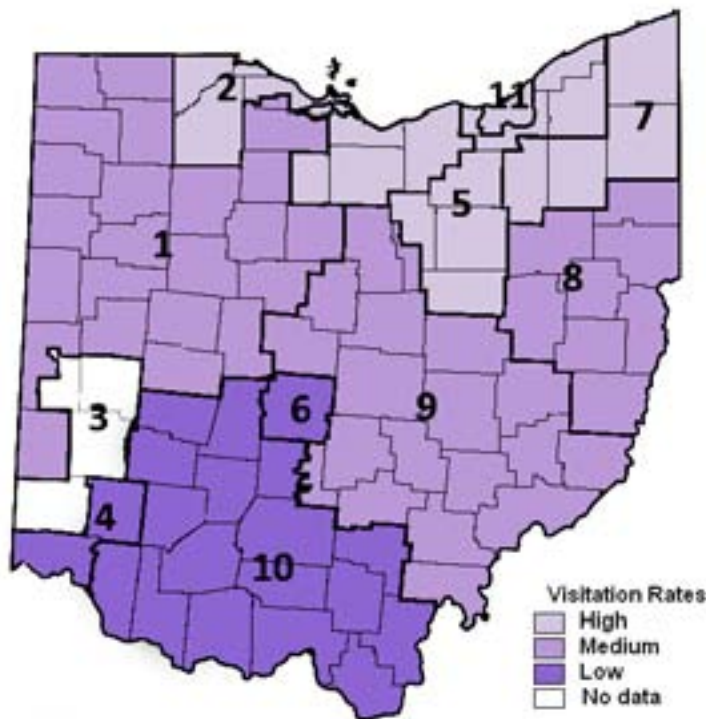
**FINDINGS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY**

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.



**Figure 1: Visitation Rates at One DYS Facility**

## 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

	COMPLETELY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	AGREE	COMPLETELY AGREE
I feel certain that what I discuss with staff will be kept private.	25.6 %	20.8 %	17.6 %	36.0 %
Staff in this facility try to help me succeed.	6.4 %	12.8 %	37.6 %	43.2 %
I feel comfortable talking to staff about my family.	30.6 %	14.5 %	29.0 %	25.8 %
I feel like youth specialists listen when I talk to them.	20.8 %	15.2 %	32.8 %	31.2 %

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

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.<sup>3</sup> “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.”

### 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

## Families as Partners

### 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

- 1 William Quinn and David Van Dyke, "A Multiple Family Group Intervention for First-Time Juvenile Offenders: Comparisons with Probation and Dropouts on Recidivism," *Journal of Community Psychology* 32 (2004): 2. Kevin I. Minor, James B. Wells and Earl Angel, "Recidivism among Juvenile Offenders Following Release from Residential Placements: Multivariate Predictors and Gender Differences," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*. Routledge, 2008. Joseph P. Ryan and Huilan Yang, "Family contact and recidivism: A longitudinal study of adjudicated delinquents in residential care," *Social Work Research*, 29(1), 31-39. (2005).
- 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.

## For More Information...

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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