CrimRxiv

Review 1 of "Pennsylvania Juvenile Probation Departments in the Wake of the Luzerne County Scandal: What Has Changed?"

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The study's goal is to document changes in juvenile probation practices since the Luzerne County Kids for Cash scandal in 2009. Unfortunately, interviews with 16 POs at one point in time cannot really assess changes in practice. At best, they measure perceptions of changes, although we don't have enough information about the officers themselves to establish their tenure and ability to speak to changes.

Moreover, the front end of the paper – particularly the focus on the sentencing literature – does not fit the findings very well. The front end is set up as if the paper will address what factors influenced decisions, but it cannot do that using the data generated by this study.

In some sections, I felt that the authors' knowledge of the juvenile justice system was incomplete. For example, POs don't make recommendations for detention centers unless they are operating in a very narrow role as intake officers (which are actually prosecutors in many jurisdictions). The decision to detain is a very different decision than whether to keep someone in the community or place them after adjudication. Moreover, there are many constraints, including bed space and whether the judges themselves go along with the recommendation made by the PO (this was actually the major problem in Luzerne, which is that these two judges were bucking all recommendations to send youth committing low-level to residential facilities). Moreover, all these decisions are circumscribed by the contracts made by the county or state. If that jurisdiction doesn't have an MST or FFT provider on contract, that won't be on the menu of options for a PO. A more nuanced treatment of the role of POs and their importance is needed here.

[Please put additional info below, as/if you see fit.]

I was pretty shocked by the use of the term "criminal" as a noun to describe a court-involved youth. A deeper understanding of how the juvenile justice system works would reveal that youth can be referred to court for a wide variety of non-serious (and non-criminal) behaviors that should make us very wary of calling them criminals.