



# PROBLEM-SOLVING JUSTICE

This fact sheet is one in a series to support the development of problem-solving justice initiatives. For other documents in the series, please visit courtinnovation.org.

no. 02

# USING DATA TO BUILD YOUR PROGRAM

*“Research gave us a powerful instrument to galvanize people behind this approach; it was a systematic scientific inquiry into the nature of the problem. ... [Having solid numbers] was helpful in terms of marshaling people ... resources and energy.”*

—Jim Jordan, former director of the Office of Strategic Planning for the Boston Police Department

Because problem-solving justice initiatives are designed to build stronger connections between citizens and the justice system, performing a community needs assessment is usually a top priority for any new problem-solving program. Both quantitative data (rates of arrest, most common criminal charges, etc.) and qualitative data (results from focus groups, surveys measuring community perceptions of safety, etc.) can be useful to planners. Only when a community's problems, strengths, and resources have been clearly defined can planners start generating solutions. Consulting with as many relevant stakeholders (e.g., elected officials, local police, and clergy) as possible right from the start can also help build support for new approaches.

## SIX STEPS TO ASSESS YOUR COMMUNITY'S NEEDS

### 1 Gather Quantitative Data

Planners need quantitative data to sharpen their understanding of community problems. Relevant numbers are available from an array of sources, including the United States Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov>), state administering agencies (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/saa/>), state and local court systems, police departments, district attorneys' offices, correction agencies, welfare agencies, departments of education, health and social services, housing authorities, and other government agencies. When California's Orange County Superior Court was planning its community court, planners reached out beyond the court system to collect numbers, like calls for police service, arrest data, and information about persons under supervision of local community corrections agencies. This provided planners with the ability to analyze community problems "by the numbers," and compare how these figures squared with the community's perceptions of public safety issues.

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This fact sheet was produced as part of the Community-Based Problem-Solving Criminal Justice Initiative, a project of the Bureau of Justice Assistance that aims to broaden the scope of problem-solving courts by testing their approach to wider defendant populations and applying key problem-solving principles outside of the specialized court context. The Bureau of Justice Assistance supports law enforcement, courts, corrections, treatment, victim services, technology, and prevention initiatives that strengthen the nation's criminal justice system. The Center for Court Innovation is a non-profit think tank that works with criminal justice practitioners, community-based organizations, and ordinary citizens to develop creative responses to public safety problems, aid victims, reduce crime, and improve public confidence in justice.

## ONLINE SURVEY TOOLS

Seattle Community Court staff use a low-cost online survey tool, <http://www.surveymonkey.com>, to assess the community's relationship with the court. Survey participants go to a website to complete the survey. Questions include:

- Over the past year, how would you rate the quality of life in Seattle? [Very Bad, Bad, Neutral, Good, Very Good, Don't have enough information]
- In the past year do you think the quality of life has: [Improved, Stayed the same, Declined, Other]?
- Are you aware of Seattle's Community Court?
- Do you believe the application of the Community Court's key principles [listed elsewhere in survey] can improve livability and safety in the downtown core?
- Has Community Court made a difference?

### 2 Observe Court Processes

Some data isn't readily available. In that case, planners might be able to gather the raw data themselves. Planners can also collect valuable information by:

- Observing court proceedings and recording dispositions over a week or two weeks to understand how judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys respond to particular cases.
- Polling defendants to find out what kinds of problems they have—drug use, homelessness, and any other issues.
- Talking to system insiders who might be able to accurately estimate numbers that are otherwise unavailable, or who can explain how things operate and the logic behind current approaches.

### 3 Interview Stakeholders

Stakeholder interviews are structured interviews designed to get feedback on a set of questions. These interviews help planners to gain an understanding of how a neighborhood works, as well as its strengths and weaknesses, assets, and concerns. Interview subjects can include, for example: elected officials, local police, clergy, school officials, block association representatives, social service providers, merchants, and social and civic groups. Planners from the Superior Court of the District of Columbia's East of the River Community Court conducted interviews with 27 stakeholders in an effort to better understand the community's strengths and the challenges facing it. Interview questions covered community strengths and needs, public safety issues, other concerns or problems facing the community, and the community court concept in general.

### 4 Convene Focus Groups

Focus groups are facilitated discussions around a pre-determined set of questions. Planners should convene focus groups to get input from community members who are part of underrepresented groups or members of important constituent groups. Planners from the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Melbourne, Australia, held six different focus groups—comprised of younger residents, mid-age residents, older residents, Vietnamese residents, younger residents from other cultures, and members of the business community—in which participants discussed their experiences of the justice system and their suggestions for improvement.

### 5 Administer Surveys

Community surveys can give planners a detailed picture of a community's priorities, expectations, and self-image. A well designed survey gathers information from hundreds and potentially thousands of stakeholders and crystallizes information into quantifiable data. The Red Hook Community Justice Center conducted surveys as part of its planning process, with AmeriCorps volunteers going door to door to ask about residents' perceptions of neighborhood public safety, existing community resources, and the criminal justice system.

### 6 Use Data to Identify Key Problems

Once planners have gathered data in these various ways, they need to sit down and synthesize the information to define the key problems facing the community and pinpoint the community's assets. By this stage, many good ideas for solutions have probably

## CONVENING A FOCUS GROUP

- Get suggestions from key stakeholders on whom to include, or use local stakeholders to help you convene focus groups.
- Assemble groups of about 10 people each and meet with them for an hour or two.
- Secure an appropriate space that participants will likely come to.
- Ask an independent facilitator to run the group if you don't feel comfortable doing so.
- Provide food.
- Use space that is both easy to access and neutral.

already surfaced; others can be harvested by talking to local members of the criminal justice system, and by turning to other jurisdictions that are handling similar problems in creative ways. Questions to ask include:

- What are the problems in this community?
- What is currently being done to address these problems?
- What resources are available to help solve these problems?
- How could these problems be better addressed?



## FURTHER READING

### **Action Research: Using Information to Improve Your Drug Court**

<http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/action-research-using-information-improve-your-drug-court>

### **Defining the Problem: Using Data to Plan a Community Justice Project**

<http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/defining-problem-using-data-plan-community-justice-project>



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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