

New Lessons and Evidence from Reclaiming Futures



Reclaiming Futures is a national public health and juvenile justice reform organization developed nearly 17 years ago at a time when the terms public health and juvenile justice were seldom uttered in the same breath. We offered a different lens on juvenile justice – one that focused on the systems that serve youth as well as the relationships between these systems—rather than the youth themselves.¹

Our model was resonant with the emerging “system of care” approach that is now consensus best practice in behavioral health for adolescents and adults alike. Reclaiming Futures, however, was ahead of its time to suggest shifting the focus of intervention to the systems that serve youth, and making the building blocks of a public health approach – screening, assessment, triage, and community reinforcement – standard practices at the front door of juvenile justice. Today, treatment-focused alternatives in juvenile justice are more commonplace and there is growing consensus and consistent research evidence supporting the notion that community-based alternatives should form the core of youth justice practices.²

Along with a greater focus on the community and more systematic consideration of treatment need, the field has also seen greater sensitivity to the role played by trauma and neuro-developmental factors in delinquent behavior. Further, the field has finally begun to take seriously the persistent racial and ethnic disparities in the ways that youth are handled by the system.³ Still, many jurisdictions continue to overuse detention and incarceration, don’t track disparate outcomes by race and ethnicity, and don’t properly screen, assess, and refer young people for substance use and behavioral

health treatment need. The Reclaiming Futures model offers a blueprint and national peer learning community to support jurisdictions around the country in bringing these reform principles to life in their communities.

THE RECLAIMING FUTURES NATIONAL COMMUNITY

Reclaiming Futures (RF) has now implemented our model in 42 jurisdictions across 20 states. After the launch of the original ten sites, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation teamed up with the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to fund a series of 15 additional sites that were concurrently implementing a juvenile drug treatment court. Between 2008 and 2012, 14 counties in North Carolina joined the initiative with a blend of funding from the NC Governor’s Crime Commission and the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust. Later, two additional NC counties were able to join the Reclaiming Futures initiative with funding from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, and most recently a consortium of three counties in rural Northwest Ohio tapped into state justice reinvestment funds to join the initiative. All RF sites convene for regular national meetings, webinars, and conference calls to maintain close collaboration, peer-to-peer exchange, and coaching and technical support from the Reclaiming Futures national program office.

OPERATIONALIZING AND TESTING THE RECLAIMING FUTURES MODEL

In 2009, at a point when Reclaiming Futures had fine-tuned its approach and established a consistent

implementation strategy, the federal government funded a multi-site longitudinal evaluation of the effectiveness of the RF model. A research team at the University of Arizona's Southwest Institute for Research on Women (SIROW) led by Sally Stevens, along with Kathryn McCollister from the University of Miami, was awarded the multi-year research grant administered by the US Library of Congress and funded by OJJDP. The SIROW team studied nine Reclaiming Futures sites that combined the RF model with a juvenile drug treatment court over a five-year period and compared outcomes for these sites with a matched comparison sample of jurisdictions that had implemented a juvenile drug treatment court, but did not use the Reclaiming Futures approach.⁴

The Reclaiming Futures model and systems integration strategy were found to have significant impact in a number of areas, including improving a jurisdiction's ability to connect youth with needed treatment services, and to do so in a way that matched the severity level and specific treatment needs of youth. Sites employing the RF model showed significantly stronger outcomes – most notably, reductions in substance use and criminal behavior for youth with relatively more severe substance use and behavioral health problems. Similarly, RF sites had greater success with youth whose delinquent behavior was more serious at baseline.

Perhaps the strongest finding, and most significant from a policy standpoint, is that the Reclaiming Futures approach results in a dramatic drop in recidivism (repeat criminal offending) compared to sites that do not use the RF approach. These reductions in recidivism generate significant cost savings. Health economist Kathryn McCollister reports that the Reclaiming Futures sites produce an average one-year net cost savings of roughly \$84,000 per child.⁵ These savings are over and above the cost of implementing Reclaiming Futures at a local jurisdiction and represent savings that could be reinvested to sustain and expand the approach.

According to McCollister: "Our analysis did not isolate the specific factors contributing to the reduction in criminal activity that generated the greatest savings from juvenile drug courts implementing the Reclaiming Futures model. My impression, however, is that the coordination of care and interagency collaboration that Reclaiming Futures adds to juvenile drug courts may be a key factor in reducing crime and delinquency among this group."

Jeffrey Butts and his colleagues of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice Research and Evaluation Center also released a report with the findings of a follow-up study they conducted.⁶ This evaluation examined the quality and consistency with which RF sites around the country implemented our model as a predictor of how local jurisdictions perceived the level of coordination

and the quality of the treatment service delivery for the youth served in their juvenile justice systems. Their findings clearly suggest that consistent engagement in a peer-based and professionally-coached national learning collaborative like Reclaiming Futures allows local jurisdictions to implement and sustain important practice reforms and to establish effective treatment systems for youth.

Taken as a whole, the findings of these two studies offer strong validation for the Reclaiming Futures approach that we hope will allow us to sustain and expand our impact on the field and continue to innovate for years to come.

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