

Reprinted from:

THE PROVIDER

Vol. 29 - No. 2

The Newspaper of the Providers' Council

February 2008

Mandate collection of juvenile data

By Lael Chester

It is time for the Massachusetts Legislature to require all key players in the juvenile justice system, from the police and prosecutors to the courts and probation, to collect basic statistical data about the youth who have contact with this system.

Right now, Massachusetts is blindly funding a system without any of the data that it needs to answer two critical public policy questions about the state's juvenile justice system: Is it fair, and is it effective? By inserting simple language in the state budget, the Legislature can take a major step towards answering these questions.

We know, for example, that youth of color are over-represented in our juvenile justice system. Although the reasons are complex, the disparities are stark. Hispanic and African American youth are at least two and three times more likely, respectively, to be committed to the Department of Youth Services than Caucasian youth. These racial disparities raise deep concerns about the fundamental fairness of this "justice" system. To understand this troubling problem, we need

to collect race and ethnicity data at each significant decision point in the system:

- How many youth of color are arrested each year in Massachusetts?
- How many youth of color are arraigned or formally charged with a crime?
- How many youth of color successfully complete probation?
- And how many youth of color fail to finish probation and face incarceration?

At the moment, Massachusetts juvenile justice officials cannot answer any of these questions, and consequently, they have no capacity to assess the fairness of the state's system.

The federal *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act* requires the Commonwealth to collect and report juvenile justice data. By failing to comply with this requirement, Massachusetts risks losing federal grants which have funded important prevention and intervention programs including the only current alternative to detention program in Massachusetts. The loss of federal funds is something Massachusetts can ill-afford at a time when it faces

substantial projected revenue shortfalls

Moreover, during these tight fiscal times, the Legislature should require data to guide budget priorities. It must ensure that the budget for the juvenile justice system is being used in the most effective way possible. An ineffective use of the allocated funds not only wastes taxpayer dollars, but also increases both social and fiscal costs in the future: Youth who are not successfully rehabilitated in the juvenile justice system will "graduate" to the even more expensive adult criminal system.

No one would expect a consumer to purchase a car without knowing some of the basic information about the car — gas mileage, safety features, etc. Similarly, we should expect the Legislature, representing the public "consumer," to collect some basic information about the juvenile justice system it is financing. Who are these youth? What are their ages, genders and races or ethnicities? What type of charges are they facing? Where are they from?

The Department of Youth Services, for example, which does the best job of all the key

players in gathering information, collects home zip code data from the youth in its custody. This has proven helpful in identifying crime "hot spots." Think of what we could learn if we had such substantive data from all the stakeholders!

Nonprofit human service agencies understand the need for data collection. In their own work, it plays a crucial role in shaping and evaluating programs. Moreover, data is often required by funders to demonstrate the need for, and the effectiveness of, their programs as a condition to receiving support. The absence of reliable, comprehensive data at many stages of the juvenile justice system handicaps efforts to do this.

The Legislature has the opportunity to quickly solve this problem by including language in the budget that requires the collection of the data. Policy makers and taxpayers deserve — at the very least — to get basic information from the agencies they are funding.

Lael Chester is the executive director of Citizens for Juvenile Justice.