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Outcome Evaluation of Washington State's Research-Based Programs for Juvenile Offenders

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1997, the Washington State Legislature passed the Community Juvenile Accountability Act (CJAA). The primary goal of the CJAA is to reduce juvenile crime, cost effectively, by establishing “research-based” programs in the state’s juvenile courts. The basic idea is straightforward: taxpayers are better off if their dollars fund programs that have been proven to be effective in achieving key policy outcomes, in this case reduced re-offending.

The CJAA funded the nation’s first statewide experiment concerning research-based programs for juvenile justice. Because selected treatment programs had already been researched elsewhere in the United States, usually as small scale pilot projects, the question here was whether they work when applied statewide in a “real world” setting. This report indicates that the answer to this question is yes— when the programs are competently delivered.

The basic findings are these:

1. When Functional Family Therapy (FFT) is delivered competently, the program reduces felony recidivism by 38 percent. The cost-benefit analyses find that FFT generates \$2.77 in savings (avoided crime costs) for each taxpayer dollar spent on the program, regardless of therapist competence. For competent FFT therapists, the savings are greater—\$10.69 in benefits for each taxpayer dollar spent.
2. When competently delivered, Aggression Replacement Training (ART) has positive outcomes with estimated reductions in 18-month felony recidivism of 24 percent and a benefit to cost ratio of \$11.66.
3. The Coordination of Services program achieved a decrease in 12-month felony recidivism, and the estimated benefit to cost ratio is \$7.89.
4. Because of problems implementing the Institute’s evaluation design, no findings are associated with Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST). If the courts and the state wish to continue funding MST, the Institute recommends re-evaluating the program.

These findings affirm the merit of the legislature’s investment in research-based programs for juvenile offenders. The next step is to implement the CJAA quality assurance standards so taxpayers can fully benefit from these programs.