Rethinking Juvenile Probation: The Desktop Guide to Good Juvenile Probation Practice Revisited

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Patrick Griffin

Nearly a decade has passed since the issuance of the original Desktop Guide to Good Juvenile Probation Practice, a widely influential desk reference and training resource written primarily by and for working line officers “to promote and enhance the practice of juvenile probation as a career.” Following its 1991 publication by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Desktop Guide was distributed to juvenile probation offices in virtually every county in America. It still serves in many of those offices as a comprehensive introduction to the theory and practice of juvenile probation for new hires, a handy collection of approved standards and best practices information for veterans, and “a call to higher levels of professionalism” for the field as a whole.

But a lot has changed since 1991. In fact, it’s hard to think of anything that hasn’t changed—including the tools juvenile probation officers use every day, the research that informs and supports their practice, the political-legal atmosphere in which their work is done, and even the prevailing philosophy and ultimate goals of the profession.

So what constitutes “good juvenile probation practice” today?

In June of 2000, a group of about 30 juvenile probation officers, supervisors, administrators, victims advocates, and researchers from across the country assembled in Pittsburgh to begin hammering out an answer to that question. The workshop to rethink and reshape the Desktop Guide for the next decade was convened by the National Center for Juvenile Justice, with funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and was attended by prominent representatives of the three major membership groups that helped guide the launch of the original Desktop Guide—The American Probation and Parole Association, the National Juvenile Court Services Association, and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

Over three days, the group not only reviewed all that has changed in the last decade—advances in knowledge and technique, altered demands and expectations, new definitions and measures of success—but managed to articulate the core beliefs that have remained the same. They outlined the sort of Desktop Guide that would meet the profession’s current needs, and even began dividing up the work of writing it among themselves.

This Report will summarize the consensus reached by the workshop group regarding contemporary definitions of good juvenile probation practice, and offer some “coming attractions” of the reinvented Desktop Guide that will emerge from this process some time next year.
It’s no secret that the ground under the juvenile probation profession has been shifting for years now. Traditional approaches to delinquency suffered an almost unbroken string of “no confidence” votes in statehouses across the country during the 1990’s, with lawmakers in nearly every state taking action to curtail juvenile court jurisdiction over serious and repeat offenders1 or to “toughen up” juvenile court sanctioning to make it resemble that of the adult criminal justice system more closely.2

Much of this legislative activity was unmistakably motivated by the public’s perception that the juvenile system has been too lenient in dealing with past crimes, and not effective enough in deterring future ones—indictments that are clearly directed not only at the courts, but at the juvenile probation departments that oversee the majority of their dispositions.

Despite this erosion in public confidence and support, however, juvenile probation’s workload increased sharply over the same period. Between 1988 and 1997, the most recent year for which figures are available, the number of cases in which adjudicated delinquents received formal probation as the most restrictive disposition rose 67%—largely because of an increase in the overall number of delinquency cases handled by the courts.3 And though the proportion of offenders who received probation remained unchanged at a little over half, the mix of offenders did not—so that a typical line officer’s caseload came to contain fewer vandals and car thieves, more drug dealers and armed robbers.4

At the same time, more and more critics called upon the profession to reconsider its goals, its methods, its work habits—in fact its whole approach to delinquency case management. “Fortress probation”—the passive, office-bound, out-of-touch style that equates monthly “contacts” with supervision and values administrative convenience over real effectiveness—was assailed on all sides.

Advocates of change under a variety of banners—the Victims’ Movement, Restorative Justice, Balanced and Restorative Justice, Community Justice—united in insisting that juvenile probation broaden its focus to take into account the interests, priorities and potential contributions of victims and community members in sanctioning and rehabilitating juvenile offenders.

A similar ferment was occurring in the adult probation field, with practitioners and researchers debating the proposed new “Broken Windows” paradigm for probation,5 as well as the range of new ideas emerging from the 1998 “Rethinking Probation” conference convened by the Office of Justice Programs.6

**JUVENILE PROBATION’S ROLE**

Given all this deep-structural change, doubt, and debate, the Desktop Guide work group found it necessary to begin by revisiting some basic questions. What is juvenile probation for? How should it work? Where should its responsibilities begin and end? Before exploring what it takes, in terms of knowledge, skills, techniques, and resources, to do the job of juvenile probation well, the group had to tackle a more fundamental question: what is the job?

After a thoughtful, open, and largely buzzword-free discussion, every member of the work group—not a representative body, maybe, but a pretty fair cross-section of experienced and able juvenile probation professionals from every region of the country—subscribed to the following answer:

We envision the role of juvenile probation as that of a catalyst for developing safe communities and healthy youth and families.

We believe we can fulfill this role by:
- holding offenders accountable,
- building and maintaining community-based partnerships,
- implementing results-based and outcome-driven services and practices,
- advocating for and addressing the needs of victims, offenders, families, and communities,
- obtaining and sustaining sufficient resources, and
- promoting growth and development of all juvenile probation professionals.

The Desktop Guide work group took several days to discuss the implications of this vision, arriving eventually at a series of detailed consensus beliefs that will guide the revision of the Desktop Guide and provide a conceptual framework for defining good juvenile probation practice today. But even a quick reading reveals one point that is worth bearing in mind. Juvenile probation is a catalyst—it makes things happen. It doesn’t act by itself, but stimulates others to act. For it to accomplish its mission, others—community members, families, offenders, victims—have to be involved too. This central point has far-reaching implications, as is reflected in the more detailed discussion of juvenile probation values which follows.

**PUBLIC SAFETY**

“Protecting the public is one of the primary goals of juvenile probation.”

This is one of the first value statements around which consensus formed among members of the Desktop Guide work group—which is significant, since as recently as a decade ago, many in the juvenile probation profession would...
probably have regarded the public’s safety as at best a lower-order value, desirable in itself but not central to their work.

The “offender-centered” point of view—in which the mission and goals of juvenile probation began and ended with the probationer and his or her rehabilitative progress—has clearly given way to something broader and more inclusive of the public interest. Most in the profession now seem to recognize that the public’s primary interest is in safety. Ignoring that interest is the surest way of forfeiting public support.

Does this make juvenile probation some sort of auxiliary police force? Of course not. Like judges, prosecutors, intake officers, correctional workers, and indeed everyone else who works in the juvenile justice system, juvenile probation officers protect the community by exercising their proper functions in such a way as to contribute to community protection. That might mean more active supervision and control of potentially dangerous offenders in the community, tougher and more consistent boundary-drawing, more aggressive enforcement of probation conditions that implicate the public’s safety, like curfews. But it might also mean more effective communication with families of offenders, or more timely and concrete help in a crisis. A probation officer who keeps close track of a charge’s school attendance might be doing as much to protect the community from physical harm as any police officer, without ever having need of a sidearm.

Remember too that juvenile probationers are likely to be among the most immediate and direct beneficiaries of a renewed emphasis on safety and public order. Being an out-of-control kid, after all, is one of America’s most dangerous occupations. Strict, caring, consistent supervision—the kind that, like it or not, imposes structure on a probationer’s life—can literally save it. But there’s no getting around the fact that really shouldering its share of responsibility for public safety will mean big changes for juvenile probation. It’s one thing to add another clause to the mission statement. It’s another to restructure your department so that you’re working nontraditional hours rather than nine-to-five, supervising juveniles in their neighborhoods rather than across your desk, measuring outcomes that matter to the community rather than numbers of contacts and referrals.

Even in the short term, it could mean different case assignment procedures, different monitoring priorities, different training, different equipment. In the long term, who knows? Maybe a different kind of juvenile probation officer.

COMMUNITY ORIENTATION

“When I entered the probation office, I found it a place of a lot of personalities, and I thought, ‘Is there a purpose here? Is it just a bunch of people and they’re not really doing anything?’”

It’s hard to read a sentence like that without the involuntary yawn. Nowadays everyone “partners” with “the community.” It’s easy to say. It’s obligatory. Most of the time, it’s meaningless. But sometimes it’s not. The remarkable success of the community-oriented policing movement during the last decade—in terms of real results as well as public enthusiasm and support—was clearly on the minds of members of the Desktop Guide work group when they agreed upon the importance of community partnerships to good juvenile probation practice.

Like most pre-1990’s police forces, too many juvenile probation departments currently have little or no contact with or input from the communities they serve—and they suffer for it. The public doesn’t understand their work or its importance. They get no ideas, no information, no help and no heat from the people and street-level institutions best situated to support their efforts. When they are perceived at all, they are too often perceived as ineffectual strangers—a perception that, in effect, makes them more ineffectual.

So what did the police do to get out of a similar bind? Among other things, they started listening to the people who were supposed to be their customers. Surveying them. Holding informational and planning meetings with them. Explaining problems, eliciting suggestions and complaints. Asking about their priorities—and then adjusting departmental ones in response. Whatever was the idea behind these early community-police collaborations, it soon turned out that enlisting community involvement of this kind did more than just generate decent ideas or good PR—it generated real communal strength. A community that owned its public safety problems, apparently, was half-way to solving them.

That lesson was not lost on many members of the Desktop Guide work group, who were clearly on the lookout for opportunities to encourage community ownership of delinquent kids. But here again, they recognized that rhetorical flourishes won’t get you there. It will take changes as fundamental as school-based probation—which is essentially plugging juvenile probation officers right into the grid of the institution that matters most to any community.

It will take dispensing with the busy-work and time-serving that currently goes under the name “community service,” in favor of work that is actually generated, controlled, and valued by the people in whose name it is done. Most of all, it will take a sustained, neighborhood-by-neighborhood public education effort to dispel the notion that probation is not a real sanction—ordinary people have to understand what juvenile probation means, what obligations it imposes on delinquents, the limits it sets and the supports it offers. And then they need to be shown how they can help to discharge what is, after all, a collective adult responsibility: the disciplining and support of the young.
“Juvenile probation should promote individual growth.... Juvenile offenders have the capacity to change for the better.... Young people are different from adults.”

All of these consensus belief statements from the Desktop Guide work group point to one essential truth: juvenile probation should be an optimistic profession, or it shouldn’t be a profession at all. The original rehabilitative mission of the adult correctional system may have been all but lost along the way, but that of the juvenile system has not been, and never should be—members of the work group were emphatic on this point. A “junior criminal justice system” that simply adapts the pessimism of the adult system to fit smaller bodies would be wasteful in more ways than one. The vast majority of the young people under juvenile court jurisdiction need only a little structure and tangible help to grow up straight.

There is nothing mystical about this conviction either—it’s based on observation and developmental facts. “Kids are not short adults,” as somebody from the work group put it. In fact, they’re works in progress.

That’s one reason the work group called for the introduction of a new “Adolescent Development” section into the format of the Desktop Guide, laying out the demonstrated physiological and cognitive differences between adolescents and adults and their different levels of social, emotional, and moral development, discussing the assessment, supervision, and programming implications of these differences, and restating the case for a separate justice system founded on them.

Juvenile probation’s recognition of young people’s “unfinished” nature— their immense potential and capacity for change and growth—carries with it certain obligations. Above all, the obligation to provide opportunities for development, channels for progress.

Probation for adolescents cannot be a holding pattern—the time is simply too critical. Accordingly, the work group acknowledged that good juvenile probation practice must include the sort of assessment, referral, and collaboration with other resources that enables probationers to build skills and strengths—to emerge from the experience with something tangible to show for it.

“Accountability is important for both juvenile offenders and juvenile probation.... Fairness is essential to good probation practice.... Individual, agency, and programmatic integrity is an essential characteristic of juvenile probation.”

Although mindful of the central and growing importance of accountability to juvenile probation’s public mission, the Desktop Guide work group subscribed to a broad-based, mutually reinforcing definition of the term—one that took in not only a juvenile’s responsibility to account to victims and the community for past offenses, but a juvenile probation department’s accountability for the way it manages that process.

A publicly accountable juvenile probation department is clear and firm in setting expectations for itself as well as its charges. Just as it monitors probationers closely to ensure that they meet their obligations, it continually measures itself and its performance in relation to its publicly stated goals.

Among the most important of those goals are fairness and consistency. Work group members made it clear that good juvenile probation practice is, above all, predictable juvenile probation practice, based on written procedures evenhandedly applied over time. “Doing what you say you’re going to do,” as one member put it.

In the course of their talks, the work group strongly endorsed a variety of other practices and approaches to the work of juvenile probation, and discussed ways of weaving them into the fabric of the new Desktop Guide. Focusing on strengths, for example. Working with and through the families of offenders. Teaching—and modeling—respect for victims. Devoting more resources to prevention and early intervention.

But ultimately, the clearest belief that emerged from these discussions was belief in the profession as a profession. Work group members envisioned the revamped, renewed Desktop Guide as an opportunity, not only to disseminate information that will be useful to the field, not only to clarify its standards, but to raise its sights. At present, juvenile probation is often locally controlled and administratively isolated. In many places, there is no professional certification procedure for juvenile probation officers, no rigorous training for new hires, no continuing education. Line staff may have little say in the development of policy, and no effective outlets for their thoughts regarding the directions their departments should take. Even supervisors often lack opportunities to meet their colleagues from other jurisdictions, to compare notes, share successes or vent frustrations.

What ties a fragmented profession like this together, then? Among other things, publications like the Desktop Guide. A thoughtfully revised Desktop Guide could go a long way toward drawing these scattered and isolated workers together into a single professional body—getting everyone, literally, on the same page, working up to the same aspirations, agitating for the same broad changes. Because it will serve as an introduction to the field for nonprofessionals as well, including college students considering juvenile probation careers, the Desktop Guide also has the potential to draw new and different kinds of talent into the field.
COMING ATTRACTIONS

So how will the revised version of the Desktop Guide be different?

Start with the format. It will be designed above all with adult learners in mind. Individual chapters will be brief, to the point, and studded with concrete examples. Statistical information will be presented in easy-to-digest charts, tables, and graphs. Illustrations, large-type subtitles, boxed quotations and other graphic devices will help readers find their way through the organization of the book, and brief sidebars will highlight information about research, innovations, and real-world program successes related to the thematic material in the main text. In addition to the sturdy old 3-hole paper format familiar to users of the original Desktop Guide, the revised version will be disseminated in CD-ROM, and will be available on-line to anybody with a computer and an Internet connection.

The work group proposed a number of significant changes to the organizational content of the Desktop Guide as well. A new section to be added on adolescent development has already been mentioned. Material on juvenile probation’s role in the prevention of juvenile crime will have its own new chapter too. The old Desktop Guide had a brief subsection on detention decision-making; the new one will have a separate chapter on detention and front-end referral/diversion. It will also have a chapter addressing issues relating to probation officer safety, in the office and in the field. And a “national profile” chapter will present aggregate data on the way juvenile probation departments are organized, funded, and administered across the country.

Existing chapters in the Desktop Guide will get an overhaul. Among many other suggestions, work group members advocated weaving more current research-based “what works” information throughout the Desktop Guide; exploring victims’ issues more directly; adding a discussion of emerging technologies in supervision (electronic monitoring, DNA testing, etc.); addressing juvenile probation’s role in reducing minority overrepresentation; passing on pointers for working with juveniles in groups and managing group dynamics; and expanding the list of “special populations” requiring specialized assessment and supervision techniques—to include, for example, those with attention deficit and/or hyperactivity problems. The historical and legal background material in the introductory sections will of course be brought up to date, and a glossary and index will be added at the end, along with lists of resources, contacts, and suggested readings, and a “tool box” of probation contracts, assessment instruments, model conditions, etc.

In a very real sense, this is a chance, not just to paint a picture of the ideal juvenile probation officer, but to make a generation of them.

OLD AND IMPROVED

The process of actually preparing the new Desktop Guide has only just begun. But it’s already clear that the finished product will be a blend of old and new. Like the original, the revised Desktop Guide will be generated by and oriented toward the juvenile probation officer on the ground. It will offer practical help, not gimmicks or policy prescriptions. It will be grounded in technique.

Nevertheless, it will faithfully reflect the best thinking of the juvenile probation profession, and that thinking has undergone profound changes in the past decade.

The values and assumptions ratified during the June 2000 work group meeting in Pittsburgh will literally be written all over the new Desktop Guide. It couldn’t be any other way. A probation handbook that did not have those contemporary values woven through it— that ignored victims, say, or failed to recognize the community’s legitimate interest in public safety or its necessary share in the work of turning young people around—would be useless nowadays, like an old map where the landscape has shifted. The Desktop Guide survey of the current landscape of good juvenile probation practice will appear some time next year.

In the meantime, if you have information you want to share, a program you think is worth a look, or any other advice or suggestions with regard to the revision, please feel free to contact Doug Thomas, National Center for Juvenile Justice, 710 Fifth Avenue, Ste. 3000, Pittsburgh, PA 15219-3000, (412) 227-6950.

ENDNOTES

1 Statutes in 41 states and the District of Columbia currently either place certain defined categories of juvenile offenses under adult criminal court jurisdiction, require juvenile courts to waive their jurisdiction over some kinds of cases, or allow prosecutors the option of proceeding against certain juveniles as though they were adults. See Griffin, P., Torbet, P., and Szymanski, L., “Trying Juveniles as Adults in Criminal Court: An Analysis of State Transfer Provisions” (Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998), p. 2. 
4 Ibid.
A NEW VISION FOR JUVENILE PROBATION

A vision, in the strategic planning sense, is a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of an organization or profession. The vision reflects a state or condition that does not currently exist, but ought to exist. It is based on shared fundamental values and beliefs and provides a conceptual bridge to the future. The vision described below was articulated and adopted by members of the work group to update the Desktop Guide for Good Juvenile Probation Practice during a workshop in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania held June 4 - 6, 2000.

We envision the role of juvenile probation as that of a catalyst for developing safe communities and healthy youth and families. We believe we can fulfill this role by:

- holding offenders accountable,
- building and maintaining community-based partnerships,
- implementing results-based and outcome-driven services and practices,
- advocating for and addressing the needs of victims, offenders, families, and communities,
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ABOUT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE

The National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) was founded in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1973 by U.S. District Judge Maurice B. Cohill, Jr. NCJJ is a private, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of justice for children and families. This mission is pursued by conducting research and providing objective, factual information that is utilized to increase the juvenile and family justice systems’ effectiveness. NCJJ is the Research Division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, but has its own charter and policy board and is responsible for raising its own operational support. The Center concentrates its efforts in three areas of research: applied research, legal research, and systems research.

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