

Characteristics Of Juvenile Offenders

Findings and Recommendations:
1997-1999 Risk and Need Study for the
Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee of
The Charlottesville/Albemarle
Commission on Children and Families

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer and fall of 2001, the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC) of the Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children and Families continued a study of local juvenile offenders, the first phase of which was completed in 2000. The previous study was conducted to accomplish two objectives: to better understand the risks presented by and the needs of juvenile offenders entering the local system and to validate a Risk Assessment Tool mandated by the Department of Juvenile Justice.

The 2001 study had somewhat different objectives:

- To better understand the risks presented by and the needs of juvenile offenders entering the local system to determine what risk and protective factors impact local juvenile offenders.
- To identify trends or changes in the characteristics or demographics of juvenile offenders over the three-year period.
- To conduct an analysis of the types of initiating offenses for juvenile probationers.
- To review the offenses that lead to placement of juveniles in secure detention, and
- To develop and implement a prioritized plan to address the factors identified in the study.

For the 2001 study, data was obtained from the case files of 134 juveniles placed on probation in Charlottesville and Albemarle in 1999. This data was analyzed in isolation and then combined with data obtained from the case files of 263 juveniles who were placed on probation in 1997 and 1998, resulting in a total of 397 cases.

The data obtained in the three-year study included the fifteen factors identified in the Department of Juvenile Justice Risk Assessment Tool¹ (see Appendix 1) as well thirty-three additional factors. The additional factors considered were chosen based on tools used in other communities and current research on risk and need indicators.

The data from the study has created a complex profile of juvenile offenders in the City of Charlottesville and Albemarle County. A range of behavioral, family, social, educational, and emotional characteristics, such as family disorganization, truancy, or lack of involvement in productive activity were identified as being present for over half of the juvenile offenders.

This report describes some of the findings about local juvenile offenders. The report is divided into four parts. Section 1 analyzes specific risk and need factors for the entire cohort of 397 juveniles in the three-year study. Section 2 compares demographic data, offense data, and characteristics of juvenile offenders across the three-year study period, identifying trends. Section 3 looks at detention information in anticipation of the opening of a new local detention facility. Section 4 enumerates the work group's recommendations to the JJAC and CCF to address issues identified in the study.

METHODOLOGY

The Court Service Unit's probation and parole case files for 134 juveniles placed on probation in Charlottesville and Albemarle in 1999 were reviewed and analyzed for the 2001 study. This information was then combined with data for 263 juveniles placed on probation in 1997 and 1998. Data collected included demographic information, juvenile offense records, intervention history (such as services and sanctions offered), and thirty-seven possible risk or need factors. A variety of cross-tabulations and comparisons were conducted.

SECTION 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF COURT INVOLVED YOUTH IN CHARLOTTESVILLE/ALBEMARLE

*SPECIFIC **INDIVIDUAL** RISK AND NEED FACTORS PRESENT FOR OFFENDERS*

The following charts identify specific risk and need factors for the entire cohort of 397 juveniles who were placed on probation in 1997, 1998, and 1999. This data indicates that certain factors were present for a substantial number of these juvenile offenders.

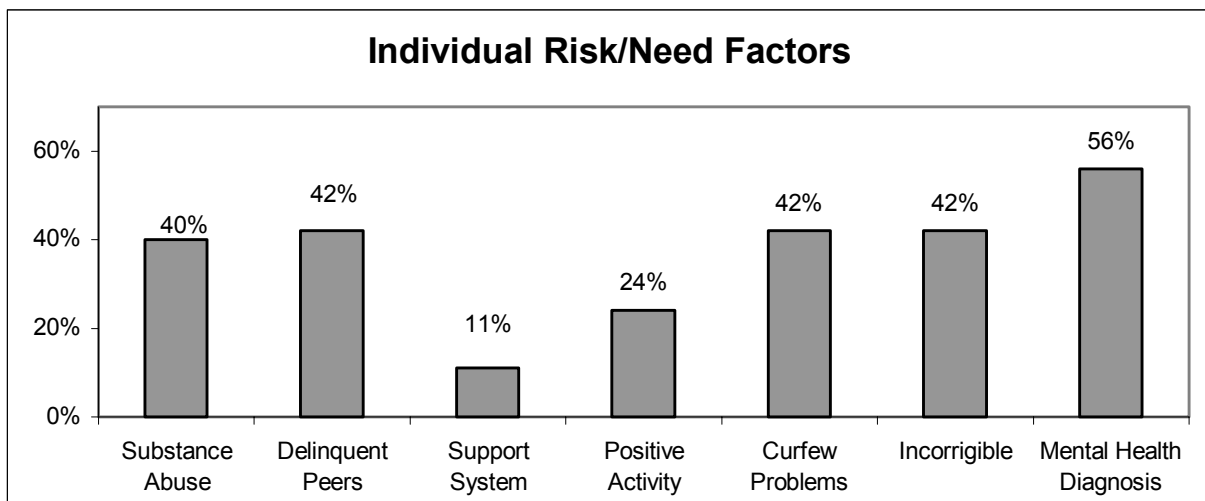


Chart 1

Certain **individual** risk and need factors were present for many of the juveniles in the study group, frequently at a higher level than in the general youth population, and have been shown to be prevalent for delinquent youth. For example:

- 56% had mental health diagnoses and/or were taking prescribed psychotropic medications. According to a report issued by the U.S. Surgeon General in 1999, between 11% and 19% of children ages 12 to 21 have a diagnosable mental illness.² Research on juveniles incarcerated in Virginia from 1993-1998 indicates that 50% have mental health diagnoses.³
- Nearly half had a documented history of serious drug or alcohol abuse. The Surgeon General's report indicates that 2% of children ages 12 to 21 have a

substance abuse diagnosis.⁴ 64% of youth incarcerated in Virginia in 1993-1998 required substance abuse treatment⁵.

- 24% of the youths in the study group were described as being involved in a productive activity such as work, sports, church groups, or school clubs. Locally, 70% of Charlottesville high school students participate in school-sponsored extracurricular and sports programs.⁶ 64% of Albemarle students in grades 7-10 report participating in sports activities.⁷ According to a report by the National Crime Prevention Council, children need to learn that they have something of value to offer to others. Research and work with school-aged children and teens emphasize the importance of giving kids meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute to their families, neighborhoods, and communities.⁸

FAMILY RISK AND NEED FACTORS PRESENT FOR OFFENDERS

Risk factors related to **family** relationships and functioning were identified for many of the juveniles in the study. The following chart shows the factors.

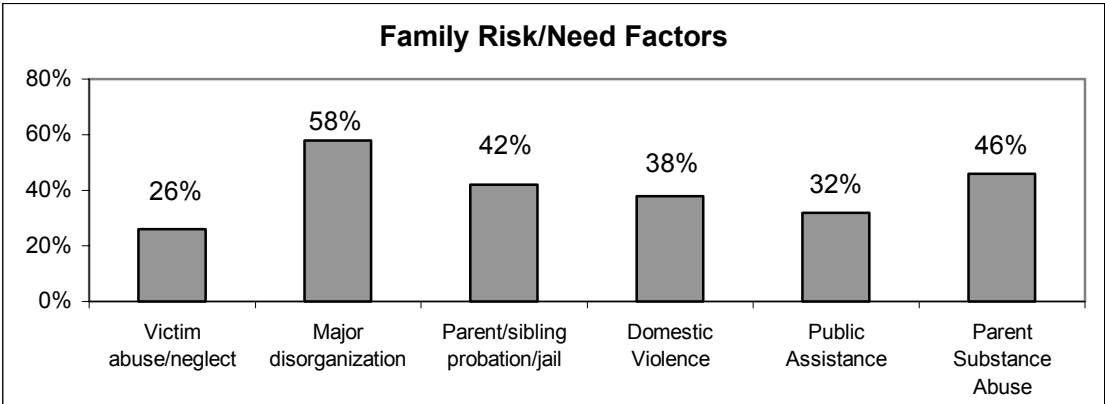


Chart 2

Several of the family risk/need factors present for many of the juveniles in the study group have been shown by national research to be correlated to delinquency.

- One-fourth of the individuals in the study group were reported to have been abused or neglected. The local rate of child abuse investigations is 3.25% in Charlottesville and 1.74% in Albemarle.⁹ The United States Office of Juvenile

Justice and Delinquency Programs (OJJDP) reports that “maltreated children are significantly more likely than non-maltreated children to become involved in delinquent and criminal behavior.... Delinquent youth with a history of abuse and neglect are at higher risk of continuing their delinquent behavior than delinquents without such a history.”¹⁰

- Thirty-eight percent had been exposed to adult domestic violence in their families. The local incidence of domestic violence arrests is .6% in Charlottesville and .2% in Albemarle.¹¹ According to OJJDP’s publication “Safe from the Start: Taking Action on Children Exposed to Violence”,

Preliminary research indicates that, on average, children who experience domestic violence exhibit higher levels of childhood behavioral, social, and emotional problems than children who have not witnessed such violence.... The emotional consequences of viewing or hearing violent acts may be severe and long lasting. Children who witness violence often experience many of the same symptoms and lasting effects as children who are direct victims of violence.¹²

SCHOOL RELATED RISK AND NEED FACTORS

Risk factors related to **school** were present for many juveniles in the study group.

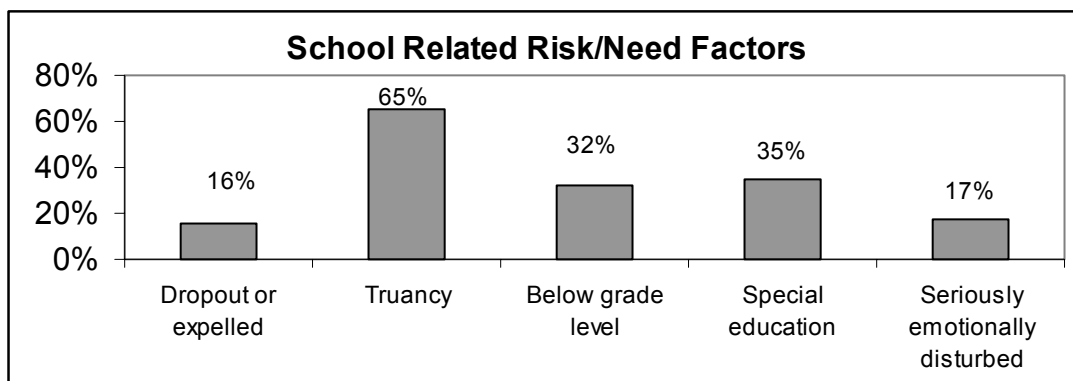


Chart 3

Several of the school related risk factors were present at a rate considerably higher than that of the general population and are shown to be related to delinquency.

- While 65% of offenders in the study group had 15 or more unexcused school absences, only 24% of Charlottesville middle and high school students were truant at this rate.¹³ According to the OJJDP publication, "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School", truancy has been found to be related to substance abuse and involvement in criminal activity.¹⁴
- Thirty-five percent of offenders in the study received some form of special education services, compared with 15% of other local students. According to the OJJDP publication, "youth with learning disabilities or an emotional disturbance are arrested at higher rates than their non-disabled peers and studies of incarcerated youth reveal that as many as 70 percent suffer from disabling conditions... Ensuring that special education needs are met at every point in the juvenile justice process will inevitably support and enhance the success of delinquency intervention."¹⁵

MAJOR LIFE TRANSITIONS FOR OFFENDERS IN THE STUDY GROUP

Chart 8 shows the types of **life transitions and/or stressors** that have impacted juveniles in the study group.

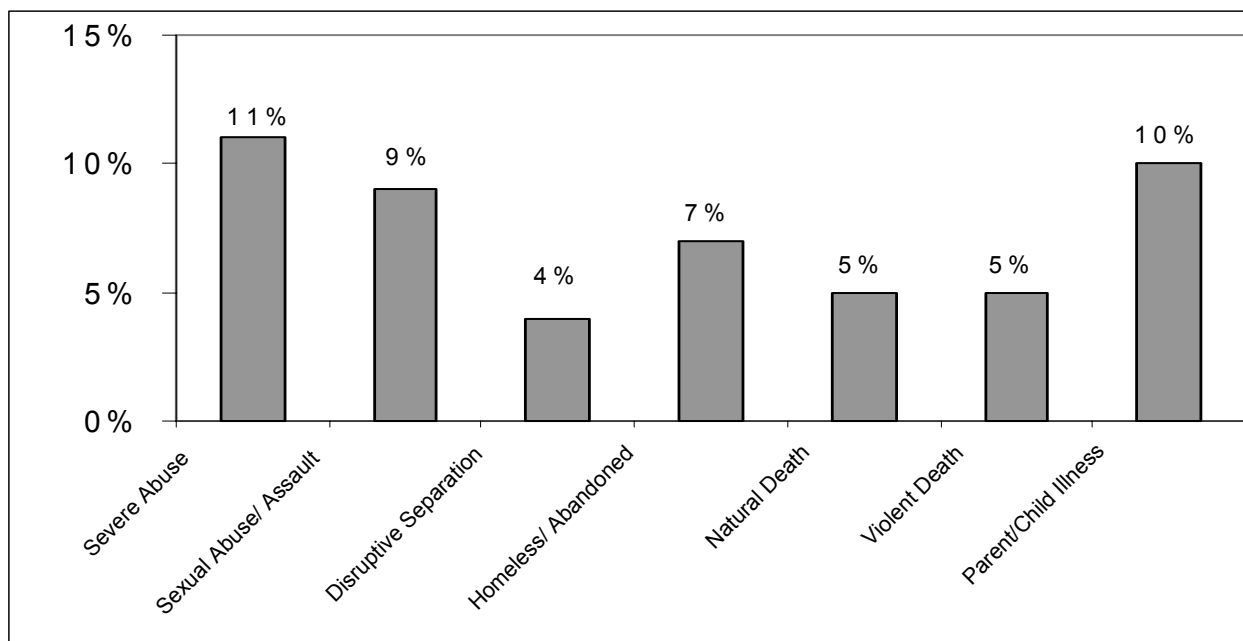


Chart 8

OJJDP's report "Research on the Causes and Correlates of Delinquency" has found that multiple family transitions had a clear and statistically significant effect on the

prevalence of delinquency.¹⁶ An Urban Institute report notes that “children living in stressful family environments are ... four times as likely as other children to have high levels of behavioral and emotional problems.¹⁷ Specific data about such transitions was collected for the study group. Sixty-three percent of the juveniles in the study group experienced some type of major life transition.

SECTION 2: COMPARISON OF DATA FOR 1997, 1998, 1999

1. Demographic data:

Various demographic factors and risk and need characteristics were compared across the three year period. Demographic factors considered included race, gender, and place of residence. While the gender make-up of the study group remained consistent, there were changes in the race and residence of studied youth. Chart 5 indicates that an increasing percentage of juvenile probationers reside in Albemarle.

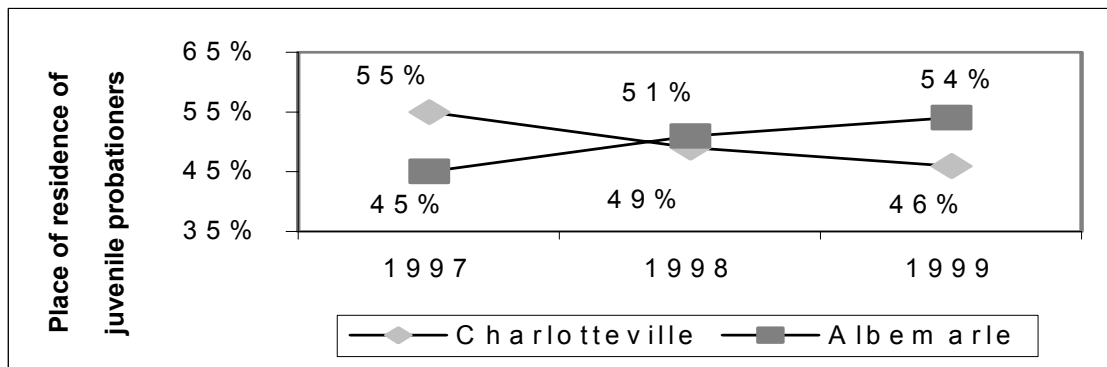


Chart 5

Chart 6 indicates that the percentage of African-American juvenile offenders locally is decreasing, although the percentages continue to be higher than the general population.

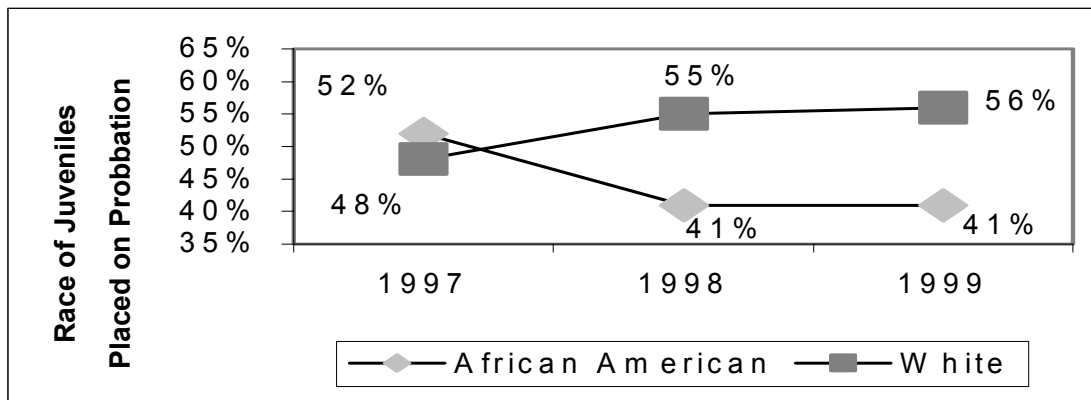


Chart 6

Chart 7 suggests that African-American juveniles in Charlottesville in the three year study group are over-represented when compared to 1999 Census estimate data for Charlottesville residents ages 10-14 and with 1999-2000 public school students. [Note: 1999 population estimates were used because 2000 census is under appeal. Ages 10-14 are used because University of Virginia students skew the 15-19 age group.]

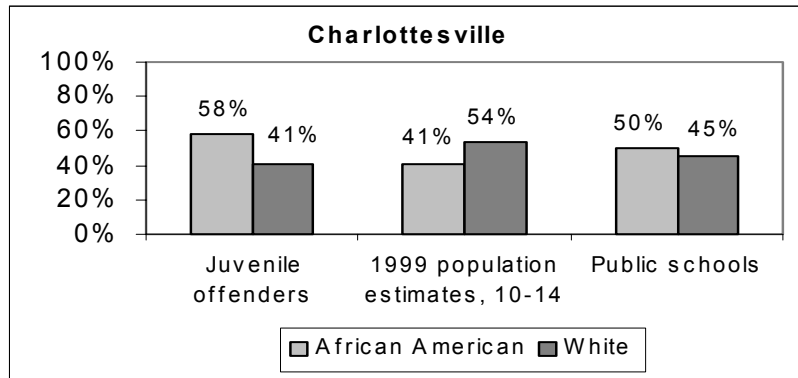


Chart 7

Chart 8 suggests that African-American juveniles in Albemarle in the three year study group are over-represented when compared to 1999 Census estimate data for Albemarle residents ages 10-14 and with 1999-2000 public school students. [Note: 1999 population estimates were used because 2000 census is under appeal. Ages 10-14 are used because University of Virginia students skew the 15-19 age group.]

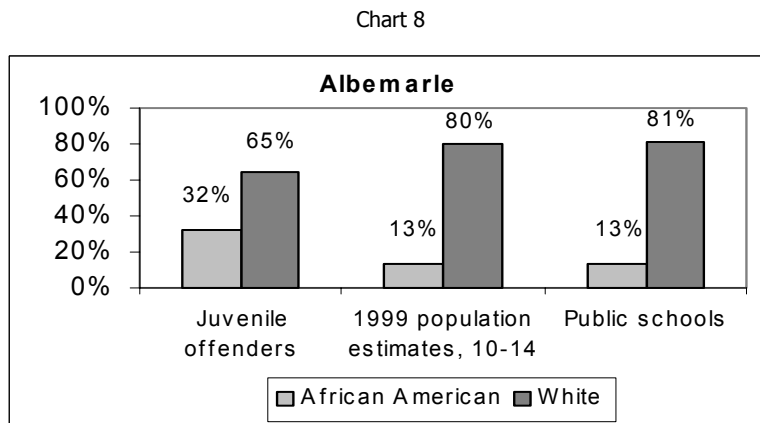


Chart 8

2. Offense Types:

Analysis of the offenses that first brought the juveniles in the three study groups to the attention of the courts indicates that there have been changes in initial offense patterns. The number of juveniles placed on probation for assault and related charges has increased by almost 300% in Albemarle County, while decreasing somewhat in Charlottesville. Property offenses have decreased from 28 to 4 in the City over the time period while remaining fairly steady in Albemarle. See Chart 10.

	CHINS: Truancy, runaway			Assault, Firearms, Disorderly Conduct			Property; larceny, trespass, burglary			Serious; arson, rape, felony assault			Drug/ alcohol		
	97	98	99	97	98	99	97	98	99	97	98	99	97	98	99
Charlottesville	7	20	21	26	22	18	28	18	4	3	8	0	5	10	2
Albemarle	14	16	15	11	16	30	18	29	19	5	11	4	7	13	12
Combined	21	36	36	27	28	48	46	47	23	8	19	4	12	23	14

Chart 10

3. Risk and Need Factors Compared Over Three Year Period:

Chart 11 compares the percentages of each year's study group exhibiting specific risk and need factors. While there is insufficient longitudinal data to identify significant changes, several trends bear watching. The percentage of juveniles exhibiting substance abuse problems decreased from 47% in 1997 to 31% in 1999. The percentage of offenders who experienced major family disorganization increased from 52% in 1997 to 63% in 1999. The number of juveniles with a strong support system outside of the family decreased from 19% in 1997 to 7% in 1999.

Risk/Need Factor	1997 (n=128)	1998 (n=135)	1999 (n=134)
Under age 14	45%	34%	41%
2 or more separate offenses	21%	11%	13%
3 or more violent offenses	5%	5%	1%
Total drug/conspiracy	11%	10%	10%
1 type of property	24%	26%	13%
2 types of property	12%	9%	1%
3 types of property	7%	1%	2%
Substance abuse	47%	44%	31%
Dropout or expelled	14%	18%	17%
Mostly delinquent peers	50%	40%	36%
Runaway/escape	27%	30%	19%
Victim abuse/neglect	30%	27%	20%
Major family disorganization	52%	60%	63%
Parent or sibling on probation	38%	27%	32%
Parent and sibling on probation	9%	9%	12%
Truancy	73%	62%	60%
2 years below grade level	9%	10%	5%
1 year below grade level	26%	22%	26%
Below grade level	35%	32%	31%
Special education student	41%	30%	35%
LD	16%	7%	16%
SED	19%	16%	15%
MMI	5%	4%	6%
Major life transition	70%	70%	53%
Have external support system	19%	9%	7%
Involvement in positive activity	28%	23%	34%
Domestic violence	43%	35%	36%
Public assistance	36%	25%	36%
Chronic curfew violations	50%	42%	34%
Incorrigible as described by parents	47%	41%	39%
Mental health diagnosis at entry	29%	32%	24%
Subsequent mental health diagnosis	60%	59%	50%
Family is offense victim	9%	11%	15%
Parent drug/alcohol abuse	46%	47%	44%
Adjudicated sex offender	5%	3%	4%
Inappropriate sexual behavior	11%	9%	7%
Public housing	12%	12%	12%

Chart 11

SECTION 3: ANALYSIS OF DETAINING OFFENSES AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF DETAINED YOUTH

Data was analyzed for the three year period to determine the number of detention admissions and demographics of detained youth. Specific information about detaining offenses was gathered for the 1999 study group only.

For the three-year period, 240 (60%) juveniles were admitted to detention a total of 649 times. The youth who were detained had an average of 2.7 times.

Juveniles in the study group were detained on the following types of offenses:

- Violation of a court order- 42%
- Violation of probation- 24%
- Misdemeanor offense- 29%
- Felony offense- 5%

The underlying offenses for the detention admissions for violations of probation or court orders were:

- Child in Need of Supervision (truant/runaway) - 39%
- Misdemeanor- 53%
- Felony- 8%

SECTION 4: SUBCOMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction:

The Risk and Needs Assessment subcommittee found the data contained in the three year study of juvenile offenders to be of immense value to the subcommittee's efforts to identify important risk factors as well as developing meaningful risk and need assessment tools and interventions. However, as members reviewed the data, we became convinced that there were many issues and needs in this study that went far beyond the scope of the committee. Specific challenges noted included:

- Future collection of data in a timely manner,

- The high level of domestic violence, mental health issues, truancy, substance abuse and other risk and need factors in the lives of the children in this study and the impact on our community efforts to serve these children,
- How to use computer and web based technology to simplify data collection and information sharing, with an ultimate goal of the development of a common interagency vision and integrated data base system that could reduce duplication of effort and splintered information storage,
- The need to identify funding for continued follow-up studies that can result in the development of worthwhile interventions and improved understanding of these issues,
- The need to build on this and other efforts such as the Commission on Children and Families (CCF) *Stepping Stones* Reports to identify community trends that can lead to improvements.

These are complicated issues requiring careful cost-benefit analysis and planning. However, as the subcommittee worked with this data and these issues, members felt that unless CCF takes an active approach to some or all of these issues, future committees will reach the same conclusions and progress will be slow and repetitious.

Members recommend that CCF actively explore some of the larger issues identified in this study and its recommendations to consider development of systemic improvements that will not only improve our community prevention and clinical interventions and effectiveness, but also can reduce the current cost and inefficiency of our agency based data collection and information sharing systems.

Recommendations:

The Subcommittee submits the following comments and recommendations to the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee:

1. The three years of data about juvenile offenders studied thus far have identified some critical issues that relate to risk and need factors for local youth. This information should be reviewed and analyzed by the Commission on Children and

Families to determine and prioritize which of the following areas of concern related to juvenile delinquency should be addressed by the Commission and/or its workgroups along with identified community partners:

- **Domestic violence**
- **Drug/alcohol abuse** by juvenile offenders
- **Drug/alcohol abuse** by the parents of juvenile offenders
- **Engaging youth in productive activities**
- **Family stabilization and strengthening**
- **Mental health issues**
- **Racial disparity**
- **Truancy/Educational needs**
- **Child abuse and neglect**

2. The current study was a follow-up study, conducted 2-3 years after the fact. The subcommittee recommends devising a means to obtain current data about juvenile offenders on an ongoing basis. Possible methods to do this include:
 - Using the current Department of Juvenile Justice Juvenile Tracking System (JTS) to collect and analyze data. This would require enhancement of local access to the JTS relational database and personnel to conduct ongoing analysis.
 - If access is not available directly to the JTS, a means should be devised to copy information entered into JTS to a local system for analysis.
 - Assuring that any new City or County MIS systems are able to interact with JTS, as well as with Harmony, the Comprehensive Services Act database.
3. The current data should be transferred to a format such as SPSS that allows for more thorough analysis of data, including multivariate analysis.
4. The subcommittee suggests publicizing these findings among residents, professionals, and policy makers to better inform the community about risks and needs of juvenile offenders.

5. The subcommittee recommends the development of an interagency risk and need screening process to identify youth at risk of a variety of problems, including:
 - delinquency,
 - school failure,
 - foster care,
 - abuse/neglect,
 - mental health concerns,
 - physical health issues,
 - suicide,
 - violence

The tool should be easy to administer and score. It is envisioned that the tool would be used by staff in schools and community agencies and would serve as a “red flag” to alert the community for further assessment or services. When the tool is developed, a strength-based orientation to its use should be provided for all agency staff.

The subcommittee recommends that the Commission convene a time-limited group to develop and implement this screening process. The group could include representatives from various Commission bodies, including the Children Needing Extensive Services Work Group, the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, the Risk and Needs Assessment Subcommittee, and the Young Offenders Grant Advisory Group.

6. In conjunction with the implementation of an interagency screening process, the subcommittee suggests the use of the *Guide to Youth Services* as a resource tool for follow up on services to address identified needs. It is suggested that the Commission conduct regular periodic orientations to the *Guide* and utilization of community resources.
7. The three years of data about juvenile offenders studied thus far reflect disparity along racial lines in comparison with the racial make-up of the area's juvenile-aged

population according to census data. This information should be reviewed and analyzed by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee to assist the community in understanding these data and in determining the causes of the disparity. The Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee should explore methods and resources that might be used to address this issue.

Subcommittee members;

Andy Block
Rory Carpenter
Martha Carroll
Dave Chapman
Jonathan Earl
Gretchen Ellis
Jack Gallagher
LeeLee Lawless

Sources:

¹ Risk Assessment Instrument (DJJ Form 9260), Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, 2000.

² *Mental Health: a Report of the Surgeon General*. United States Department of Health and Human Services. 1999

ⁱⁱ Waite. D. and McGarvey, E., *Profile of Incarcerated Adolescents in Virginia Correctional Facilities, Fiscal Years 1993-1998*. 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Mental Health: a Report of the Surgeon General*. United States Department of Health and Human Services. 1999

^{iv} Waite. D. and McGarvey, E., *Profile of Incarcerated Adolescents in Virginia Correctional Facilities, Fiscal Years 1993-1998*. 1999.

^v *Stepping Stones*, Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children and Families, 2001.

^{vi} "Albemarle County Youth Risk Behavior Survey." Albemarle County Schools. 2001

^{vii} "Securing the Future for Safer Youth and Communities", National Crime Prevention Council, 1998

^{viii} *Stepping Stones*, Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children and Families, 2001.

^{ix} Weibush, R. Freitag, R, and Baird, C., "Preventing Delinquency Through Improved Child Protection Services", Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Services, U.S. Department of Justice, 2001.

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^{xii} *Summary Report. 1999-2000 Testing Program*. Charlottesville City Schools. 2000

^{xiii} Baker, M., Sigmon, J, and Nugent, M., "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Kids in School", Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Services, U.S. Department of Justice, 2001.

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