

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/examining-the-relationship-between-family-group-conferencing-and-juvenile-recidivism>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Family Group Conferencing (FGC), also called Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) is rooted in both a restorative justice and family-centered approach. Originating in New Zealand in 1989, FGC/FGDM was first implemented in the United States in 1995 and has since garnered interest nationally and globally. Much of the existing literature on FGC/FGDM focuses on young, first-time, non-violent offenders. In addition, existing literature has generally limited the follow-up periods for measuring recidivism, ranging from six to 18 months. Recently, I conducted an evaluation of FGC/FGDM with a two-year follow-up period that included all offense types, ages, and repeat and first-time offenders using data from Dauphin County Juvenile Probation Department in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Drawing on the individual case record data of 684 youth active with the juvenile probation department, the study used a quasi-experimental design to compare the recidivism rates of all juveniles completing a family group conference between 2004 and 2008, with a comparison group of juveniles who did not participate in a family group conference. Recidivism, for the purpose of this study, was defined as being officially charged with a new offense, either a misdemeanor or felony, within two years.

The analysis suggests that juveniles who complete FGC can reduce their likelihood of recidivism. In fact, while controlling for variables (such as gender, race, age, age at first offense, year of referral, drug use history, grading of first offense, type of first offense, and history of out of home placement), completion of an FGC decreased the odds of recidivating by 43 percent.

The findings do raise some questions about the potential of an unmeasured variable to explain a portion of the sizeable effect. For example, the shift happening in juvenile justice policies and priorities around the country to emphasize family engagement and involvement may explain, in part, why there is such a significant effect from the completion of a conference. Or, perhaps it is not the conference itself leading to reduced recidivism, but the added layers of family involvement and engagement that FGC/FGDM fosters. The voluntary nature of completing the conference, along with family participation, ownership, and buy-in to the developed plan, and assistance with plan completion, could all be indicators of the strength of the family involvement model to increase success by effectively engaging families in decision-making.

The promising results of this evaluation support existing findings that demonstrate the success of restorative justice based programs. Continued research in this area, such as the work being done by Vera's Family Justice Program, is needed to more fully understand and make use of the positive impact that families can have on young people's success.

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