AT THE INTERSECTION OF CHILD WELFARE AND JUVENILE LEGAL SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT

RESEARCH STRATEGIES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE CHANGE

JUVENILE JUSTICE RESEARCH AND REFORM LAB AND EVIDENT CHANGE

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CONTENTS

Introduction and Purpose ............................................................................................................................................ 1
State of Existing Research ......................................................................................................................................... 2
Prioritized Challenges .................................................................................................................................................4
Potential Solutions ...................................................................................................................................................... 5
Recommendations for Future Research ................................................................................................................... 7
Discussion .................................................................................................................................................................. 10
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................................15
References ..................................................................................................................................................................16
Youth with a history of both child welfare and juvenile legal system involvement comprise a unique population with unique needs. However, this population is not small, as a sizable portion of legally involved youth have some history of involvement in the child welfare system (Alvarez et al., 2018; Herz & Dierkhising, 2018). Well-documented challenges facing these youth offer a compelling illustration of the need for cross-system research and policymaking.

Because the child welfare and juvenile legal systems rarely operate in concert, policies and practices in one system often fail to account for the other; their data collection and management systems are typically misaligned; and their budgets regularly preclude access to critical services for youth with a history in both systems. Further, youth of color are dramatically overrepresented among dually involved youth—even beyond the disparities observed within each individual system (e.g., Lee & Villagrana, 2015).

Despite longstanding acknowledgment of the interwoven and exacerbating nature of dual-system involvement—particularly for Black and Brown youth—most research continues to focus primarily on understanding the prevalence of and reasons for dual-system involvement rather than on understanding how to prevent it, developing effective ways to serve dually involved youth, and evaluating the impacts of related policy and practice changes. These research gaps contribute to a scarcity of data-informed policies and practices to prevent dual-system involvement, address the racial inequities in this involvement, and promote positive long-term outcomes for youth who touch both systems.

To remedy the persistent separation of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems in research and reform efforts, Evident Change and the Juvenile Justice Research and Reform (JJR&R) Lab at Drexel University, with support from the William T. Grant Foundation and the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, hosted a 1.5-day convening of researchers, practitioners, individuals with lived experience of system involvement, and funders to create a strategic research agenda to begin addressing dual-system involvement.

The convening was designed to address several goals, including the three aims described below.

1. Identifying existing challenges related to dual-system involvement.
2. Developing potential short- and long-term solutions to address these challenges via changes to local, state, or national policies, procedures, or practices.
3. Creating a research agenda to facilitate the identification, development, implementation, evaluation, dissemination, and/or replication of these potential solutions.
Dually involved youth make up a large proportion of the young people involved in each system. It is estimated that between 7% and 29% of youth with a history of child welfare system involvement also touch the juvenile legal system at some point (Cutuli et al., 2016; Herz et al., 2010) and that 45% to 83% of youth in the juvenile legal system also have a history of child welfare involvement (Halemba & Siegel, 2011; Herz & Dierkhising, 2018; McCroskey et al., 2017).

Importantly, characteristics of dually involved youth tend to be distinct from their single system-involved peers. For example, compared with the larger population of legally involved youth, dually involved youth are more likely to be Black/African American or American Indian/Alaska Native, female, or part of the LGBTQ+ community (Halemba & Siegel, 2011; Herz & Dierkhising, 2018; Herz et al., 2019; Irvine & Canfield, 2016; Johnson-Reid & Barth, 2000; McCroskey et al., 2017). Additionally, compared with young people solely involved in the child welfare system, youth who are also legally involved are more likely to be Black, to be male, and to have entered the child welfare system at a later age (Cutuli et al., 2016; Herz et al., 2019; Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000).

In addition to demonstrating unique demographic and social characteristics, dually involved youth often experience each system differently from youth involved in only one system (Developmental Services Group, 2021). For example, during their time in the child welfare system, dually involved youth are more likely than their peers with no legal system involvement to be removed from their home multiple times, placed in multiple care settings, and involved in the child welfare system for longer periods (Cutuli et al., 2016; Herz et al., 2019; Johnson-Reid & Barth, 2000). These youth also tend to experience more restrictive child welfare placements (e.g., in residential treatment centers rather than in kinship or foster care) than youth solely involved in the child welfare system (Ryan et al., 2008). Dually involved youth are often at a greater risk of placement in a group home or correctional facility as part of their juvenile legal disposition than legally involved youth with no child welfare history (Ryan et al., 2008). These youth may also experience higher rates of rearrest and other forms of recidivism than their solely legally involved peers (Herz et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2008).

Importantly, dually involved youth demonstrate high rates of need across several areas of life and overall well-being. For example, dually involved youth often experience challenges related to mental health, academics, and substance abuse (Altschuler et al., 2009; Developmental Services Group, 2021; Haight et al., 2014; Herz, 2016). Researchers estimate that 50–74% of dually involved youth experience mental health challenges (Herz, 2016; Herz et al., 2010) and 17–80% of dually involved youth meet criteria for substance abuse (Herz et al., 2010). Also, many dually involved youth experience frequent absences from school and otherwise struggle
academically (Herz et al., 2010). Given their extensive needs, youth who experience both systems are more likely to use mental health, housing, and federal services than youth who experience a single system (Garcia et al., 2021; Herz & Dierkhising, 2018).

Given the unique needs and challenges faced by dually involved youth, early identification of these individuals would likely contribute to more effective case management and service planning. However, child welfare and juvenile justice agencies frequently lack structures to support cross-system collaboration (e.g., ways to share data), and concerns about confidentiality and differences in agency goals, policies, and terminology can pose additional barriers to coordination (Herz & Dierkhising, 2018; Kelly & Haskins, 2021).

When the juvenile legal and child welfare systems fail to coordinate care for dually involved youth, these young people can ultimately be subject to two sets of requirements, be expected to achieve conflicting goals, and experience disparate styles of supervision (Development Services Group, 2021; Vidal et al., 2019; Wigg et al., 2013). This lack of coordination can create significant challenges that hinder effective case management and service planning and lead to confusion and stress for youth and their families (Modrowski et al., 2023). Such shortcomings may impede the holistic support needed for dually involved youth, negatively impacting their well-being and ability to navigate the complex systems designed to assist them (Haight et al., 2014).

Efforts to address cross-system challenges to serve dually involved youth have sought to develop and leverage partnerships among juvenile justice agencies (e.g., juvenile court, juvenile probation), child welfare agencies, and community members (Newton, 2020). Often, these partnerships are formalized via the execution of memoranda of understanding (MOUs), facilitating expedited data sharing and cross-system case planning coordination for dually involved youth (Thomas, 2015). Additionally, leaders of child-serving agencies have benefited from training and technical assistance emphasizing the importance of early intervention and increased family engagement for dually involved youth, as exemplified by the Crossover Youth Practice Model (Center for Juvenile Justice Reform, n.d.). Evaluations of these and similar initiatives have linked participation in such programming to enhanced data-sharing practices, implementation of front-end screening and identification processes for dual-status youth, adoption of multidisciplinary case planning and shared case management responsibilities, and notable improvements in the collaborative nature of service plans for both youth and families (Haight, 2014; Herz & Dierkhising, 2018; Morgan, 2022; Thomas, 2015).

Despite this progress, ongoing challenges remain, indicating a need for more comprehensive discussions about these challenges, their potential solutions, and the ways in which research can help inform this important work. As a result, Evident Change and the JJR&R Lab at Drexel University convened a gathering of individuals with diverse subject matter expertise as a way to promote and facilitate these necessary discussions and related action planning.

Dually involved youth demonstrate high rates of need across several areas of life and overall well-being.
Prior to the convening, Evident Change and the JJR&R Lab created and distributed a survey that asked attendees to identify what they perceived to be the challenges most contributing to youth involved in either the child welfare or juvenile legal system becoming engaged in the other system as well. Response options (e.g., lack of family involvement or family inclusion; confidentiality laws, regulations, or policies preventing effective information sharing between the two systems) were based on reviewed literature. Participants could also specify additional challenges that were not already included as response options.

We received 18 pre-convening survey responses, resulting in 17 identified challenges (e.g., racial and ethnic disparities in both systems leading to overrepresentation of youth of color among dually involved youth, lack of intersystem coordination leading to service gaps) that were shared with convening attendees.

In the first working session of the convening, attendees met in small groups, discussed and revised this list of challenges, and distilled the list down to what they believed to be the seven most significant challenges: (1) lack of data linkage between systems; (2) racial disparities/structural racism within both systems; (3) lack of effective strategies to prevent youth from entering either system; (4) emphasis on “compliance” for youth and families involved in each system; (5) lack of community resources; (6) widespread oversurveillance of youth and families; and (7) challenges related to measuring youth well-being outcomes.
CONVENING PARTICIPANTS FORMED SEVEN SMALL GROUPS—ONE FOR EACH PRIORITIZED CHALLENGE—BASED ON THEIR INTEREST IN GENERATING POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR THE GIVEN CHALLENGE. THE GROUPS ENGAGED IN FACILITATED DISCUSSIONS AIMED AT Eliciting DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES, THOUGHTS, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR RELEVANT SOLUTIONS TO THEIR ASSIGNED CHALLENGE. ACROSS DISCUSSION GROUPS, IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS TENDED TO FIT WITHIN ONE OF FOUR THEMES.

FIRST, GROUPS FREQUENTLY DISCUSSED THE NEED FOR CHILD WELFARE AND YOUTH JUSTICE AGENCIES TO MAKE FOUNDA TIONAL CHANGES TO THEIR EXISTING SYSTEM PROCEDURES—NAMELY, MOVING AWAY FROM AN OVERRELIANCE ON SURVEILLANCE AND COMPLIANCE-BASED METRICS AND INSTEAD PRIORITIZING YOUTH AND FAMILY WELL-BEING BY USING INDIVIDUALIZED APPROACHES TO CASE MANAGEMENT. FOR EXAMPLE, PARTICIPANTS NOTED THAT SYSTEMS SHOULD ENSURE INTAKE PROCEDURES BRING TOGETHER YOUTH, THEIR FAMILIES, SYSTEM PERSONNEL, AND SERVICE PROVIDERS TO JOINTLY IDENTIFY A CASE PLAN BASED ON NEEDS AND OBJECTIVES THAT ALIGN WITH YOUTH AND FAMILY GOALS AND DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS. BY CREATING SUCH INDIVIDUALIZED CASE PLANS WITH A LIMITED NUMBER OF REQUIREMENTS AND DECREASING RELIANCE ON UNIFORMLY APPLIED REQUIREMENTS THAT ARE NOT ALWAYS RELEVANT (E.G., REGULAR DRUG TESTING), SYSTEMS CAN INCREASE YOUTH AND FAMILY BUY-IN, WHICH CAN HELP CONTRIBUTE TO POSITIVE OUTCOMES. FURTHER, GROUPS ROUTINELY RECOMMENDED THAT SYSTEMS CREATE MECHANISMS FOR YOUTH AND FAMILIES TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK ABOUT THEIR SYSTEM EXPERIENCES TO ENCOURAGE ACCOUNTABILITY AND CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT BASED ON YOUTH- AND FAMILY-IDENTIFIED NEEDS.

SECOND, ATTENDEES EMPHASIZED THE NEED FOR INTERAGENCY COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION WITH AN EMPHASIS ON DATA-DRIVEN APPROACHES. THEY NOTED THAT CONNECTING CHILD WELFARE AND JUVENILE LEGAL AGENCIES’ CASE MANAGEMENT AND CARE COORDINATION DATA WOULD ALLOW SYSTEMS TO DEVELOP A MORE HOLISTIC AND COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF YOUTH AND FAMILY NEEDS AND, AS A RESULT, PROVIDE MORE TAILORED SUPPORT. INCREASED CROSS-SYSTEM COORDINATION WOULD ALSO ALLOW EACH SYSTEM TO ACCOUNT FOR THE REQUIREMENTS IMPOSED BY THE OTHER SYSTEM, THEREBY REDUCING CONFUSION AMONG DUALLY INVOLVED YOUTH AND THEIR FAMILIES AS THEY SEEK TO ADHERE TO BOTH SETS OF EXPECTATIONS. GIVEN THE SILOED NATURE OF THESE SYSTEMS AND EXISTING LEGAL REQUIREMENTS, PARTICIPANTS RECOGNIZED THAT SYSTEMS MAY NOT BE ABLE TO SIMPLY BEGIN SHARING THEIR DATA. INSTEAD, CONVENING ATTENDEES RECOMMENDED THE CREATION OF JURISDICTION-BASED WORKGROUPS FOCUSED ON DATA LINKAGE THAT INCLUDE REPRESENTATIVES WITH EXPERTISE IN TECHNOLOGY PROVISION AND DATA INTEGRATION STRATEGIES, AS WELL AS FRONTLINE CHILD WELFARE AND JUVENILE LEGAL STAFF, AGENCY LEADERSHIP, SYSTEM-INVOLVED YOUTH AND FAMILIES, YOUTH ADVOCATES, ATTORNEYS WITH PRIVACY LAW EXPERTISE, LEGISLATORS, AND JUDGES.
Third, group discussions highlighted the need for solutions that recognize community members’ inherent value, engage communities, and seek to leverage community resources and insights to improve system operations. For example, youth and families with a history of system involvement could be asked to share their perspectives on system operations, what outcomes should be prioritized, and what supports should be offered. Further, whenever possible, systems should contract with community-based service providers to directly serve youth (e.g., for diversion programming, to provide court-ordered counseling), especially providers staffed by individuals with similar backgrounds to the youth receiving services. Additionally, by prioritizing funding for community-based organizations that engage in prevention work, fewer youth will enter the child welfare and/or juvenile legal system in the first place. Community resource mapping would also be a helpful exercise, to identify existing high-quality organizations with strong positive support from the surrounding community with which child welfare and juvenile legal agencies can partner. Such a list can also highlight gaps in available resources (e.g., organizations designed to support certain underserved groups of youth) where future investments could help young leaders build the capacity to fill such gaps.

Fourth, solutions identified by the small groups often involved educational and advocacy efforts targeting system actors and policymakers who can make broader systemic changes. For example, educating these individuals about structural racism and the harms and costs associated with existing systems can help motivate sustained change efforts. As a complement, this information can lay the groundwork for advocacy aimed at reallocating funding away from usual practices, such as overly restrictive measures of surveillance (e.g., ankle bracelets) and facility commitment, and toward more youth- and family-focused solutions, such as engagement with community-based organizations and services, after eliciting suggestions from community members about where interventions would be most beneficial. Additional advocacy efforts could include encouraging lawmakers and policymakers to build models for cross-system coordination and data sharing to better serve dually involved youth, create incentives for jurisdictions to adopt such models, and encourage (or even mandate) the measurement of outcomes that go beyond typical compliance-based metrics to include overall well-being measures informed by insights from system-involved youth and families.

**POTENTIAL SOLUTION THEMES**

1. Prioritize youth and family well-being by using individualized approaches to case management.
2. Strengthen interagency communication and collaboration with an emphasis on data-driven approaches.
3. Recognize community members’ inherent value, engage communities, and leverage community insights to improve system operations.
4. Develop education and advocacy efforts that address the barriers to broader systemic changes in how these systems work together.
We asked convening attendees to collaboratively generate potential research questions related to each of the prioritized challenges, considering previous discussions. We also asked group members to identify the resources needed to explore these research questions and to reflect upon how such work might advance cross-system change. Across all challenges, several research ideas, approaches, and strategies arose.

1. **Integrate various perspectives into all phases of research, especially those from individuals with lived expertise.**

Participants suggested that researchers obtain narratives from system-involved youth and their families (and practitioners in youth-serving systems) about their experiences to inform all work related to dual-system involvement. For example, researchers could ask youth and families about their experiences trying to comply with child welfare and juvenile legal system requirements or the ways youth, families, and practitioners would define or measure youth well-being. Further, partnering directly with system-involved individuals—as co-researchers rather than just information providers—would allow their insights and expertise to inform all stages of the research process, from generating research questions and appropriate methodologies to carrying out those studies, interpreting data and results, and disseminating findings.

2. **Describe and evaluate current practices within the child welfare and juvenile legal systems as they relate to dually involved youth.**

Participants noted that researchers could investigate existing operations of child welfare and juvenile legal systems, which are often siloed and limited in their ability to coordinate services and develop collaborative policies. Focusing on systems that have developed successful cross-agency data linkages could provide important guidance for other jurisdictions hoping to enact similar processes. Additional research topics include examining the standard requirements for youth and families involved in the child welfare and/or juvenile legal system across jurisdictions and determining where in each system racial and ethnic disparities emerge, what processes appear to contribute most to those disparities, and what strategies appear to effectively reduce them. Undertaking these and similar avenues of inquiry would allow researchers to develop a better baseline understanding of existing problems and more accurately identify points of intervention for future reforms.

3. **Examine strategies that build the capacity of communities and other agencies to support youth and families.**

Convening attendees suggested that centering research efforts outside of formal child welfare and juvenile legal systems could substantially improve outcomes for dually involved youth.
and/or prevent multisystem involvement. For instance, researchers could work with a human services department of a given jurisdiction to pilot a universal basic income initiative to examine how that reform impacts the number of youths entering both the child welfare and juvenile legal systems, as well as impacts on existing disparities among dually involved youth. Convening attendees also noted the chronic under-resourcing of community-based methods of supporting youth and families, which often presents a barrier to building community capacity. They suggested that research could explore the individual youth and community-level impacts of new funding allocations focused specifically on community prevention efforts for youth.

4. Pilot and investigate the impacts of innovative reforms within the child welfare and juvenile legal systems.

Researchers should partner with cities, counties, or states that have already implemented or would be open to implementing new policies and practices in the child welfare and juvenile legal systems and explore the outcomes of these novel approaches. For example, researchers could work with these systems to develop and implement new measures and guiding frameworks focused on youth and family well-being. Specifically, researchers could identify existing well-being measures and frameworks and determine which are most relevant to dually involved youth and their families to consider for adaptation and implementation. Participants emphasized the importance of incorporating perspectives from system-involved youth and families (e.g., how they would define well-being, how systems could best promote well-being) during the development process.

Then, researchers could work directly with system agencies to empirically investigate how adopting frameworks focused on well-being impact youth outcomes.

In addition to investigating the outcomes of novel reforms, researchers should explore the barriers that arise during implementation and evaluate approaches to overcoming those obstacles. Further, incorporating relevant constructs from implementation science (e.g., acceptability, fidelity) into the research plan would provide a more robust understanding of the reform’s uptake within a specific location and provide important guidance to other jurisdictions seeking to implement similar reforms.

5. Investigate effective methods for influencing system leaders to apply evidence-based strategies and principles to improve outcomes for youth and families.

Successful implementation of potential solutions identified during the convening will require bold leadership in the child welfare and juvenile legal systems, including the judiciary. Research should examine what strategies encourage leaders to create new approaches to serving dually involved youth and their families. For example, researchers could explore the effectiveness of communications-related efforts (e.g., education and awareness campaigns) designed to influence leaders to act on available empirical evidence. Research in this area could identify helpful strategies to reduce barriers to implementation of innovative reforms and increase cross-system collaboration in developing policies related to dually involved youth.
Participants noted that, to undertake their suggested ideas, researchers would need to draw upon several important resources. Some of these resources focused on people, including connections to people from different interest groups—especially individuals with lived expertise—who would be willing to contribute to research projects as thought partners, collaborators, and credible messengers to share relevant project information with communities. Additionally, partnerships between research teams and agencies seemed to be a particularly critical resource, as several suggested research ideas require ongoing communication and access to existing data (e.g., case information) beyond what is publicly available.

Time was also identified as a meaningful resource. Many attendees suggested that investigations would require multi-method, longitudinal approaches. Further, successful partnerships often require a considerable time investment to build sufficient trust and collegiality before embarking on a research endeavor. Convening participants also universally highlighted the need for funding and other support and incentives for researchers to perform this work, as well as funding to compensate system-involved individuals and families for contributing their time and expertise to a given research project.

Other relevant resources identified during convening discussions about research ideas included existing best practices or other guidelines to inform implementation of evidence-based reforms (e.g., from jurisdictions already implementing novel ideas), positive media coverage to increase the likelihood of the general public supporting change efforts, and strategies for getting research results to the people who could most use and benefit from those results (e.g., judges, policymakers, youth, and families).
Along with a growing recognition that youth who touch both the child welfare and juvenile legal systems are a distinct group of young people with specific needs, key parties are increasingly aware of the need for integrated, cross-system policies and practices that are directly responsive to those needs and that can more effectively serve dually involved youth. Addressing that need was the primary motivator for the November 2023 convening that focused on identifying existing challenges to effectively serving dually involved youth, developing potential solutions for addressing those challenges, and creating a research agenda that could facilitate identified solutions and inform the field more broadly.

Convening attendees prioritized challenges related to cross-system data linkage, structural racism and racial disparities within both systems, a dearth of community resources and effective prevention strategies, a systematic overemphasis on compliance and oversurveillance for youth and families involved in these systems, and the difficulty in measuring youth well-being as an outcome. Potential solutions to these challenges focused on redirecting system goals away from compliance and surveillance and toward growth and support; increasing interagency communication and collaboration; supporting the capacity of youth, families, and other community members to engage with and meaningfully contribute to ongoing efforts to serve dually involved youth; and educating key parties about the needs of dually involved youth and advocating for the reallocation of funding away from the child welfare and legal systems and toward community-based services that can help prevent youths’ dual-system entry.

Emphasizing the critical role that researchers and funders—in partnership with practitioners and individuals with lived expertise from system involvement—can play in driving sustainable change, convening participants also discussed several areas of research that could help inform efforts to address the identified challenges. They also discussed several resources that would be required to support research in these areas, including people, partnerships, time, funding, and effective strategies for disseminating results.

NEED FOR COLLABORATIVE INVOLVEMENT FROM KEY PARTIES

Throughout the convening—regardless of the challenge, proposed solution, or related research area under discussion—participants routinely referenced the central need for partnerships among practitioners, researchers, and system-involved individuals. In particular, convening attendees emphasized the need for people with lived expertise to be a central partner in all stages of the research and reform processes, highlighting the benefits of incorporating community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) into this work.

CBPAR approaches seek to create academic–community partnerships in which community members play an equal role to academic researchers. Each group contributes unique strengths through the research process, from identifying and prioritizing community goals and needs, to jointly developing research questions and study methods, and to interpreting and disseminating results together (Maiter et al., 2008). Further, scholars using CBPAR
approaches aim to produce results that contribute to practical, actionable solutions to community-prioritized challenges that complement ongoing work by community-based organizations (Brogan et al., 2021).

CBPAR approaches could serve as one useful strategy for incorporating the voices of individuals with a history of dual-system involvement into research in this area—preferably as partners and members of research teams. Facilitating partnerships among such community members with lived expertise, researchers, and practitioners will better ensure that research and reform efforts address the most pressing needs of the communities most impacted by ongoing challenges.

NEED FOR LONG-TERM INVESTMENT AND COMMITMENT

The inclusion of time in the convening attendees’ list of necessary resources for completing this important work indicates that it will require a prolonged commitment from all key parties (i.e., system leadership and personnel, policymakers, researchers, funders, system-involved youth, and families) to enact meaningful change to impact millions of youth across the country. Key parties might start by setting and pursuing relatively short-term goals, such as building interdisciplinary partnerships (e.g., among researchers, practitioners, and individuals with lived expertise) that last beyond changes in agency leadership, developing new methods for measuring well-being, and increasing cross-system data sharing in ways that align with existing legal requirements.

Even executing tasks associated with the relatively short-term goals identified through the convening will likely require more time than the one to three years of support typically provided through existing funding streams; carrying out a comprehensive strategy for addressing systemic challenges would require significantly longer periods of support. In that regard, funders—whether government agencies or independent foundations—can play a critical role by setting long-term research and reform agendas and soliciting and investing in projects and collaborations that can translate strategies identified by key parties into real-world change. In particular, these agencies should aim to fund initiatives committed to enacting a sustained impact—for instance, providing several years of support to ensure organizations are implementing reforms with an eye toward continued operations over the long term—to better address ongoing challenges faced by dually involved youth.

NEED FOR LOCAL, STATE, AND NATIONAL STRATEGIES

The structures of child welfare and juvenile legal systems differ across the country. Within some states, these systems are operated by each county independently; elsewhere, system operations are centralized at the state level. In some states, one system (e.g., juvenile legal) operates at the county level while the other system (e.g., child welfare) operates at the state level. Therefore, bringing about system change will require local, state, and national efforts simultaneously.

Given the relative speed with which local change can sometimes occur (Khoury, 2021), focusing on reform implementation and evaluation in individual towns, cities, and counties would be a valuable initial investment. Then, as replicable policy and practice models are established and support for successful changes grows, local momentum can motivate change at state and
national levels, which, in turn, often encourages uptake in additional local jurisdictions as well. Together, the combination of top-down (i.e., federal or state agenda setting that drives local practice changes) and bottom-up (i.e., local successes that inspire state and federal entities to encourage more widespread use) influences can produce a national consensus about the need for reform and promising strategies to enact.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS, PRACTITIONERS, AND FUNDERS

We have developed several recommendations for researchers, practitioners, and funders who wish to improve outcomes for dually involved youth and their families, based on convening attendee reports.

RESEARCHERS

Individuals interested in conducting research connected to dually involved youth should actively engage in communities of learning and partnership focused on the challenges and opportunities that arise for this unique population. In particular, they should actively engage people with lived expertise as partners in their work, working with system-involved groups to better understand how youth and families experience the child welfare and juvenile legal systems and frame their priority areas for further inquiry. These system-involved individuals can also serve as co-researchers throughout a study or line of research, using their critically relevant experiences and perspectives to inform and contribute to research designs, data collection strategies, data analysis plans, interpretation of results, and dissemination of findings. As part of their efforts to engage in CBPAR, researchers must aim to produce work—in partnership with community members—that directly benefits the community and builds community members’ capacity to bring about systemic change.

Researchers should also seek to partner with local agency leaders and policymakers to assess existing operations and, when indicated, use assessment results to provide evidence-based recommendations for system reform. In such cases, researchers might rely on principles of implementation science, a field focused on understanding how research findings successfully translate into practice and policy (Bauer et al., 2015). Specifically, in addition to providing recommended changes to partner agencies and organizations, researchers should also provide guidance about how to make recommended changes—for example, by engaging personnel in preparation for the reform, by identifying and preparing program champions who can help promote widespread buy-in of the proposed changes, or by providing ongoing support for staff implementing new protocols (Waltz et al., 2015). Additional roles for researchers within a lasting research-practice partnership include providing support during implementation (e.g., helping to develop protocols, providing training on new procedures) and evaluating how reforms

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1 The MacArthur Foundation’s work in the juvenile justice space from 1996 through 2019 serves as a strong example of the type of long-term investment from funding organizations that can make a meaningful impact. Specifically, over the course of two decades, the MacArthur Foundation supported various efforts aimed at creating a more developmentally appropriate juvenile legal system. Results of these efforts have directly led to systems change across the country and continue to be an important resource for researchers and advocates (MacArthur Foundation, n.d.).
impact outcomes for system-involved youth and families—both for the purposes of continuous quality improvement and to identify policies and programs for replication.

Finally, researchers should recognize that systems’ data capacities can vary widely across jurisdictions and even within agencies and organizations in the same jurisdiction. Although some local and state child welfare and juvenile legal systems maintain electronic databases that can be used reliably in research to examine patterns across youth, agencies elsewhere have developed data collection and storage procedures designed solely for use on an individual basis to address immediate needs within the scope of agency work (e.g., individual case management). Therefore, as part of the partnership developed with practitioners, researchers might offer guidance and/or support to agencies seeking to create or enhance their data systems. Such efforts would likely benefit all parties, as agencies would have more robust data collection and organization systems to enhance individual case management and quality improvement efforts, and researchers would be able to examine relevant data to answer community-identified research questions.

**PRACTITIONERS**

To truly make progress, communities of partnership and learning must include individuals working in systems that serve dually involved youth (e.g., child welfare and juvenile legal agencies, providers working with this population of young people) as central partners. Relying upon their direct experience, system practitioners can share observations of existing policies and practices; identify successes and shortcomings; and make suggestions for system enhancements that are realistic, practical, and acceptable to those who will be responsible for implementation.

Practitioners with their own questions about current operations and their impacts on youth and families and with ideas for addressing shortcomings are encouraged to reach out to researchers (e.g., at nearby universities) to collaborate on evaluation and implementation efforts; established partnerships that extend beyond a single project can facilitate ease of and comfort with this type of communication. Local systems might also consider building out their internal capacity to engage in research efforts by embedding researchers within system organizations for rapid analysis and ongoing evaluation and quality assurance efforts.

Practitioners can further incorporate solutions discussed at the convening by adopting trauma-informed practices throughout all program and agency operations. Recognizing the significant and often compounding trauma histories of youth involved in both child welfare and juvenile legal systems, practitioners can strive to infuse trauma-informed principles throughout their policies and practices to recognize trauma histories, mitigate trauma-related impacts, and prevent further traumatization.

Additionally, practitioners can incorporate youth voice and promote youth agency. There are several opportunities for practitioners to engage young people with lived expertise, both at the individual level (e.g., by asking youth about their personal goals, what is most motivating to them, and how system actors can best support them) and at the programmatic level (e.g., by engaging young people with lived expertise in the design of new programs and/or policies).

Finally, practitioners can work to build cross-sector partnerships and cross-system collaborations—for example, via cross-system taskforces/workgroups or MOUs to facilitate ongoing interagency
communication between child welfare and juvenile legal agencies. Although successful dual-system collaborations and communications are central to change, broadening partnerships to include other child-serving agencies (e.g., schools, mental health) can generate more robust and holistic impacts on youth and their families.

**FUNDERS**

As noted earlier, funding agencies and organizations can play an important role in progressing efforts to address systemic challenges to preventing dual-system involvement and serving dually involved youth. For instance, they can, themselves, *actively engage in communities of learning and partnership*, providing support for ongoing convenings that bring together researchers, practitioners, and individuals with lived system expertise to connect, generate shared knowledge, and develop new partnerships—or expand and strengthen existing ones.

Funders should also *prioritize long-term investments*, going beyond the typical one- to three-year funding periods, to allow researchers, practitioners, and community members to carry out the many steps (e.g., partnership development, data acquisition and integration, reform implementation and evaluation) associated with this complex work. Further, if funding organizations see this work as a priority, they must *create calls for funding that directly target concerns* identified by members of system-impacted communities, practitioners, and researchers, especially those calls that allow for both shorter-term and longitudinal studies. Funders might also revisit existing funding streams to determine whether they align with current goals and long-term strategies, adapting them as needed to enhance feasibility and increase their likelihood of being used to support impactful work in this area. Across solicitations, funders should ensure that the length of time for application review does not prevent applicants from “striking while the iron is hot,” or capitalizing on immediate, potentially short-lived opportunities for reform.

Finally, to facilitate some of the suggestions made during the November 2023 convening, funders might also adjust their solicitations to support *investments in data infrastructure*, *support policy advocacy* to help a wider constituent base offer suggestions to shape local and federal policies, and support efforts to *evaluate and scale promising practices*.

Funding agencies and organizations should also prioritize projects that *promote youth leadership*, whether through specific funding mechanisms or requiring projects funded through other mechanisms to include youth or young adults with lived expertise as project team members and leaders. In the latter case, funding should also be allocated to support staff to supervise, support, and mentor these young people with lived expertise, as it may require substantial time, effort, and skill to facilitate their involvement and provide support for their broader professional development. As these requirements for thoughtful and responsible supervision of young people with lived system expertise may be beyond the capacity of many research teams, funders might choose to invest in building a well-supervised youth advisory group of individuals who can consult with researchers on specific projects as team members and leaders.
A key lesson of the convening is that creating meaningful and widespread dual-system change will require more than a short-term effort driven solely by single projects or individual research teams; it will require long-term investment of time and money by a broad group of interested parties.

To generate robust, high-impact, dual-system change, we must recognize the current state of the field and how it should develop. We must ask the question: How can we use research to support policy and practice changes at the intersection of the child welfare and juvenile legal systems to produce better outcomes for young people?

Currently, there is a wealth of research that identifies the prevalence of dual-system involvement in individual jurisdictions, risk factors for youth entry into the two systems, and the harmful impacts of involvement in both systems.

At the national level, work has begun to identify available data structures and data capacity of systems serving dually involved youth to better inform and improve efforts to support these young people and their families.

Nevertheless, considerable amounts of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research remain to be done. Such research will inform the development, implementation, evaluation, dissemination, and replication of policy and practice changes to improve outcomes for this group of particularly vulnerable young people. Active research–practitioner–community partnerships are needed to move these efforts forward in ways that are feasible, acceptable, and impactful, and funders can support these efforts by creating a long-term investment plan that recognizes the complexity and—importance—of this work.
REFERENCES


