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Linking Juvenile Justice Research to Policy Action: Engaging Community Partners and Policymakers to Achieve Change

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Research shows that incarcerated youth are at risk of poor health and social outcomes.¹ Interventions that focus on keeping youth out of the juvenile justice system are more likely to impact long-term outcomes.¹ To create systems that prevent youth incarceration and improve youths' trajectories, we must use evidence to inform public policy.

By applying the scientific method through community-engaged scholarship,² pediatric researchers can generate evidence to support policy change. Evidence provided by pediatric researchers to policymakers can potentiate the voices of community members and may identify solutions not previously visible or expected. The case study below presents an example of linking research to legislative changes that protect child sex trafficking victims from harmful exposures to the justice system.

Case Study: Decriminalizing Child Victims of Sex Trafficking

The 2000 federal Trafficking and Victims Protection Act re-defined sex-trafficked youth as victims rather than criminals. But, since criminal law is determined at the state level and states had not yet adopted similar policies, the practice of prosecuting and incarcerating child victims for being trafficked continued.³

This came to my attention in 2012 as a research fellow, when I interviewed incarcerated youth in Los Angeles about their perspectives on pathways to

jail. Youth expressed that girls, as opposed to boys, became incarcerated because of what they termed “prostitution,” a claim I verified with local experts.

One month later, in preparation for an internship in California’s legislature, I spoke with advocates and identified an opportunity for justice reform regarding sex trafficked youth, a group increasingly being recognized as victims.

Once in Sacramento, I shared with lawmakers quotes from the incarcerated youth about “prostitution” triggering justice involvement and avoidance of healthcare because of fear of re-arrest. I met Senator Holly Mitchell’s team as they contemplated a bill to decriminalize child sex trafficking victims and re-route youth to supportive services. It made ethical sense that youth not be incarcerated for their own trafficking. But some California experts raised concerns that, should decriminalization pass, youth would lack the safety and services of juvenile hall. I telephoned experts in New York, which four years prior, had become the first state to decriminalize child victims of sex trafficking, to request their input on a potential decriminalization bill for California.

After I completed the one-month internship, I returned to my fellowship program, maintaining regular communication with Senator Mitchell’s team

and key advocacy organizations. Through our interactions, an unanswered research question became clear: “What are best practices for laws decriminalizing and diverting child sex trafficking victims?” I then launched a study with the community agency Children’s Law Center of California (CLC), a stakeholder partner that advocates for the community of sex trafficked youth. We sought to identify unintended consequences and key elements to include in such a law, should evidence support new legislation. CLC interacts with youth daily through direct client representation and connects to a network of advocates that includes sex trafficking survivors. Alongside CLC, I formalized the informational interviews I was already conducting. We did so by: obtaining IRB approval, conducting legal analysis of the nine existing state child sex trafficking decriminalization laws, and developing and adhering to a systematic interview protocol. We conducted and analyzed interviews together, and jointly planned the dissemination approach.

One year later, I shared findings from our “in press” peer-reviewed publication⁴ with Senator Mitchell’s team, providing her office and others hardcopies of the article. I discussed our table on provisions for model legislation with a staff member on her team for two hours in a café across the street from the Capitol building, receiving a higher level of trust than an advocate, I was told, because I brought the objectivity of research evidence.

Once I had disseminated the research findings, I focused on other academic studies related to child sex trafficking, and Senator Mitchell's office and the advocates continued the policy process. Senator Mitchell then introduced Senate Bill 1322, drafted with the help of CLC based on study recommendations, to decriminalize child victims of sex trafficking less than 18.⁵ The bill was signed into law in 2016. Providing police officer training on child sex trafficking emerged as an unanticipated recommendation from the study and, in 2018, was codified as Assembly Bill 2992.⁶

Methodologic Reflections

The scholarship built on the well-established tools of community-based participatory research (CBPR) to achieve policy change, involving close collaboration from study inception through the dissemination process.² Designed to reduce disparities of under-resourced populations, academic-community partnerships expand the validity and reach of research, achieving more than academics or community partners could alone.^{2,7}

We applied community engagement principles of trust, respect, and knowledge exchange² to community *and* policymaker partners. The three-way partnership was critical to a successful application of research to policy. As an academic pediatrician, I was trusted to broker and distill evidence. I relied on our policymaker partner to guide the research question and to enact legislative change. The stakeholder partnership anchored the research

in the community of youth, advocates, and providers necessary for successful implementation. Departing from the classical partnership model, which calls for policymaker engagement after research completion,⁷ policymaker engagement occurred from the onset of the research process, guiding the study question, approach, and dissemination.

As exemplified by the case description, with the full involvement of the community, the researcher can use the scientific method to bring information from the community to provide key evidence to policymakers. Likewise, researchers can apply the engagement principles of trust, respect, and knowledge exchange to interact with policymakers and community partners about policy ideas. The earlier each sector is involved, the better for shared ownership of ideas, methods, data, and policy solutions.

We encountered several challenges, many of which were inherent to community-partnered research. We developed strategies to overcome the disconnect between researchers and policymakers, often attributed to policymakers not valuing evidence and researchers not understanding the multiple demands upon policymakers. Having trusted relationships and transparent communication was key to progress. Other challenges inherent to community and policy-engaged research include: funding misalignment, lack of academic incentive, and

tension between the role of scientist versus advocate in working for policy change. A challenge specific to justice reform was bringing the voices of the youth and families forward—justice involvement can be isolating and silencing. Our community partners—and policymakers who embraced the youth who came to the Capitol to testify—were paramount in overcoming these challenges.

Researchers engaged with community and policymaker partners can conduct community engaged, policy-relevant research—matching more grounded questions to overcome justice system disparities with solutions more likely to be implemented effectively. Dialogue among researcher, community, and policymaker partners throughout the process of research on youth justice can thus create a sustainable policy bridge to support evidence-informed policy to promote justice reform—and instead re-direct young people to the help they deserve.

While we applied this approach to juvenile justice reform, it may well have applicability to addressing other social risks. I learned that policymakers are receptive to evidence, especially when coupled with narrative community voices. In addition to building authentic community partnerships, researchers—including early-career researchers—should heighten ambitions for policy impact and develop real plans for policymaker buy-in and

dissemination. Pediatric researchers can build alliances among these partners and use science to uncover solutions that fuel policy change.

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