



Vol. 3, No. 1  
July 1999

*On Good Authority* is a periodic briefing on trends and issues in criminal justice. This report was written by staff Research Analyst Karen S. Levy McCanna. It is a summary of a program evaluation of the Cook County Juvenile Sheriff's Work Alternative Program. The evaluation was conducted by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. Copies of the evaluation are available from the Authority's Research and Analysis Unit.

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*The evaluation was supported in part by grant #95-DB-VX-0017, #96-DB-MU-0017, #97-DB-MU-0017, and #98-DB-MU-0017, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

*Printed by authority of the State of Illinois, July 1999. Printing order #99-084; 3,000 copies.*

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## Juvenile work program provides alternative to detention

The Cook County Juvenile Sheriff's Work Alternative Program (JSWAP) has provided a sentencing alternative for more than 3,000 juveniles adjudicated from 1995 through 1998. Initiated to address concerns about juvenile delinquency in the community, the program aims to:

- Create sentencing alternatives;
- Relieve overcrowding at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center (JTDC), and;
- Provide community service opportunities for juvenile offenders.

From June 1996 through February 1999, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency conducted a process and impact evaluation of JSWAP, funded through the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority with federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act funds. The recently published final report provides a comprehensive look at the program.

### Program description

Juveniles who have been adjudicated and could be sentenced to up to 30 days in a temporary detention facility may be ordered to the work alternative program instead. Eligibility criteria were established to include males between the ages of 13 and 17 years who have been adjudicated of a probationable offense, with the exception of specific violent

and felony offenses. Predispositional juveniles were ineligible.

While a formal screening process does not exist to determine eligibility for the program, the referral process is overseen by the Cook County Juvenile Probation Department. According to the program design, probation staff identify juveniles eligible for the program based on the established criteria. The court is then asked to consider program placement.

Individual cases are considered by the attorneys and judge involved in the court proceedings. Actual placement of a juvenile in the work alternative program follows the court disposition.

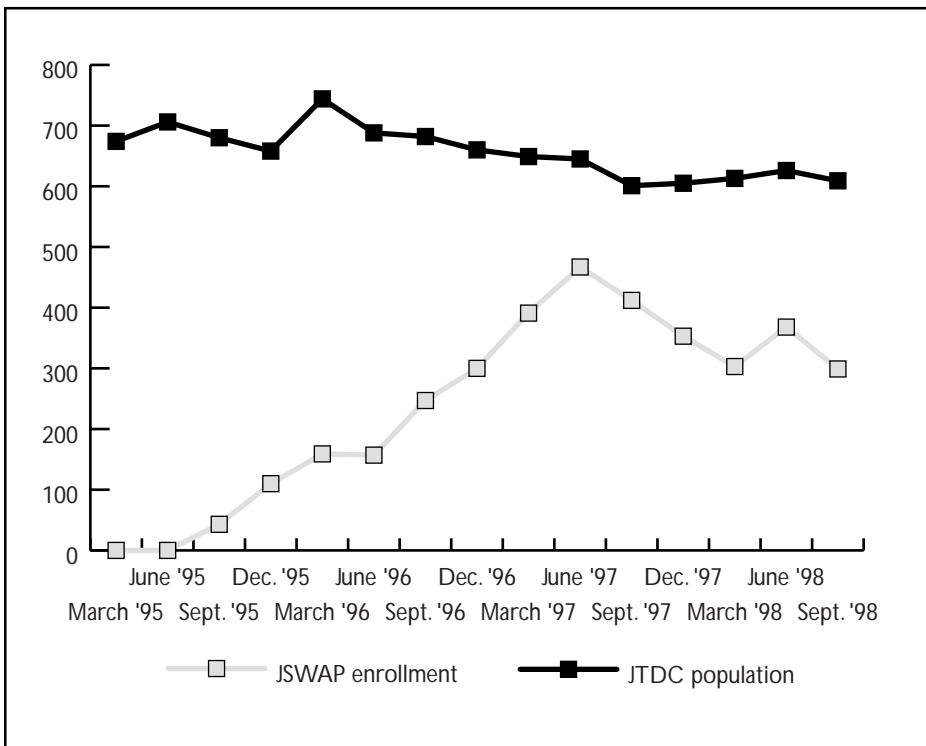
JSWAP participants are assigned an average of 11 days in the program. Once admitted, juveniles enrolled in school must attend at least one weekend work session per week. Juveniles who are not enrolled in school must attend at least three work sessions during the week.

Juveniles who participate in the program begin the day at 7:30 a.m. at the juvenile court building. Community service tasks are assigned to groups of five to 10 juveniles who are supervised by sheriff's deputies. Assignments include moving equipment, snow removal, and vehicle, highway, park and public area maintenance. Work sessions conclude at 3:30 p.m.

Operational goals, established June 1997, state that more than 60 juveniles should participate in weekend work detail and 20 juveniles should partici-

Figure 1

Comparison of JSWAP enrollment to JTDC daily population



pate each weekday. These goals make it possible for 55 juveniles to complete the program each month. Participation numbers never exceeded the goal of more than 60 juveniles. In August, September, and October 1998, the average weekend participation number reached 23 while the average weekday participation number reached 21. These low numbers may be linked to lower overall enrollment rates during the 1998 period.

Attendance for both groups is monitored by program staff and used as a progress indicator. Lack of attendance, misbehavior, and other actions are considered program violations. Violations may result in a negative report to the juvenile's probation officer and the court, or unsuccessful termination from the program. Lack of attendance accounted for the majority of unsuccessful program terminations.

Program capacity declined from a peak average daily population of 467 in 1997 to 299 in September 1998. Program staff attribute the decline to the termination of juveniles, enrolled but non-participating, who do not fit the

eligibility criteria, rather than a drop in referrals.

### Program activities

Of the 244 cases examined by evaluators, community service activity with the most participation was highway maintenance (182 participants), followed by park and public area maintenance (173), other (20), vehicle maintenance (19), and moving equipment (9).

Cases examined in the process and impact evaluation suggest that juveniles who were ineligible according to established criteria were allowed into the program. This may be the result of determining cases individually, rather than utilizing systematic screening and referral processes.

### Interviews

During the process evaluation, National Council on Crime and Delinquency representatives interviewed court officials who interact with JSWAP participants and staff. Six Cook County probation officers were asked to give their perception of the

program's overall effectiveness as an alternative to detention, and make recommendations for improvement. They indicated that the program is useful but requires clearer expectations for juvenile participation. Probation staff said the program is not consistently being utilized by the court as an alternative, because participation may be ordered as a probation condition in addition to time served in detention. Officers also noted that participants work on large-scale community service projects instead of providing service to the communities in which they reside.

Seven judges from the juvenile court also were interviewed. Their comments indicated positive perceptions of the work alternative program. Interview data indicated the program provided an alternative sentencing option, as well as an additional sanctioning tool. It was noted that each judge interpreted the program guidelines differently.

### Sentencing alternative

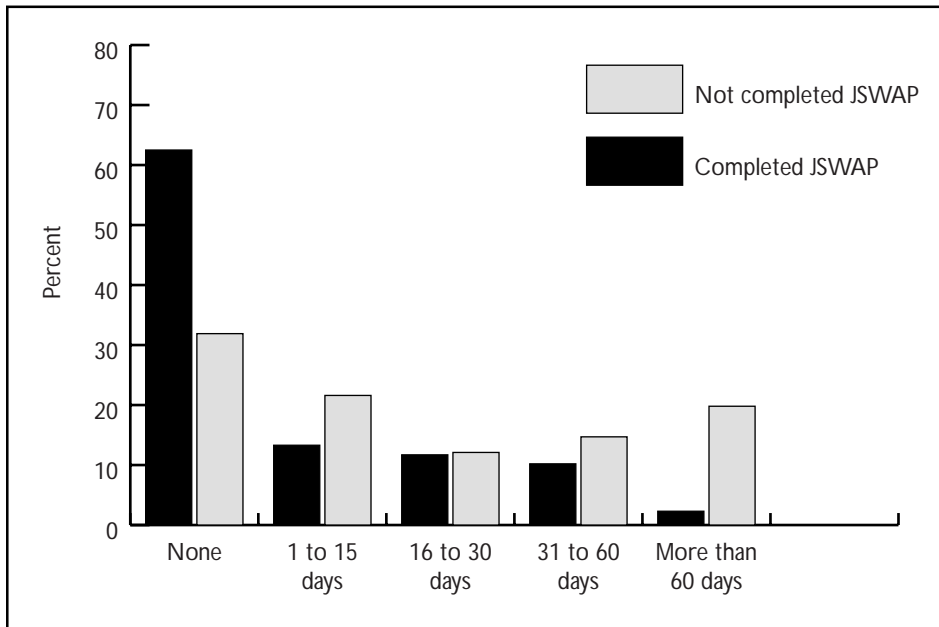
Monitoring the daily population rate at the juvenile detention center provided a measure of two Juvenile Sheriff's Work Alternative Program goals:

- The program's success as a sentencing alternative, and;
- The program's contribution to relieving overcrowding at the detention center.

Evaluators acknowledged the difficulty in measuring the impact of the work alternative program on the detention center population. The difficulty in determining the number of juveniles who may be detention bound as a result of adjudication also complicates the method used to measure the program's impact. The court's discretion is a primary factor in determining which juveniles are detention bound.

The program appears to have contributed to a decline of the average daily population at the detention center. In the program's first month, August to September 1995, 43 juveniles were admitted to the program. The Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center population was 680 in September 1995. By September 1998, work program admissions

**Figure 2**  
Subsequent detention days served by juveniles involved in JSWAP according to completion type



increased to 299, and the average daily population at the detention center dropped to 609. Figure 1 illustrates the comparison of the detention center’s average daily population fluctuations to JSWAP admissions.

Evaluators compared the number of petitions filed in juvenile court to the dispositions issued for the same time period for another indicator of successful alternative sentencing practices. Of the 19,008 petitions filed from 1995 to 1997, the number of detention sentences stayed in favor of alternative sentencing options increased steadily. In 1995, 6,121 petitions were filed. The number of juveniles with a detention sentence issued and stayed in favor of alternative sentencing options was 1,662. In 1996, 7,087 petitions were filed with 2,512 detention sentences stayed in favor of alternative sentencing options. Finally, in 1997, 5,800 petitions were filed while 2,566 detention sentences were stayed in favor of alternative sentencing options.

### Comparison group

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency compared aspects of 244 JSWAP participants to 184 juveniles with similar criminal histories, and who were of the same age, gender, and

ethnicity. Using information taken from the JSWAP database, the circuit court clerk’s database, and data provided by the probation department, evaluators analyzed characteristics and demographics of juvenile offenders.

Program admissions data suggested the average juvenile participant was African-American, 16 years old, and male. The top four offense classes were possession of a controlled substance, unlawful use of a weapon, battery and aggravated battery, and robbery. Prior court history data for the juveniles indicate that just less than half of the participants had no previous record, about half had no prior felony offense court petitions filed, and more than half had no prior dispositional finding of delinquency. These demographic, offense, and criminal history characteristics are found in the comparison group as well.

The number of successful program completions and terminations also were collected and analyzed as an impact variable. Termination may result from program guideline or probation violations. Participants who are terminated from the program are returned to the original sentencing

court and often forced to serve time in detention. From August 1996 through July 1997, about 52 percent of JSWAP participants successfully fulfilled the program requirements. During the same time period almost 48 percent were terminated.

Two general indicators of success were analyzed: the number of petitions filed, and the number of days juveniles spent in detention (following disposition of the most recent offense during a 12-month period.) Overall, statistical differences between the participant and comparison groups were not significant. However, the evaluators noted that 22.3 percent of the comparison group had one subsequent petition filed while 29.9 percent of program participants had one subsequent petition filed. Alternately, 16.8 percent of the comparison group had three or more subsequent petitions filed, while 9.8 percent of the JSWAP group had three or more subsequent petitions filed.

The analysis of subsequent numbers of detention days served was not statistically significant between the JSWAP and comparison groups. More than 9 percent of the comparison group and 17.2 percent of the JSWAP group served from one to 15 days of a subsequent detention sentence. The comparison group served an average of 24.6 days of subsequent detention while program participants served an average of 21.9 days.

Figure 2 provides comparison data on the number of subsequent detention sentences served by program juveniles.

### Cost analysis

The cost of sentencing a juvenile to the work alternative program was calculated. Evaluators utilized a cost computation formula (yearly operational budget divided by number of days juveniles were housed during the same time period) similar to the one used by the Circuit Court of Cook County Court Services Division. By using a similar formula, evaluators were able to compare JSWAP costs to expenses incurred for housing and services at the juvenile detention center. The cost of housing a juvenile in the detention center was estimated at

\$80 by the Circuit Court of Cook County Court Services Division. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency multiplied the average daily program population for a month by the number of participation days, and divided the sum of a 12-month period into the operational budget for the same time span for a cost of \$68.68 per day per juvenile.

### Conclusion and recommendations

During its three-and-a-half years of operation, JSWAP met some goals while falling short on others. Evaluators concluded that the program does act as a diversion to detention in some instances. JSWAP also is utilized as a condition of probation, in addition to detention sentences, and as a stand alone sanction. Data showing the rise of stayed sentencing and a decrease in the average daily population recorded at the detention center reveals the judges' increased use of alternative sentencing options.

The successful completion rate of program participants has steadily

improved, reaching 60 percent by October 1998. Clear expectations of the program and termination protocols have been developed and implemented. This allows the staff and participants to determine short- and long-term goals. A tracking database has been developed to assist staff in keeping up with the activities of each juvenile. During the study period an after school program was incorporated to encourage juveniles to fulfill their educational requirements while meeting their sentencing mandates.

JSWAP participation numbers for weekend work details vary between 15 to 23 participants. This is well below the goal of more than 60 per weekend. Also, more efforts are necessary in reducing recidivism in juveniles who successfully complete the program. When compared to a control group, there was no significant difference in subsequent criminal justice events.

Program staff continue to improve existing services and expand program service areas. Collaborative relation-

ships have been developed between program staff, the judiciary, probation department, and schools to facilitate communication between the agencies, which benefits juveniles in JSWAP. Data showed a rise of stayed sentencing and a decrease in the average daily population recorded at the detention center, which may indicate an increased use of alternative sentencing options.

Evaluators provided the following recommendations:

- Daily weekend participation rates should be monitored and improved with a goal of more than 40 participants;
- Judicial orders regarding the program should be explicit about completion dates and progress expectations; and
- A successful completion rate of at least 60 percent should be maintained. ♦

