

**Statement to the Interbranch Commission**

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Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

Since the first reports of the events in Luzerne surfaced, one question has been repeated again and again: “How could this have happened for so long and nobody noticed?” More than one person has wondered how, with all the data collected, did no one realize that something bad was going on in Luzerne County? And why didn’t they do something about it?

**Data vs. Information**

I wish it were that simple. Having all the data in the world is not going to prevent all bad things from happening. In fact, it’s possible to have too much data—too much data, but not enough information. A prominent management scholar explained it this way:

“A ‘database,’ no matter how copious, is not information. . . . For raw material to become information, it must be organized for a task, directed toward specific performance, applied to a decision. Raw material cannot do that itself. . . . Computer people still are concerned with greater speed and bigger memories. But, the challenges increasingly [are] not technical, but to convert data into usable information that is actually being used.” —Drucker, P.F. (1992) “Be Data Literate—Know What to Know,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 12/1, as quoted in Don Gottfredson’s, 2000. *Juvenile Justice with Eyes Open*.

Don Gottfredson spent much of his career as a criminologist working to improve justice system decision-making. He worked with the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) to improve the use of data—information—to support juvenile justice decision-making. He described justice system decisions as having three components: 1) goals and

objectives; 2) alternatives (choices); and 3) information. A rational decision is the selection of the alternative that is most likely to achieve the goal or goals. In his view the word “information” is reserved for those data that are relevant to the particular goals and objectives sought. Much of the work of improving information systems involves the difficult task of turning “data” into “information.”

I don't claim to know all the ins and outs of the Luzerne situation and staff at the Center for Juvenile Justice Training and Research (CJJT&R) know a lot more about the data collected in Pennsylvania than I do, but I think Pennsylvania has a pretty good statewide juvenile court and probation data system. As for data on juveniles in placement, I know much less about what is routinely collected in DPW or private facilities. I would say that Pennsylvania is leaps and bounds ahead of many other states in their juvenile court information system development because its juvenile justice system goals are well defined under Balanced and Restorative Justice, and data are being collected with those Balanced and Restorative Justice Goals in mind. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania has not had the best system in place for turning the data into useful information and presenting that information to decision makers and the public.

### **Evolution of Information Systems**

In Pennsylvania and elsewhere, there is a natural evolution of justice system information systems. State agencies generally start out with a reporting system— aggregate data tallied at the local level only to meet state reporting requirements. The state produces an annual statistical report but the data aren't really used much at either the state or the local level. Eventually, at the local level, the data collected for the reporting system evolve into an information system designed to keep track of individual

youth or cases. After some time there is a realization of a need for data to answer management questions. The next stage is when data are used to answer research & evaluation questions—to test relationships among variables, determine what works and why. Ultimately, the information system evolves to produce data to answer policy questions—to figure out what changes are needed in the system. The best information systems are those that local agencies “live off of” every day and support higher-level information needs.

Pennsylvania’s Juvenile Court Management System (JCMS) evolved from earlier reporting and information systems. JCMS data are used in counties to keep track of youth and their cases and support case management. Detention screening data, risk assessment and needs assessment data are used to ensure that juveniles are placed appropriately before and after adjudication. Case outcome data are used not only to show how individual youth are doing relative to their conditions of probation, but they can also show how entire probation departments are doing relative to their BARJ goals.

JCMS is fully capable of supporting research, evaluation and policy questions, but is currently under-used in this regard. CJJT&R’s IT Division staff has spent the last several years designing and implementing the JCMS system and conducting JCMS training around the state, but they do not have the staff to take full advantage of JCMS as a research and policy information resource. They produce reports for the counties, provide case outcome information to the Pennsylvania State Police for inclusion in the Central Repository, and an annual statistical report, but do not have the personnel to conduct research studies on a regular basis or to publish many additional reports. Pennsylvania has one of the better statewide juvenile court/probation information systems

in the country, but having all those data doesn't do much good if analysts don't transform the data into information.

### **Build Research Capacity to Turn Data Into Information**

JCMS data are used by outside researchers to conduct studies from time to time, but I believe that states should have a research capability to meet their own information needs. Many states do this by creating and staffing an internal research center. A group of researchers who know the state juvenile justice system and also know the data system can conduct analyses and publish a series of statistical reports to provide key information. Other states contract with one or more universities or other research organizations. JCJC and PCCD may want to figure out ways to encourage outside researchers to analyze JCMS data files to inexpensively answer questions of importance to Pennsylvania agencies. As funding has become tight, agencies in other states have found it especially useful to collaborate with Land Grant universities on research projects. Farming all research out to academics often has the undesirable result of producing lots of journal articles, but not producing research findings that are useful to practitioners or policy makers. Many states and the federal Department of Justice have both created an internal research capacity and also contract with the outside research community. Currently, PCCD produces a few very basic juvenile justice statistical bulletins and they contract with outside researchers, such as NCJJ, to analyze data. Between CJJT&R and PCCD the bare minimum data analysis capacity exists in-house.

For comparison, our Systems division at NCJJ has 14 staff members, 3 are part-time, 8 are researchers, 5 are programmers, 3 are Ph.D.s, 4 have Master's degrees, 1 is an attorney, and 1 provides administrative assistance. This group is responsible for the

*Statistical Briefing Book*, the *Pennsylvania Electronic Juvenile Justice Databook*, the National Juvenile Court Data Archive, and serves as “on call researchers” for the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Adding a group this size to JCJC’s CJJT&R would be terrific, but probably too costly. However, I think adding a few positions to compliment CJJT&R’s and PCCD’s staffs would be very productive.

### **Providing Easy Access to Juvenile Justice Information**

The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) used to fund NCJJ to prepare occasional statistical reports & bulletins for them, but our grant now has a different focus. We do, however, still maintain the online *Pennsylvania Electronic Juvenile Justice Data Book* that like the *Statistical Briefing Book* we do for the feds, allows users access to numerous data displays at the state or county level. I direct your attention to the screen captures I have included in your packet. The online data book was developed years ago to make a standard set of data tables to support county “Communities that Care” projects. At that time NCJJ also produced a Pennsylvania version of our popular *Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics* that we developed for the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Our Easy Access data dissemination tools enable users to conduct simple analyses of large and sometimes complex data sets with extremely user-friendly tools. The PA Easy Access tool was never widely disseminated. It was never updated or maintained.

Recently, CJJT&R approached NCJJ and asked us to once again develop a data analysis and dissemination tool for JCMS that could be made available to the public online. It will be similar to the online tools we have developed for the federal government to give users easy access to large national data sets. This tool will let anyone run simple

analyses of data from JCMS. In your packet there are slides from a presentation we gave to CJJT&R showing them our proposed design. In order to keep it simple, only a handful of key variables will be included. These variables will, nevertheless, enable users to answer the most commonly asked questions on their own without burdening CJJT&R's IT staff. By making these data available to the public, Pennsylvania's juvenile justice system will gain a degree of transparency that is not possible in most states.

### **Protecting confidentiality**

I want to emphasize that making these data available to the public does not mean that information on individual youth will be made public. The data will be aggregated at the county level and protections will be put in place where small numbers might make identification of an individual likely. In developing the Easy Access online data analysis tools, NCJJ follows federal rules regarding protection of human subjects. The *Common Rule* for the Department of Justice, Title 28 part 46 of the Code of Federal Regulations protects human research subjects and establishes the essential rules that all juvenile justice professionals must follow when conducting Federally funded research activities. Federal regulations address protection of privacy and the assurance of confidentiality.

### **Other Inexpensive Improvements**

In addition to this online data tool, I think it would also be very useful for the matrices that are developed to meet federal reporting requirements regarding disproportionate minority contact to be made public. The matrices compare different groups at different stages of case processing and tell if one group is more likely than the other to penetrate the system further. So one might discover, for instance, that black youth are twice as likely as white youth to be detained. Pennsylvania data are robust

enough to expand on the required reporting, to compare not only race and ethnicity groups, but gender and offense groups, and of course, these groups could also be compared from county to county. Thus, the data might show that black girls charged with aggravated assault were twice as likely as their white counterparts to be detained in one county, but not in a neighboring county. NCJJ prepares the basic race matrices for PCCD to report to the Justice Department and could prepare the additional matrices without much trouble.

In addition, once the online data analysis tool is launched, CJJT&R staff will, no doubt, find it useful for conducting their own “quick and dirty” analyses. A set of short (2-page) “fact sheets” or “data briefs” should be prepared based on these analyses. This will serve multiple purposes; 1.) it will allow staff to test the new tool to ensure that the data are being handled properly, 2.) it will demonstrate the wealth of information made accessible by the tool, 3.) it will create a set of templates for analyses and publications that can easily be reproduced, 4.) it will be a relatively inexpensive way to develop and disseminate a lot of information.

### **Data Are Not a Panacea**

It is important, though, to remember that even with the best data, a top-notch research staff conducting excellent research, up to the moment statistical information—even with all that—bad things can still happen. Florida is a good example of that. Florida’s Department of Juvenile Justice has been developing its data system and information resources for several decades. They have an excellent information system, a well-staffed research and planning department, and they produce a lot of quality information on a regular basis. They have a well-established quality assurance process;

they make their Delinquency Profile available online (it's sort of like our Easy Access online tool), they generate reoffending rates for every program for juvenile offenders; they also combine those reoffending rates with program cost information. And even with all the information that they have, Florida has had it's share of scandals.

Gottfredson liked to tell a story about a Chinese Emperor, many centuries ago, who wandered in the woods and found a beautiful, strong, gigantic oak tree. Returning to the palace, he gathered his advisors and told them of the tree and explained that he wanted a giant oak like the one he had seen—and he wanted it in the middle of the palace courtyard. His advisors looked at him in disbelief. One said, “But Emperor, it takes centuries to grow a tree like that!” The Emperor thought for a moment, then replied, “Then we had better plant the seed right away.” Pennsylvania planted the JCMS seed and it has grown quite well, but for it to flourish bear the information fruit that is needed now, it could use some additional nourishment.

My recommendations are:

- **Pennsylvania needs to improve its capacity to turn juvenile justice system data into information that guides decision-making at the individual case level, at the department and agency level, and at the policy level.**
- **Decision-makers at all levels of the juvenile justice system should be asked to identify their information needs. Once identified, these information needs should guide future information system development/enhancements and data dissemination activities. There should be an ongoing mechanism to identify information needs.**



- **Additional “in-house” research positions should be funded and should be supplemented by grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements with outside researchers.**
- **The juvenile justice system needs to be more transparent. Information (not necessarily data) should be readily available outside the agencies that produce those particular data. A good deal of information can and should be made available to the public.**
- **Although the juvenile justice system should be transparent, the confidentiality of individual juveniles within the system should be protected.**