



The results of the State Justice Institute (SJI)-Funded Cohort

ASSESSMENT CENTER OUTCOME REPORTING NETWORK

This report is published by the National Assessment Center Association in partnership with the National Center for Juvenile Justice and Dr. Jeff M. Kretschmar with support from the State Justice Institute.



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Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network

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Executive Summary:

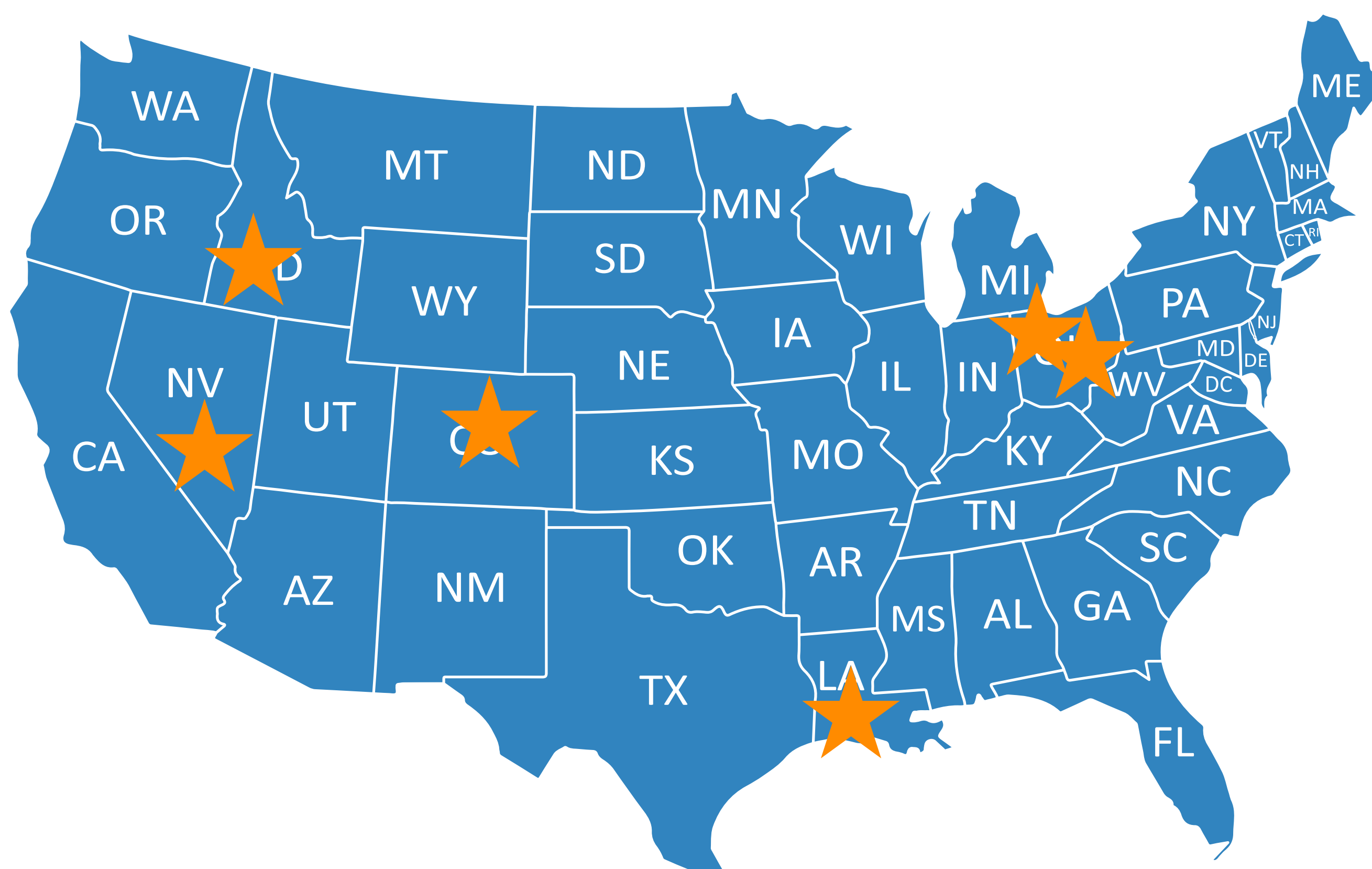
The Assessment Center Outcome and Reporting Network (ACORN) initiative was established to create more consistent performance and outcome measures for Assessment Centers nationwide. The National Assessment Center Association (NAC) in collaboration with the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) and Dr. Jeff Kretschmar - herein referred to as the TTA Team - worked to support a cohort of six (6) Assessment Centers (listed below) to assess data capacities and capabilities in order to identify opportunities to align performance and outcomes to the Assessment Center Framework. The development of consistent performance and outcome measures allows the NAC and Assessment Center community to assess impacts on prevention, diversion, and early intervention and is a necessary step prior to broad scale evaluation of the Assessment Center Framework.

This project started by conducting a wide-scale review of Assessment Centers' information systems and data capacity. It then identified six (6) Assessment Centers with varying capacities to participate in training and technical assistance, identify gaps in data collection, and create "action plans" that identify enhancement and improvement goals. The TTA Team worked with the cohort to complete mock ACORN reports. Following the completion of each section, the cohort convened to discuss challenges, successes, and actionable ways to improve data collection and quality assurance.



ACORN Cohort:

1. **The Harbor Juvenile Assessment Center (Clark County, Nevada)**
2. **Multi-Agency Resource Center (Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana)**
3. **Family Resource Center (Ashtabula County, Ohio)**
4. **The Bridge (Ada County, Idaho)**
5. **Juvenile Assessment Center (4th Judicial District, Colorado)**
6. **Assessment Center (Delaware County, Ohio)**



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“Throughout the process of setting up data collection tools to meet the needs of ACORN, I've learned so much and utilized tools I didn't know existed. The addition of Microsoft Power Apps is a huge game changer and we're already in the process of expanding its utilization throughout our agency for other data needs.” -Jonathan Shafer, Calcasieu Parish



Background

Assessment Centers (also referred to as diversion, intervention, or resource centers) prevent and divert youth from the juvenile justice system through a single point of contact which identifies underlying issues contributing to concerning behavior and partners with youth and families to access individualized services and supports within a community. These centers help reform local juvenile justice systems by diverting youth who are better served by community-based services and supports. This allows local courts and juvenile justice agencies to direct their resources to higher-risk youth. An example of juvenile justice system reform success through an Assessment Center includes the Multi-Agency Resource Center (M.A.R.C.), an Assessment Center in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. Since its opening in 2014, the M.A.R.C. has seen court filings decrease by 38%, status referrals decrease by 80%, and detention placements decrease by 60% (Calcasieu Parish Juvenile Services, unpublished). Additionally, youth served through the Miami-Dade Juvenile Assessment Center in Florida and The Harbor Juvenile Assessment Center in Las Vegas reported recidivism rates of 5% and 7%, respectively (“Why Detention Is Not The Answer: An Alternative Through Assessment Centers,” National Assessment Center Association, 2021), figures substantially lower than those experienced by youth who do not have the Assessment Center option. Young people who move through the traditional juvenile justice system of court referrals have higher re-offense rates. For example, Pennsylvania has done a remarkable job with improving its juvenile justice system through its long-term Juvenile Justice System Enhancement Strategy, reducing recidivism from over 21.6% to 11.7%. However, the rate is higher than it is for the Assessment Centers in Miami-Dade or Las Vegas. Cite. Juvenile Court Judges Commission (2023) Research Brief: The Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Recidivism Report: Juveniles Closed 2007 - 2019. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Assessment Centers were piloted in four communities in the mid-90s with the support of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The aim of these first Assessment Centers was to address an increase in juvenile crime by connecting young people at risk of becoming serious, violent, and chronic offenders to community supports through a single point of contact (Oldenettel & Wordes, 1999). From the late 1990s until 2020, Assessment Centers lacked federal or national support; however, they organically spread across the country. In the mid-90s there were four (4) centers and in 2022 there were more than ninety (90) with an additional fifteen (15) communities in the planning and development phases of an Assessment Center.

Between 1999 to 2020, there lacked formal guidance on core components and best practices specific to Assessment Centers. Additionally, consistency and coordination efforts between centers were limited. Recognizing this gap, the National Assessment Center Association (NAC) was formed in 2020 to facilitate coordination, communication, best practice sharing, and consistency among the Assessment Center community. One of the first ways the NAC supported Assessment Centers was through the development and publication of the Assessment Center Framework. The Framework was developed over the course of a year through an Advisory Committee of subject matter experts that included Assessment Center leaders, youth and families with lived experience in justice and child welfare systems, individuals with expertise in community engagement, public health practitioners, attorneys, and child and adolescent psychologists.



The Framework defines guiding principles of Assessment Centers, describes the core components, identifies best practices and quality improvement metrics, and provides concrete guidance to support Assessment Centers in their mission to safely prevent unnecessary systems contact for youth and their families by instead connecting them to community resources and supports. It was released to the field in February 2021. The NAC has spent the last three years supporting the rollout of the Framework, helping existing and new Assessment Centers adopt the Framework, and facilitating efforts for centers to identify areas for improvement and enhancement.

A theme that has risen out of this work is the need for shared outcome and performance measurement methods. A survey of Assessment Center Directors conducted in July 2022 indicated only 20% of Assessment Centers had a documented action plan (logic model or theory of change) to track and report outcomes and outputs from their work. “Shared measurement builds an evidence base of what works and is an essential component in improving standards of impact measurement, allowing more consistency and comparability to improve the effectiveness and changing more lives for the better” (Blueprint for Shared Measurement, 2013). Improving and increasing consistency of Assessment Centers data and outcome collection across states and localities will allow for better understanding of Assessment Centers efficacy in prevention, diversion, and early intervention and is a necessary step prior to broad scale evaluation of the AC Framework.

In response to this need, the NAC worked alongside evaluation and data collection experts, Assessment Centers Directors, and staff to develop a data and outcome collection system, herein referred to as the Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN), that aligns with the Assessment Center Framework. ACORN allows Assessment Centers to enter data on youth and families served, including demographics, for all core components within the Framework. It incorporates data and indicators associated with the short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes in the NAC-issued logic model. Data and outcomes captured within ACORN include who is referred to an Assessment Center, reason for referral and referral source, demographics of youth referred, and a variety of performance indicators including the timeliness of key Assessment Center interventions and responses to youth and families seeking help. ACORN includes data around the needs and strengths of youth and families identified in the screening and assessment processes, the types of community-based interventions and resources youth and families are referred to based on those identified needs and strengths, and the success of those interventions. Assessment Centers enter data around justice and child welfare involvement post Assessment Centers referral. Lastly, but most importantly, ACORN incorporates feedback from youth and families on their satisfaction and overall well-being throughout the Assessment Center process.



This project, funded by the State Justice Institute, recognized the need to strategically roll-out ACORN with targeted education and technical assistance to ensure Assessment Centers have a thorough understanding of the data required for completion, capacity issues that may need to be addressed, and information technology adjustments needed for completion. The strategic support and technical assistance worked to gain buy-in and ownership from the Assessment Center community. The intention was that this project addressed the need to create shared measurements and outcomes for the Assessment Center community in order to track center performance and impacts on system diversion and prevention, connection to community, and identify disparities. The hope was that this project improved national data through uniform and systematic improvement of local data collection, use, and analysis.

Approach and Results

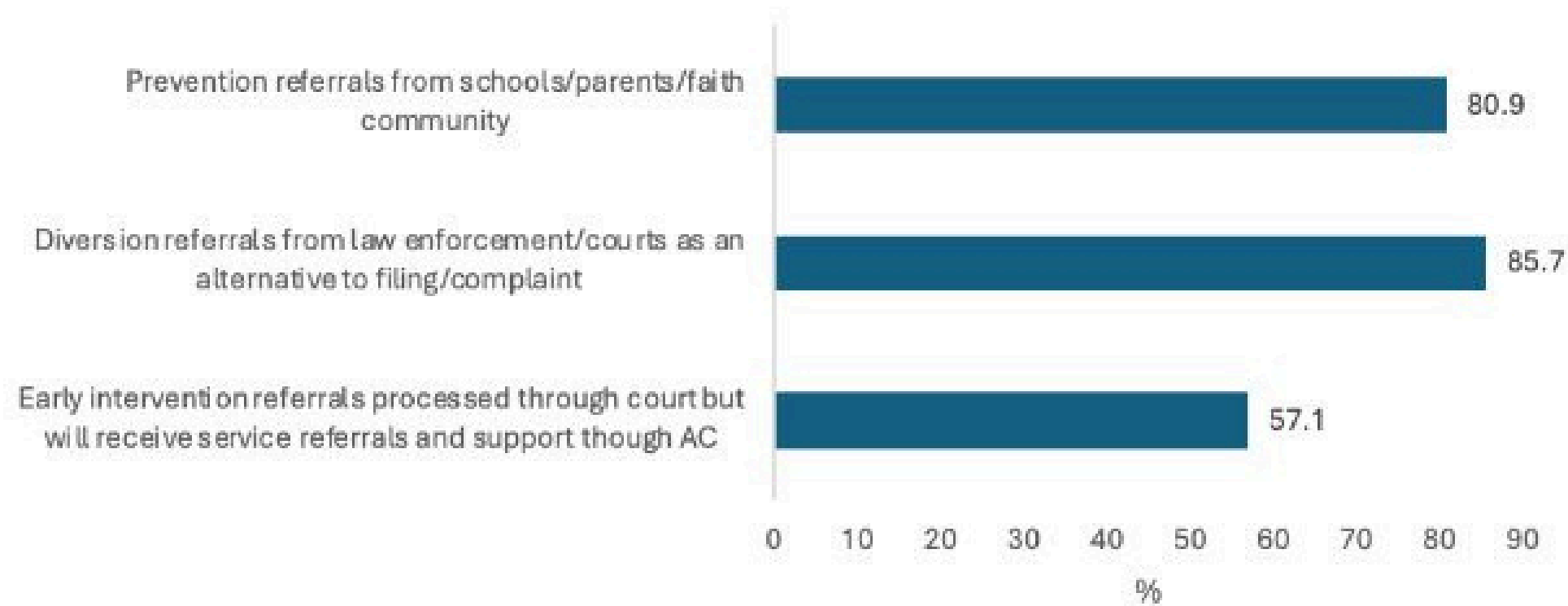
To start, the TTA developed and distributed a survey that assessed existing Assessment Center information systems and data capacity as it relates to metrics and analysis required for completion of ACORN. The sophistication and capacity of Assessment Center information systems vary widely across jurisdictions. The survey created by the TTA team resulted in a better understanding of information systems, data infrastructure, data-informed culture, use of data, internal personnel and capacity, and current practices surrounding specific data elements of interest.

Results: The Assessment Center survey was created using Google Forms and contained 24 items. A link to the survey was distributed to the Assessment Center community through the NAC's listserv. We received responses from 21 Assessment Centers in 10 states. The majority of the Assessment Centers were operated by either a governmental entity (i.e. county or court) (71.4%, n = 15) or nonprofit (23.8%, n = 5).

Over 80 percent (80.9%, n = 17) of the Assessment Centers reported accepting prevention referrals from schools, parents, and the faith community while 85.7% (n = 18) reported accepting diversion referrals from law enforcement and courts as an alternative to filing a petition/complaint. Fifty-seven percent (57.1%, n = 12) of Assessment Centers reported accepting early intervention referrals for cases that are processed through the court system for delinquency but that will receive service referrals and support through the Assessment Center.

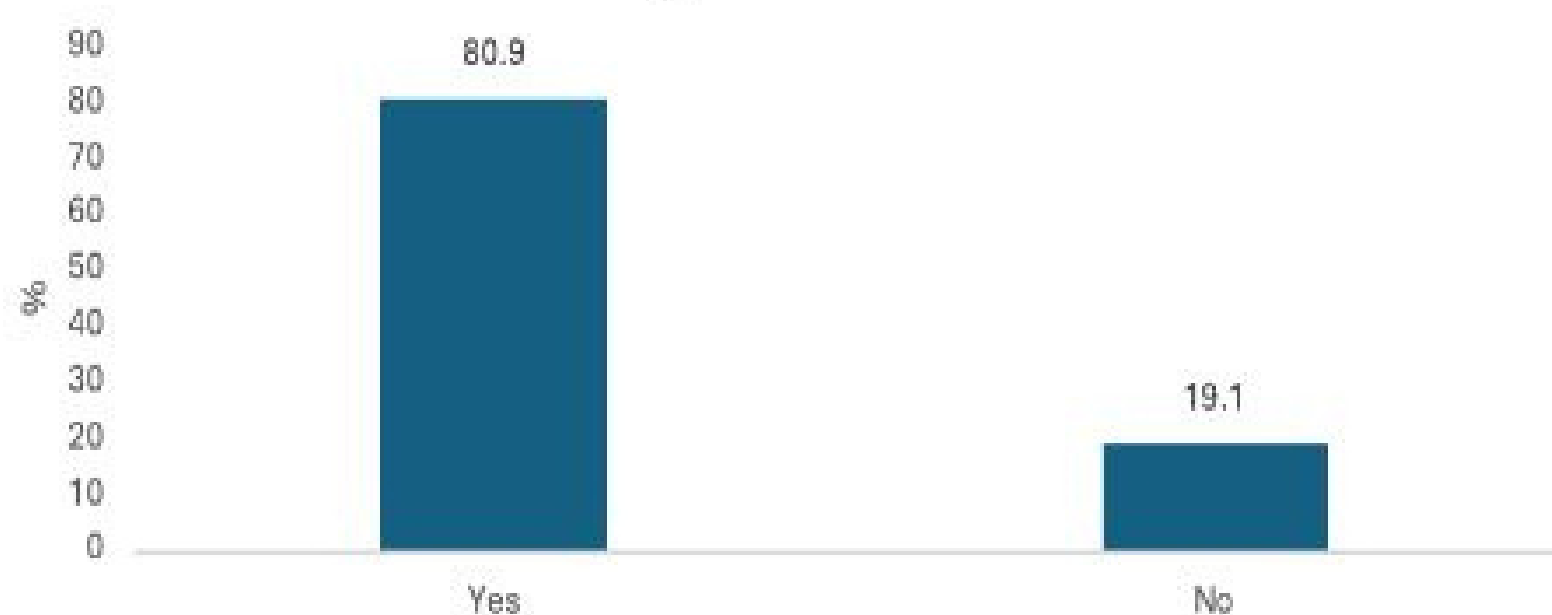


What type of referrals are accepted by your AC?

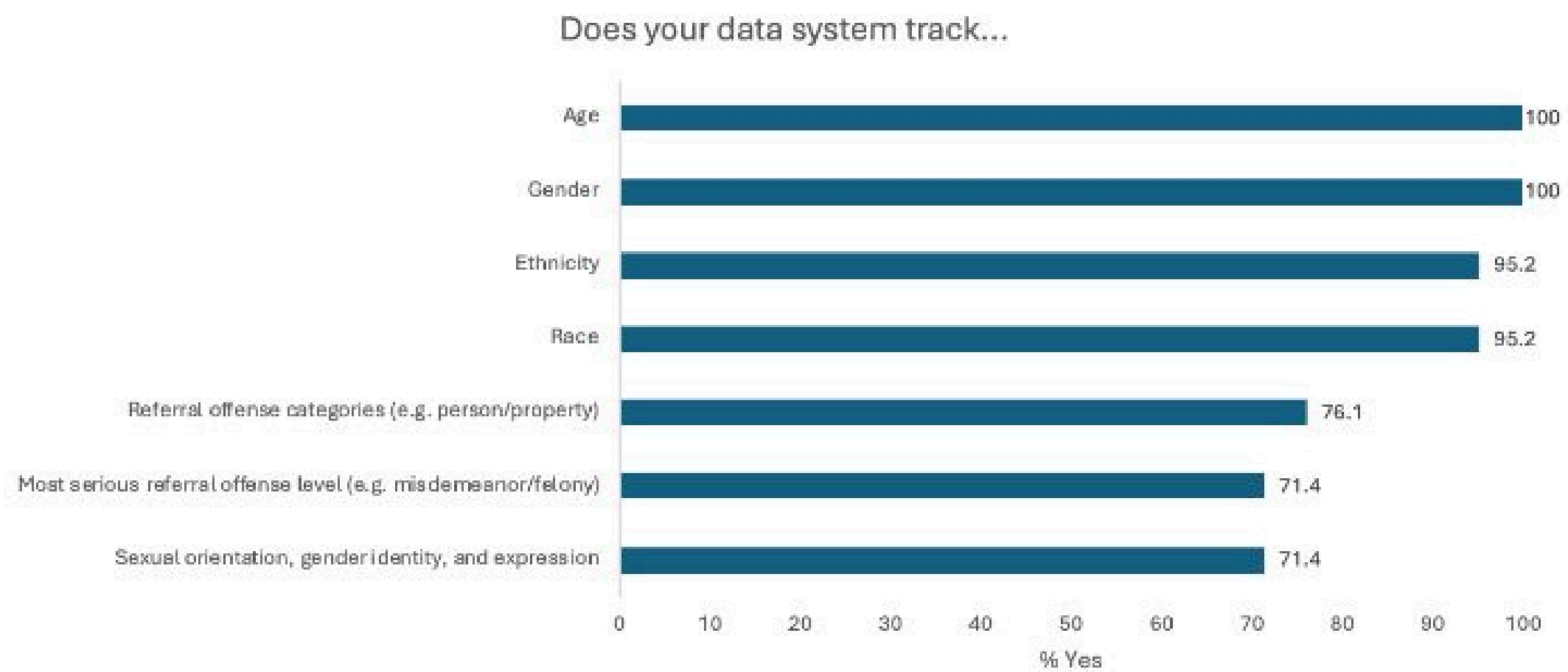


Of the 21 Assessment Centers that responded to the survey, 80.9% (n = 17) reported that they use some type of electronic system to manage or track referrals.

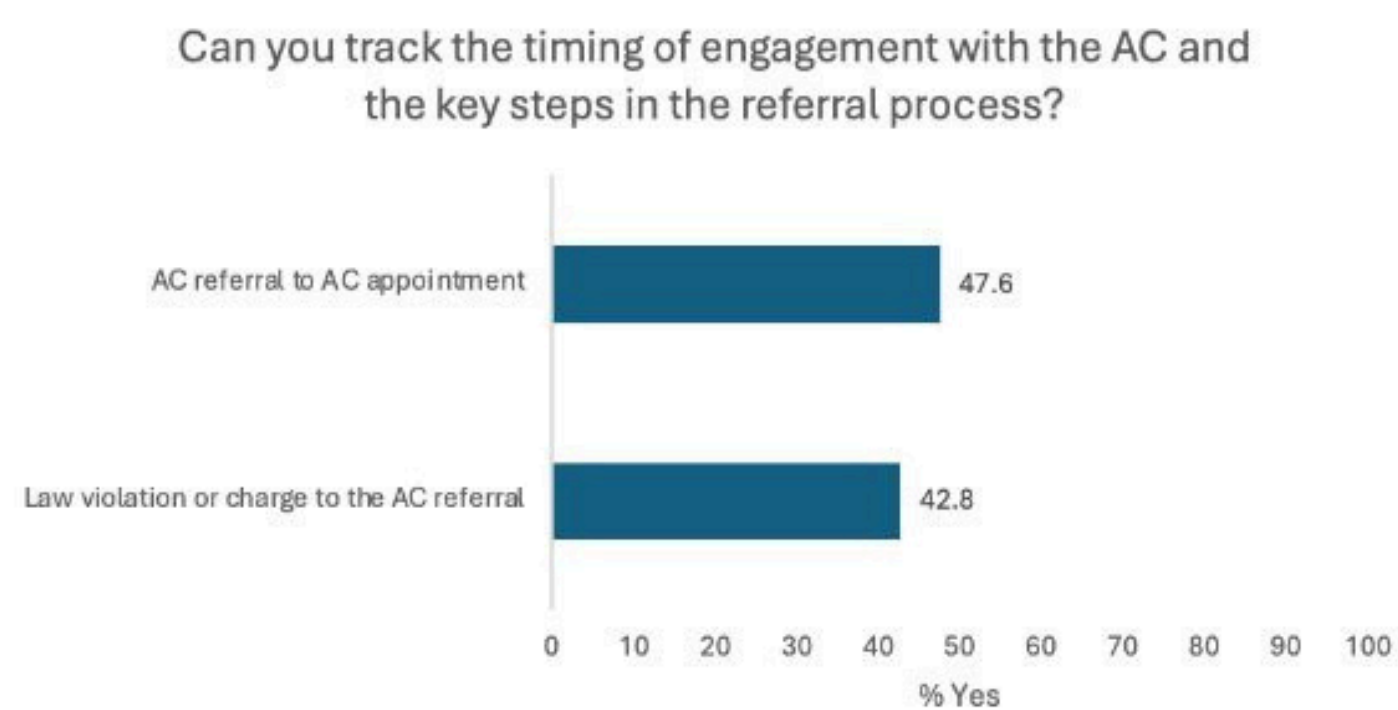
Is there an electronic system used by your AC to manage/track referrals?



When asked about the types of referral data tracked, 95.2% (n = 20) reported tracking race and ethnicity, 100% (n = 21) reported tracking gender and age, 71.4% (n = 15) said they tracked details about sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, 71.4% (n = 15) tracked details about the most serious referral offense level (e.g. misdemeanor/felony), and 76.1% (n = 16) reported tracking details about referral offense categories (e.g. person/property).



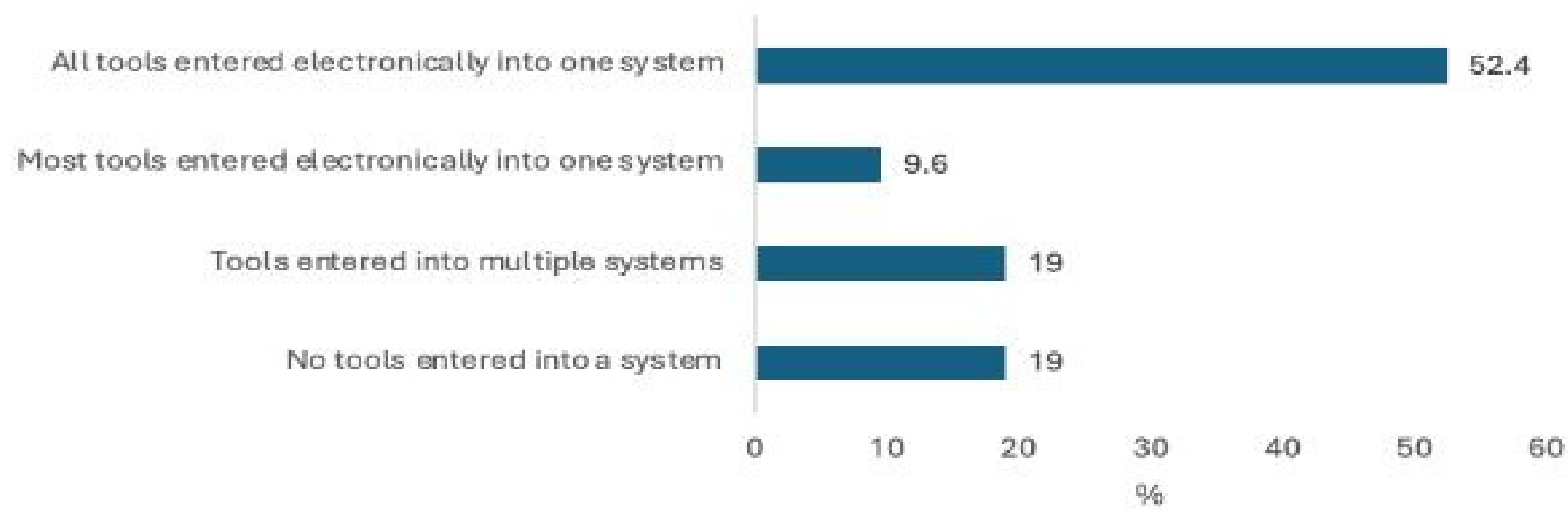
Forty-three percent (42.8%, n = 9) of the Assessment Centers track the amount of time (i.e. minutes/hours/days) from the law violation or charge to the Assessment Center referral and 47.6% (n = 10) track the time from Assessment Center referral to appointment.



Over half of the Assessment Centers (52.4%, n = 11) reported that all screening and assessment tool results are entered into their data systems, while 19.0% (n = 4) reported that none of the screening or assessment tools get entered into their systems. An additional 19.0% (n = 4) reported entering screening and assessment tools into multiple data systems.

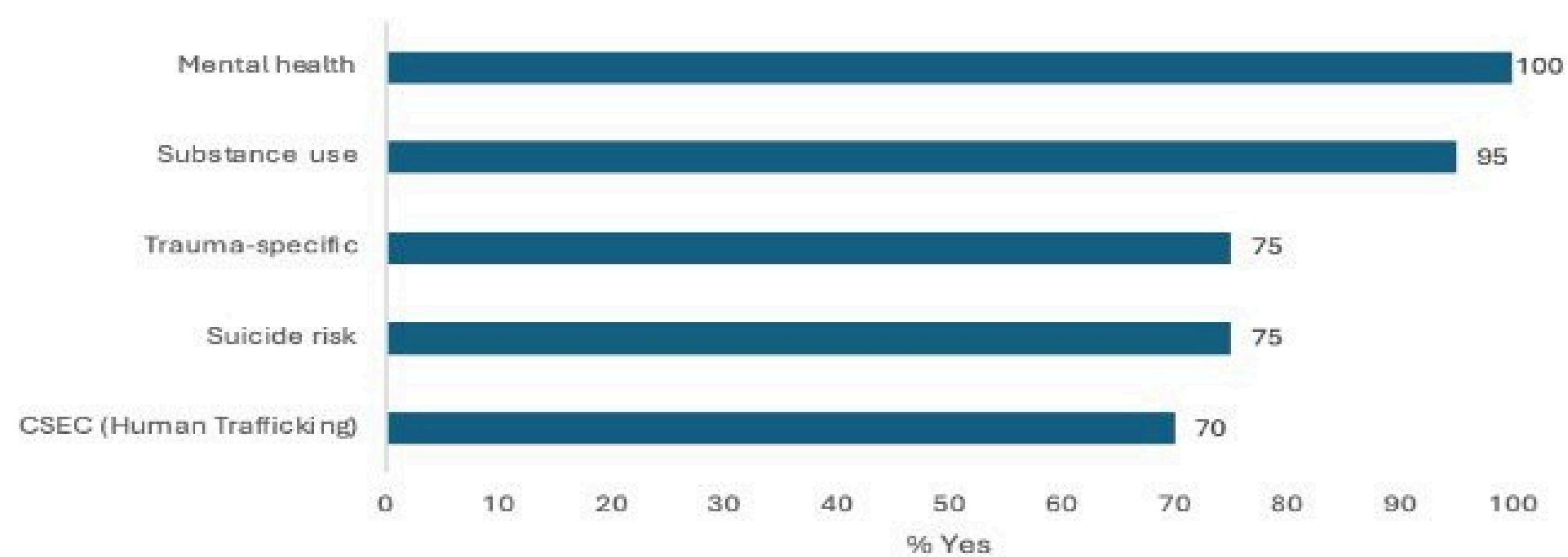


Are data from screening/assessment tools administered by the AC entered into an electronic system?

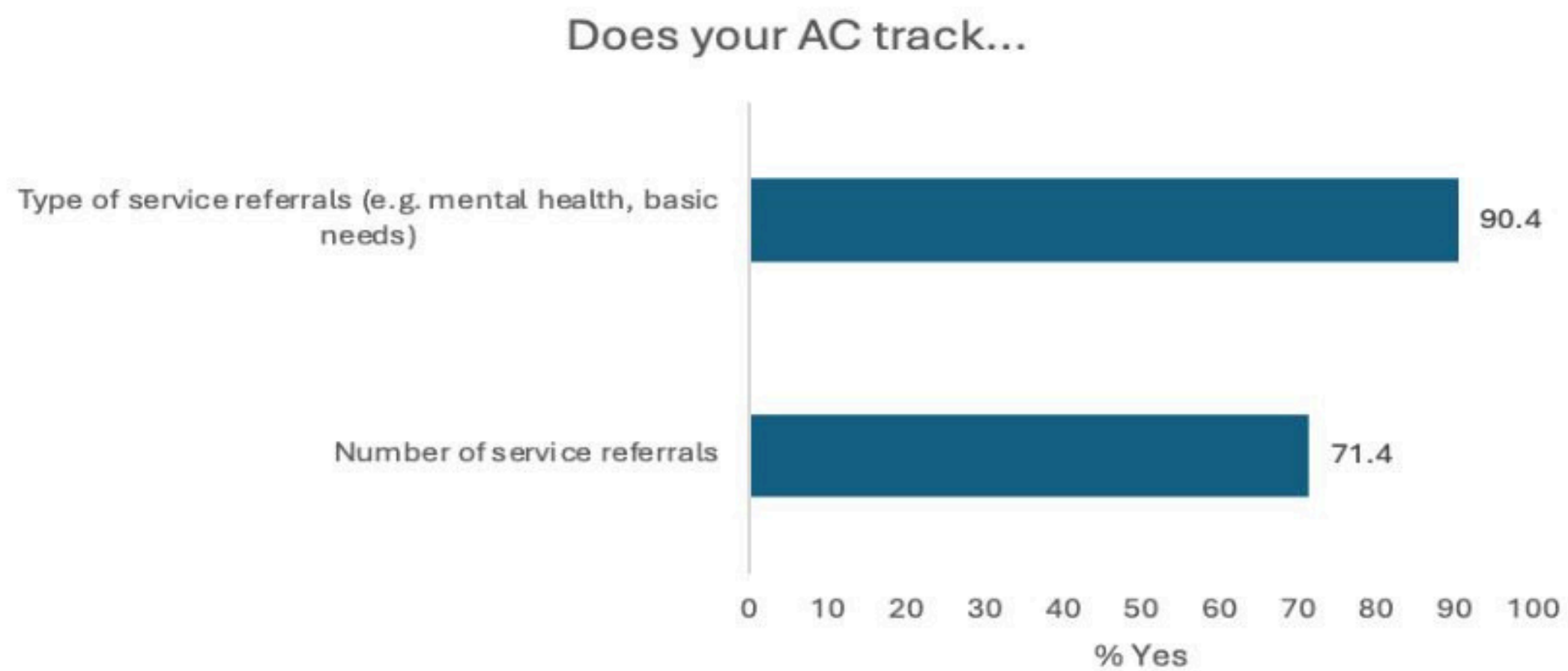


Of the 20 Assessment Centers currently administering some type of screening and assessment tools, 100% (n = 20) utilize some type of mental health tool, 95.0% (n = 19) utilize a substance use tool, 75.0% (n = 15) use a trauma-specific tool, 75.0% (n = 15) utilize a suicide risk tool, and 70.0% (n = 14) employ a human trafficking tool.

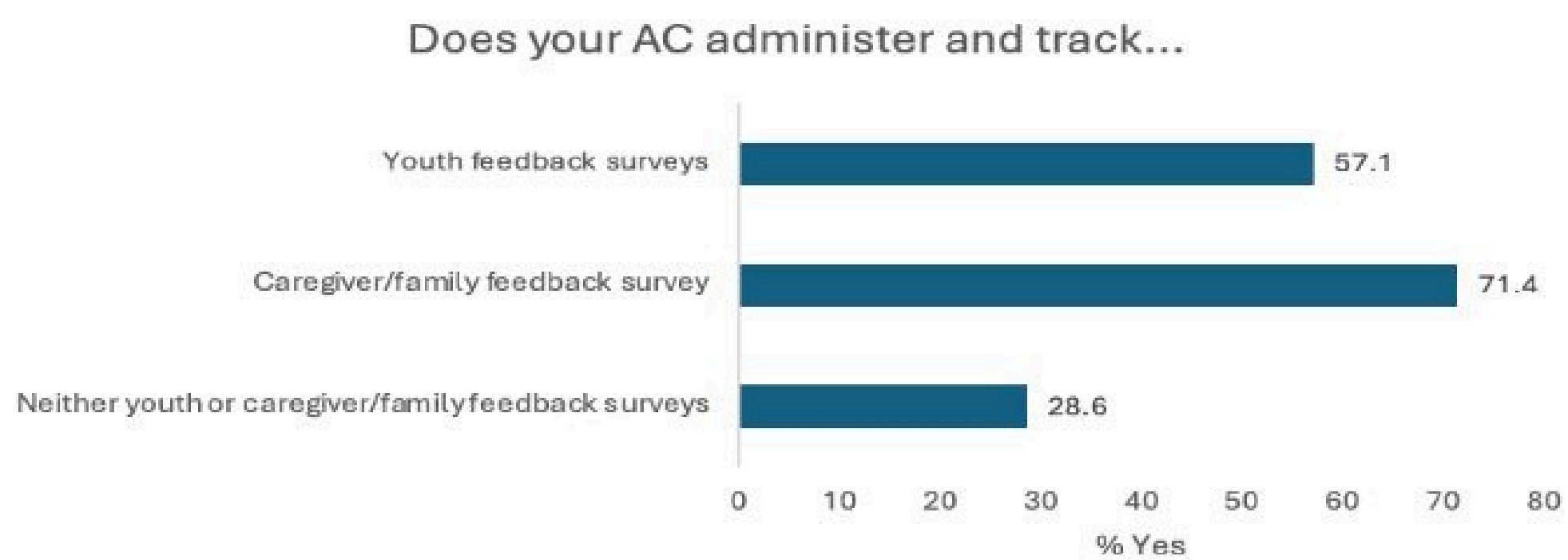
Can your AC track the number of youth identified by your screening/assessment tools with the following concerns?



Over 71 percent (71.4%, n = 15) of Assessment Centers track the number of service referrals made for youth and families, while 90.4% (n = 19) track the type of service referrals made (e.g. mental health, basic needs, etc.).



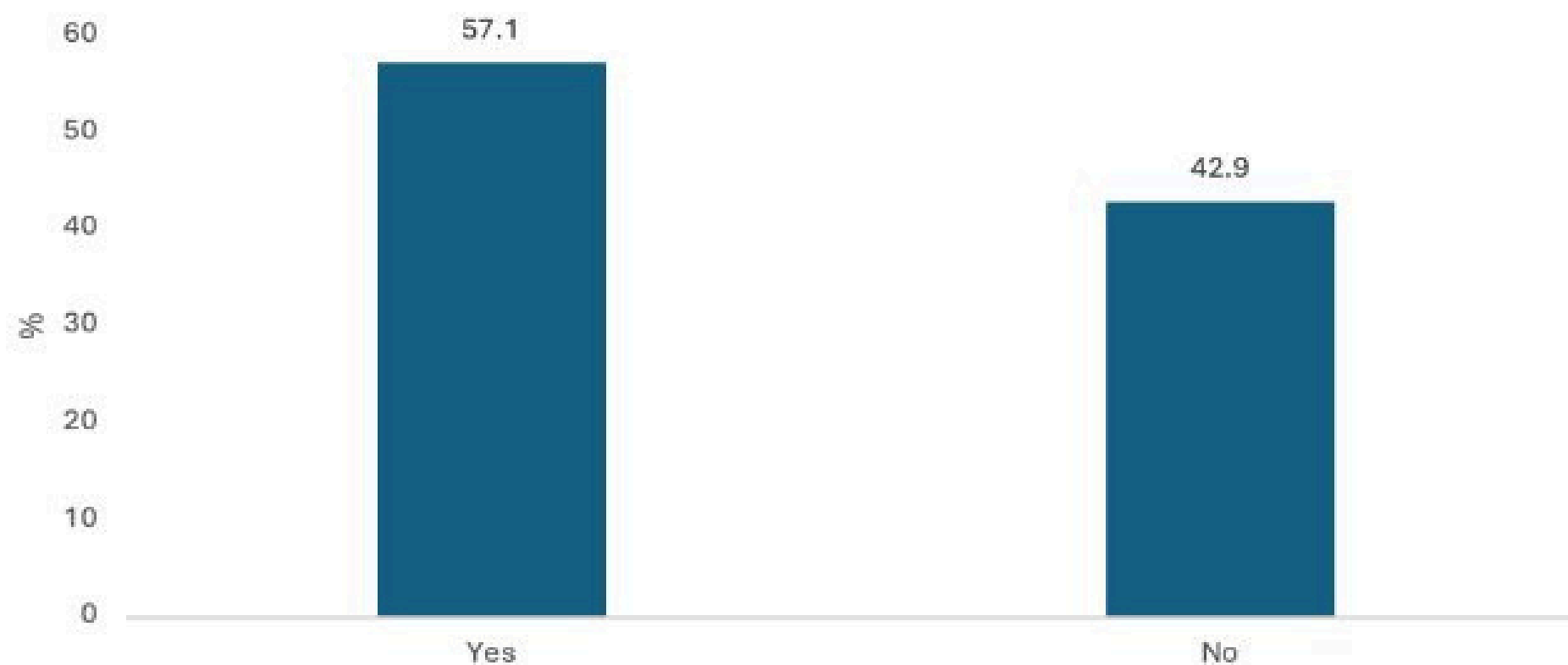
Fifty-seven percent (57.1%, n = 12) of the Assessment Centers reported administering youth feedback surveys while 71.4% (n = 15) reported administering family/Caregiver feedback surveys. Over 28 percent (28.6%, n = 6) of Assessment Centers did not administer any type of feedback survey.



When asked about their ability to report data on long term (12 months from referral) outcomes related to subsequent justice system contact, 57.1% (n = 12) of Assessment Centers reported they could produce such outcomes, although there was significant variance with respect to the definition of recidivism used by many of the Assessment Centers (e.g. new arrest, new charge, new adjudication).



Are you able to report data on long term outcomes (12 months from referral) for subsequent justice system contact?



Following the release of the survey, the TTA team hosted a webinar on July 10th, 2023 to introduce ACORN to the field and announce the cohort application process. The webinar was two hours in length and there were forty two (42) attendees. The application was distributed to the NAC network to identify six (6) Assessment Centers to participate in the pilot cohort. There were ten (10) applications received. The TTA team reviewed applications and categorized Assessment Center data capacity and capability into three categories: advanced, moderate, and novice.

Two Assessment Centers in each category were selected:

- Advanced: The Harbor Juvenile Assessment Center (Clark County, Nevada) and The Multi-Agency Resource Center (Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana)
- Moderate: Family Resource Center (Ashtabula County, Ohio) and The Bridge (Ada County, Idaho)
- Novice: Juvenile Assessment Center (4th Judicial District, Colorado) and Assessment Center (Delaware County, Ohio)

Following the selection of the sites, the TTA team conducted one-on-one needs and capacity assessments of each jurisdiction. The TTA team met individually with each center for 90 minutes to conduct a deeper dive into current data collection capability and capacity as it relates to ACORN. These interviews allowed the TTA team to get a better sense of strengths and needs and gave us insight on specific training and technical assistance needs.



Following these interviews, the TTA team developed a training schedule to support the needs of the cohort as well as the Assessment Center field. The training modules were open to all interested Assessment Centers regardless of if they were a part of the cohort; however, attendance was required for those in the cohort. Brief descriptions of these training events appear below.

Three Steps to Developing Sound Logic Models

- Registration: 83
- Attendees: 53
- Length: 77 minutes

Logic models are graphic depictions that present the shared relationships among the resources, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact of your Assessment Center program. They present a roadmap of how an Assessment Center can serve as a solution to a problem such as system involvement and lack of access to community-based supports. This webinar covered how to develop a logic model for an Assessment Center in a practical manner that aligns to the national Assessment Center Framework but can also respond to local needs and change. Attendees learned how to use a logic model as their Assessment Center evolves and ground its performance measurement strategy.

Monitoring the Integrity and Effectiveness of Assessment Center Screening Processes

- Attendees: 80
- Lengths: 90 minutes

Effective screening practices are central to the mission, function, and services delivered by Assessment Centers. This session highlighted how Assessment Centers can develop, deploy, and utilize data mapping as an effective tool to examine the integrity and effectiveness of screening processes. Through examples and interactive exercises, the presenters identified the benefits Assessment Centers will gain by using data to monitor local screening practices to ensure screening fidelity, support continuous quality improvement, and leverage results for effective community partner collaboration to guide capacity building activities.

Peer-to-Peer: Assessment Center Data Management Systems

- 24 registered
- 13 attended
- 53 minutes



This training was a peer-to-peer learning session where The Bridge in Ada County, Idaho and The Harbor in Clark County, Nevada showcased their innovative data management systems. Attendees learned how those systems allow for easy input of data from staff members, how they have allowed the Assessment Centers to better serve youth and families, and how they have helped to communicate data indicators and outcomes to internal and external stakeholders.

Using Data to Make Informed Operational Decisions

Registration: 59

Attendees: 42

Length: 76 Minutes

The purpose of this webinar was to provide assessment centers with guidance on some data collection basics that will allow them to use the information collected to make informed decisions around operations and practices. The presentation featured real-world examples of how jurisdictions used data collected to identify areas of success, interest, or concern. The webinar discussed:

- Developing a data/outcomes team
- Identifying key datapoints for review
- Ensuring accuracy of your data
- Using the data to inform policy and practice
- Determining the need for an 'outside evaluator'

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“We have so appreciated the ACORN cohort! It has been a great learning and sharing experience and we have been able to improve throughout. I think that our non-data team members were able to see how valuable the reporting is, and that it's not just a nerd thing that the data geeks like. Thank you.” -Amy Harig, Ada County

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“The most helpful for me was being able to look at what type of information was important for us to capture. It also was a great opportunity to be able to organize some things that we hadn't organized before with data collection specifically. Being new to the Assessment Center, it gave me an opportunity to learn more about what other AC's do which was very helpful.” - Sara Miller; Director, Delaware County Assessment Center, Ohio



The TTA team also created an action plan template for cohort participants to utilize as they began the mock completion of ACORN. The action plan allows cohort members to list their implementation team members and identify the following as it relates to the completion of ACORN:

Goal (What is the outcome you want to achieve?)	Objective (What specific and measurable action is desired?)	TASKS (What steps will you take to achieve the objective?)	DRIVER (Who is responsible?)	TIMELINE (By When?)	Monitor Progress (What measures will you monitor to see what is working & determine any adjustments needed?)
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The official “kickoff” of the cohort was held on November 28, 2023. During the kickoff meeting, each Assessment Center was assigned a TTA expert; either Dr. Kretschmar or staff from NCJJ, Hunter Hurst or Gene Siegel. Following the kick-off, the cohort met every other month with individualized meetings held with their assigned TTA expert in between cohort meetings. Each cohort meeting, six (6) in total, was structured by providing an overview of a specific ACORN section (Single Point of Contact (referral), Screening and Assessment, Case Management, and Long-term Outcomes), planned for data extraction and completion of ACORN, and assigned a section for completion between Cohort meetings. Cohort members spent the month and a half in between meetings conducting data extractions and doing “mock” completions of the associated ACORN section. They received one-on-one support from their TTA expert in between cohort meetings. At the completion of each ACORN section, Cohort sites were supported in completing the “workbook” or “action plan” that incorporate steps required to address barriers, implement information system changes, and create or modify policies and practices identified.

At the completion of each section of ACORN, a survey was distributed to participants asking for feedback on challenges they experienced, what data elements were easy to extract, challenging or unavailable, and approximately how much time it took them to complete that section of ACORN. The NAC compiled responses from the feedback surveys and categorized them into one of the following: (1) form issues (2) site challenges (3) conceptual or operational considerations. Form issues were compiled at the completion of the cohort and changes to the ACORN spreadsheet were made. Below is a summary of site challenges and the conceptual or operational considerations for each ACORN section.



Site Challenges

Core Component	Site Challenges	Conceptual or Operational	Time to Complete (Mean)
Single Point of Contact	Not being established site (i.e., evolving target population, evolving processes)	Primary referral reason not always clear (or multiple reasons identified)	4 hours
	Staff availability limited	Incident date - not always “an incident” for prevention/diversion, rather a pattern of behaviors or concerns	
	Some data not collected (i.e., Demographics not always known for referrals)	Definition of “referral.” Does this include or not include those youth who don’t engage?	
	Combination of paper and electronic data collection poses challenges with efficient data collection		
	Data management systems not easily modified		
Screening and Assessment	Not having established cut-offs for “screening in/out” is a challenge	Is there a need or a method to collect more detail around specific needs in Mental health (i.e., anxiety, depression) for Tier II sites?	3 hours
	Not all data management systems can export data	Define: What is screening? What is assessment?	
Case Management	We track participation in the community resource connections through client check-ins, not a feedback survey.	What “counts” as a youth/caregiver feedback survey? The NAC surveys only? “Formal” locally developed surveys? “Informal” locally developed surveys? (i.e., if the site follows up with a caregiver during the case management process to get info on connection to services, does that count?)	2.5 hours
	Classifying some of our community connections into the NAC buckets. Definitions of the categories could be helpful.	If we make 3 referrals to 3 different programs for 1 family, and the family refuses all 3 referrals, does that count on the ACORN refusals as 1 refusal or 3?	
	Our feedback survey participation is really low. We don't meet with families in person when case management services end, so we rely on clients to respond to our email or text request for feedback.		
Long-Term Outcomes	System escalation/involvement is a very manual process for most of our programs - resource center and juvenile justice, and to be able to look up long term outcomes is one of the reasons we have multiple data staff.	Defining recidivism – All jurisdictions used a different definition.	7.5 Hours
	The overall concept that was trying to be obtained in the section was easily understood but inputting the data seemed to be challenging.	Escalation due to having a different system than JJ. Due to the different system, ID#s are different.	



Action plans were updated or modified throughout the process. At the conclusion of the Cohort, each Assessment Center submitted a final action plan that encompassed priority items from each ACORN section. Below are examples goals and objectives included in the final action plans from the six cohort participants:

- Create referral reason category to code when they review the referral
- Update community resource directory
- Create process for client tracking
- Create a better way to track the time between the date of incident and date of referral
- Create a faster way to run reports with numbers so it will be easier to input the data into ACORN
- Create a way to track recidivism rates for youth referred, including demographics
- Define recidivism
- Identify partner in DAs office
- Create a data share agreement
- Create or source a feedback survey that is directed to youth
- Have decisions made on what screening tools will be utilized during intake
- Develop process for long term feedback surveys

Lessons Learned

Provided below are twelve (12) overarching lessons that were gleaned from the pilot project.

1. Assessment Centers offer a framework to safely address delinquent behavior before the juvenile justice system gets involved and the Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN) can capture impacts.

This cohort has demonstrated that Assessment Centers are effective in addressing delinquent or concerning behavior in an effort to prevent or divert youth from entering the juvenile justice system. The Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN) has played a crucial role in this framework by systematically capturing and reporting on the outcomes of youth referred to the Assessment Centers.

These data are valuable for evaluating the effectiveness of Assessment Centers, guiding improvements, and demonstrating impacts to stakeholders like policymakers, funders, and community organizations. ACORN also helps ensure the Assessment Centers' efforts are transparent and measurable.



2. The proposed ACORN Domains - Single Point of Contact (Referrals), Screening and Assessment, Case Management, and Long-term Outcomes - proved useful, relevant, and manageable.

Cohort participants found the ACORN domains structure—Single Point of Contact (Referrals), Screening and Assessment, Case Management, and Long-term Outcomes— useful and relevant to their Assessment Center workflow during the pilot. These domains reflect key stages in the Assessment Center process, ensuring a comprehensive and holistic approach to diverting youth from the juvenile justice system. Here's an expanded explanation of each domain:

1. **Single Point of Contact (Referrals):** This domain refers to the centralized point through which youth and families are referred to the Assessment Center. Having a single point of contact streamlines the referral process, making it easier for schools, law enforcement, courts, and other community agencies to connect youth to services. It also ensures that youth are not passed around between different agencies, reducing confusion and delays in receiving support.
2. **Screening and Assessment:** In this core component, youth undergo a comprehensive screening and assessment to identify the root causes of their behavior and any underlying issues, such as mental health concerns, substance use, or family conflict. This helps tailor interventions to each individual's needs.
3. **Case Management:** Following screening and assessment, staff work closely with youth and their families to connect them to services and supports that address needs and leverage strengths. This includes connecting them to community resources, tracking their engagement with the services, and adjusting plans as needed.
4. **Long-term Outcomes:** This domain focuses on tracking the youth's progress over a twelve month period. The goal is to monitor whether the youth and family feel more connected to the community, whether youth's behavior has improved, and whether they have successfully avoided further involvement with the juvenile justice system.

Overall, the six (6) Assessment Centers indicated that the ACORN domains were highly relevant and meaningful to their work. They found that the domains were not only conceptually sound but also manageable in practice and aligned with their operational capacities.

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So far, the process has been invaluable, and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate. -COHORT PARTICIPANT



3. The cohort structure, utilizing a peer-network, proved important and helped to advance data capacity.

Peer networks are important because they foster collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mutual support among organizations and the individuals working with the organizations. By structuring the cohort as a peer network and connecting Assessment Center staff, participants were able to exchange expertise in data collection, analysis, and reporting, helping others develop or refine their own data systems. They were able to access shared tools and technologies which accelerated the adoption of data management solutions (see information on the data collection tool below). Overall, the cohort strengthened the data capacity for those Assessment Centers participating in the cohort by promoting learning, innovation, and collective problem-solving.

4. The motivation and commitment of the Assessment Centers to collect high-quality data and assess their impact were clearly demonstrated by their consistent engagement throughout the cohort process.

Over the course of 12 months, all six (6) Assessment Centers maintained their presence in the cohort and attended each cohort meeting, signaling a desire to enhance their ability to measure and report on their effectiveness. This level of participation highlights each Centers' recognition of the importance of outcome development in demonstrating the value of their work, not only to funders and policymakers but also to the communities they serve. It also reflects their understanding that good data are essential for continuous improvement. By actively contributing to the cohort, each Center showed a willingness to invest time and resources into improving their data collection processes and understanding their long-term impact on youth, families, and their communities.

5. An affordable and adaptable information system is crucial for ensuring that data collection is efficient, accurate, and responsive.

When data collection relies on a mix of paper and electronic methods, several challenges arise. Paper-based systems can lead to delays in data entry, increased risk of human error, and difficulty in accessing or sharing information across teams or locations. Additionally, paper records require manual input into electronic systems, which can be time-consuming and prone to mistakes, creating barriers to real-time data analysis and reporting.



An information system that is electronic and adaptable allows for seamless data collection, management, and analysis. It enables Assessment Centers to automate processes, reducing redundancy and the potential for errors. Information systems that can easily be modified to accommodate evolving data needs helps to ensure Assessment Centers remain agile in responding to new challenges or reporting requirements.

Along with adaptability, affordability is essential for Assessment Centers that need to manage data effectively without incurring excessive costs. When a system imposes expensive costs for modifications or updates, it restricts the Assessment Center's ability to adapt and evolve its data practices to meet new needs or respond to changing conditions. For some Assessment Centers in the cohort, the high cost of system changes became a barrier and delayed their progress using ACORN. For one Assessment Center in the cohort using a private vendor-based system, requesting even minor changes in the way their Assessment Center collects data and adding data fields can cost them as much as \$15,000. A different Assessment Center was able to find a low cost alternative using the Microsoft Ecosystem of software tools to track data consistent with the ACORN and to populate the data fields.

6. Investing in a position or staff capacity focused on data collection and analysis is crucial

Those Assessment Centers that had a dedicated staff person(s) for data collection and analysis experienced significantly fewer barriers than those who did not. Investing in a position or having specific staff members dedicated to data quality and analysis plays a critical role in ensuring that the Assessment Center's work is both measurable and impactful. Skilled data experts can design and implement efficient systems for gathering accurate information ensuring data are consistently collected and organized. For example, The Assessment Center that found workarounds using Microsoft Ecosystem tools had a dedicated data analyst on its team. These skilled professionals can also support data analysis by tracking and reporting outcomes, assessing progress, and informing decisions about improvements.

By investing in a dedicated data collection and analysis position, Assessment Centers position themselves to continually refine their practices, secure funding, and ultimately better serve their target populations and communities. Having skilled staff in data collection and analysis ensures that the organization can make data-driven decisions, which is key to long-term success and sustainability.



7. Providing data collection tools to Assessment Centers participating in ACORN alleviates many barriers to completion.

Providing Assessment Centers with a data collection tool that allows them to input data directly or provides a format in order to extract data from their information system, offers significant advantages over requiring them to pull data from multiple sources. When data are spread across various platforms, files, or systems, there can be inefficiencies that increase the likelihood of errors, and complicate the process of gathering and analyzing information.

A consolidated tool can streamline the data collection process, making it easier for staff to input, update, and retrieve the information they need to complete ACORN. It is important for this consolidated tool to be low-cost. Many Assessment Centers operate within budget constraints and limited resources which can make it difficult to adopt expensive or overly complex information systems and, as mentioned above, making changes to those information systems can also be expensive.

Providing Assessment Centers with a user-friendly data system can allow them to begin collecting meaningful information that informs their work. As their capacity grows, these tools can be scaled up, allowing for gradual improvement without overwhelming staff with unnecessary complexity or financial burden.

8. There is a need to find more innovative ways to connect with youth and families post screening and assessment to get feedback and assess impact.

The Assessment Center Framework recommends administering feedback surveys with youth and families at three different points in the process 1) following screening and assessment 2) following the case management or connection to support process 3) Twelve (12) months post screening and assessment. The NAC provides member centers with template surveys both on paper and electronically and offers to analyze and provide reports. Even though the NAC offers the access to, analysis of, and reports summarizing youth and family feedback surveys, many Assessment Centers participating in the cohort struggled to have a high rate of return on surveys at the case management and twelve (12) months post screening points.

While the reason for the low rate of return is unknown, it is suspected that demands of daily life, particularly if youth and families are dealing with multiple stressors, make completing a survey low priority compared to addressing immediate needs. Additionally, families may struggle to understand the purpose of the survey or how their feedback will be used, leading to confusion or indifference about the process. There is a need to create more innovative and adaptable methods that allow Assessment Centers to receive youth and family feedback, specifically during case management and twelve (12) months post screening and assessment.



9. Assessment Centers currently define “escalation” or “recidivism” differently.

Each Assessment Center participating in the cohort defines escalation or recidivism differently. Some Assessment Centers define recidivism as any re-arrest while others focus on new adjudications. These differences in definitions make it hard to compare data across Assessment Centers, and they complicate efforts to assess the overall effectiveness of the Framework. Without a consistent, widely accepted definition of escalation or recidivism, the data can be inconsistent and not accurately measure outcomes. This does not mean that individual centers should not track their own measures, but it does point to the need for a shared definition across centers that would allow for broader or even national impact analyses.

10. Strong partnerships are required in order to track “escalation” into juvenile justice and child welfare systems.

Collecting “escalation” or “recidivism” data poses several obstacles that make it challenging for Assessment Centers to track and assess long-term outcomes effectively. There is often a fragmentation of data systems and/or lack of data-sharing agreements across stakeholders interacting with Assessment Centers such as law enforcement, courts, detention facilities, probation departments, child welfare agencies, and community-based organizations. Each stakeholder has their own data collection protocols and systems. This fragmentation can lead to incomplete data or gaps, especially when a youth moves between jurisdictions or interacts with different parts of the system. Data sharing restrictions also pose barriers. Agencies may be reluctant to share data, fearing legal or ethical breaches, or they may lack the formal agreements needed to facilitate data sharing between organizations. This creates another layer of difficulty in collecting “escalation” or “recidivism” data.

11. ACORN and the cohort action plans allowed Assessment Centers to go beyond just data collection. It allowed them to analyze, identify problem and improvement areas, and address performance.

While collecting data is a critical first step, the true value of ACORN lies in its ability to facilitate meaningful analysis of that data. Assessment Centers were able to dig deeper into the information they collected and identify areas where they were succeeding or where gaps existed. This provided a structured way for Centers to engage in continuous performance improvement. They could refine their practices based on real-time data and feedback.

ACORN and the cohort action plans transformed the role of data from a passive reporting function into an active tool for driving change. They allowed the Assessment Centers to be more strategic in their operations, making informed decisions that directly impacted the quality and effectiveness of the practices they used to serve youth and families.



12. As interest in Assessment Centers continues to grow around the country, it is imperative for them to be able to track specific data points in order to showcase impact.

Over the past several years interest in Assessment Centers has grown significantly. As stakeholders, policymakers, and community members show more interest in Assessment Centers, the ability to measure and showcase outcomes with concrete data becomes a key factor in proving their value. ACORN allows Assessment Centers to highlight their effectiveness, make informed decisions about where improvements are needed, and strengthen their case for continued investment and expansion. Tracking key data points provides a narrative of their success in supporting youth and families.

Recommendations for Next Steps

Recommendations in order to scale the Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN):

1. Roll out the Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN) to Assessment Centers throughout the country through cohorts in order to create learning communities and peer-to-peer networks.

The National Assessment Center Association (NAC) should expand the use of the ACORN nationwide through cohorts. This allows us to not only expand the use of data-driven practices but also to create learning communities and peer-to-peer networks among Assessment Centers across the country. By adopting ACORN in cohorts, Assessment Centers would be able to collaborate in structured groups, fostering an environment where they can learn from one another's experiences, challenges, and successes.

Cohorts allow Assessment Centers to share expertise leading to richer insights and more innovative solutions to shared problems. It can also help to avoid duplication of efforts. For example, if one Assessment Center develops an effective strategy for data-sharing in order to track "escalation" or "recidivism", that approach can be shared across the network, enabling other Assessment Centers to implement similar strategies. This accelerates progress and builds a foundation for sustained improvement..

Scaling ACORN through cohorts will expand those using ACORN for data collection and reporting in order to prove effectiveness and strengthen the case for continued investment and expansion. By nurturing these learning communities, the NAC can support Assessment Centers in collectively enhancing their impact and demonstrating their value.



2. States that have made, or are planning to make, substantial investments in Assessment Centers should consider implementing ACORN on a statewide level in order to enhance state-based reporting and enable more consistent and comprehensive outcome measurement across all centers.

States that have made or plan to make significant investments in Assessment Centers, such as Ohio, Colorado, Idaho, Florida, and Kansas, should consider implementing the Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN) at a statewide level. A state-wide adoption of ACORN would streamline and standardize reporting across all centers, allowing state agencies to track outcomes more effectively, compare results across regions, and make data-driven decisions to support youth and family needs. It also strengthens accountability and can inform resource allocation. Additionally, this approach would enable administrators and policymakers to align Assessment Centers more closely with statewide goals and objectives.

A next step in scaling ACORN is to identify a state partner willing to pilot and adopt ACORN. This state partner would work collaboratively with the NAC and Assessment Centers within their state to integrate the framework into their current processes, tailoring it as needed to meet specific state requirements or regulatory contexts. A state-level partner can provide invaluable insight into how ACORN might best fit within statewide reporting systems, as well as offer resources and support to facilitate a smooth rollout across multiple Assessment Centers.

3. Develop a user-friendly and cost-effective tool that enables Assessment Centers to input client-level data, either through direct entry or by extracting reports from their existing information systems, ensuring seamless alignment with ACORN data requirements and simplifying the completion of ACORN reporting.

Developing a user-friendly and cost-effective tool for Assessment Centers to input client-level data can enhance efficiency and accuracy. Ideally, this tool would allow Assessment Centers to input data in two ways: either through direct entry or by extracting relevant reports from their existing information systems. This flexibility meets Assessment Centers where they are in terms of technical capacity and recognizes the different systems in place to easily adapt the tool to their needs without overhauling their entire data management process. One challenge expressed during the cohort was not in collecting the data but in organizing it in a way that meets ACORN requirements. A tool designed to directly match ACORN's format and metrics would eliminate the need for time-consuming manual adjustments or reformatting of data.



Making the tool cost-effective is also important and ensures Assessment Centers with limited budgets and resources can participate in ACORN reporting. Creating a tool that is cost-effective and aligns with ACORN's requirements increases the likelihood of use by other Assessment Centers. It also meets the needs of sophisticated Assessment Centers by defining the report structure, or extracting reports needed from their enterprise system to upload into ACORN. In this manner the tool meets the needs of a broad range of Assessment Centers. It fosters a more cohesive and efficient reporting system across all participating Assessment Centers, leading to more robust, accurate data that can better inform juvenile justice reform efforts on a broader scale.

4. Explore effective methods of gathering youth and family feedback at medium- and long-term outcome points in order to get a higher rate of return and thus better data.

Capturing youth and family feedback at various decision points is essential in order to understand the sustained impacts of Assessment Centers on youth and families after their initial involvement. However, the challenge lies in achieving a sufficiently high response rate as responses often drop over time, making it difficult to gather meaningful long-term data.

Assessment Centers should be supported in exploring and implementing innovative strategies to engage youth and families in providing feedback. Analyzing the success of survey delivery methods such as distributing surveys online, through mobile apps, text messaging, or even phone interviews could help inform strategies for Assessment Centers. Other methods to increase participation could be incentivizing participation, ensuring strong relationships with youth and families from the outset, partnering with community organizations or schools that have ongoing relationships with the youth and families or leveraging technology and data management systems to create automated reminders and personalized messages.

The NAC and other organizations supporting Assessment Centers should explore what methods are most effective and create ways for that information to be shared with the field. Increasing response rates will lead to better-informed decisions and a deeper understanding of how their Assessment Centers contribute to the well-being and success of the youth and families they serve.



5. Support the Assessment Center community by developing templates and resources that support data sharing between Assessment Centers and critical stakeholders in order to track outcomes but also protect the privacy of youth and families.

Data sharing between Assessment Centers and key stakeholders such as schools, law enforcement, courts, community organizations, and others is essential for tracking comprehensive outcomes and improving services. However, data sharing agreements and the collaborative process must be handled in ways that recognize and protect the sensitive information of youth and families, as privacy and confidentiality are foundational elements of Assessment Center best practices.

The development of template data sharing protocols would be useful resources to the field. These protocols could include guidelines for data de-identification, encryption, and secure storage to minimize risks of breaches or unauthorized access. These protocols would clarify who, within each stakeholder organization, has access to specific data points, ensuring that only those directly involved in tracking outcomes or analyzing trends can view sensitive information.

Intentional collaboration with essential stakeholders ensures all parties are working from a shared vision and framework. These tools could enable Assessment Centers to collaborate with stakeholders securely and transparently in a way that ensures the data collected are both reliable and ethically managed. These tools could help Assessment Centers and their stakeholders better understand “escalation” or “recidivism” trends, improve outcomes, and maintain the trust of the communities they serve.

Recommendations to existing or developing Assessment Centers

1. Adapt Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN) as your foundation to data collection and reporting.

This cohort demonstrated that ACORN can positively impact data collection, outcome reporting, and continuous quality improvement. Assessment Centers should adopt ACORN as the foundation for data collection and reporting. ACORN provides a standardized framework that facilitates the collection of essential data across multiple core components of the Assessment Center Framework. By adopting ACORN, Assessment Centers can streamline processes, improve the quality of their data, and better demonstrate the effectiveness of their services to stakeholders.



Using ACORN enables the sharing of best practices, lessons learned, and successful strategies. For instance, if one Assessment Center identifies an innovative approach and positive outcomes engaging a specific population of youth, other Assessment Centers can replicate or adapt that approach, leading to collective improvements across the system. This shared learning model helps strengthen the overall impact of Assessment Centers nationwide by building on each other's successes and experiences.

Using ACORN as the foundation for data collection and reporting can improve a local Assessment Centers' transparency and accountability to stakeholders. Funders, policymakers, and community members can easily understand the outcomes being tracked and how the data reflects the success of the Assessment Center. This transparency can help build trust and support for continued operation and expansion, as stakeholders can see concrete evidence of center impacts.

ACORN can also help Assessment Centers remain flexible and scalable as they grow. While ACORN offers a foundation for data collection and reporting, local jurisdictions are encouraged to incorporate specific needs and data elements that reflect their communities. Centers can use the core framework to collect essential data while customizing certain aspects to reflect their unique local context, population, and priorities. This flexibility ensures that ACORN remains relevant and useful as centers expand or face new challenges.

2. Utilize information systems that are cost-effective and adaptable.

One of the main advantages of an adaptable information system is its ability to accommodate changes in data collection requirements. An adaptable system enables each center to adjust the interface, input fields, and reporting formats to suit their particular needs while still adhering to overarching standards such as the Assessment Center Outcome Reporting Network (ACORN). Assessment Centers should be able to make these adjustments without straining their budgets and resources. Utilizing an adaptable information system can allow for greater responsiveness to changing circumstances and creates a useful tool for tracking data and outcomes.

The Cohorts and the innovation it stimulated may be a great foundation for developing a low cost alternative to more expensive automation or a supplement to enterprise data systems where the Assessment Center lacks the flexibility to extract the ACORN data. With a modest investment a prototype could be hardened in a state pilot or as the ACORN is released. While the system is cost effective some resources for support/help desk will be needed.



3. Assessment Centers should invest resources in developing staff capacity and expertise related to data collection and analysis.

Developing staff capacity and expertise in data collection and analysis underscores the vital role that skilled personnel play in ensuring the accuracy, reliability, and meaningful use of data. As Assessment Centers increasingly rely on data to demonstrate outcomes, guide operations, and secure funding, the need for staff who are either fully or partially dedicated to data collection and analysis becomes more apparent.

Data collection and analysis can be complex, technical tasks that require more than basic administrative skills. Accurate data collection involves careful planning, consistent methodology, and an understanding of how to gather, store, and manage sensitive information in compliance with legal standards. It requires staff who are skilled at transforming raw data into actionable insights. While gathering data is the first step, it is equally important to have staff who can interpret and analyze those data to identify trends, assess effectiveness, and inform decision-making. Without dedicated and capable staff, even the most comprehensive data collection efforts can fall short, as unexamined data fails to guide meaningful changes or improvements in services.

Investing in data-focused staff also helps to foster a culture of data-driven decision-making within the organization. When data collection and analysis are embedded into the daily and routine operations of the Assessment Center, staff at all levels can begin to see data not just as a reporting requirement but as a tool for continuous improvement. Leadership can also use data to make strategic decisions about resource allocation, core component development, and partnerships. The Assessment Center can become more proactive in using evidence to guide decisions, rather than relying on anecdotal or outdated information.

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Sustaining support for the emerging peer network the SJI-funded demonstration assembled is a wise investment in juvenile justice system improvement, particularly as research supports the effectiveness of robust diversion and the national network of AC expands.” -Hunter Hurst, Director, National Center for Juvenile Justice

For more information:

www.nacassociation.org

contactus@nacassociation.org