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## Nebraska Coalition of Juvenile Justice Strength-Based Assessment

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NEBRASKA CENTER FOR JUSTICE RESEARCH

# NEBRASKA COALITION OF JUVENILE JUSTICE STRENGTH-BASED ASSESSMENT

January, 2015  
Ryan Spohn, Ph.D.





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### **ABOUT THE NCJR**

The Nebraska Center for Justice Research was established in 2014 by LB 907. The Center's mission is to develop and sustain research capacity internal to the State of Nebraska, assist the Legislature in research, evaluation, and policymaking to reduce recidivism, promote the use of evidence-based practices in corrections, and improve public safety. Questions regarding the NCJR should be directed to Dr. Ryan Spohn, Director, Nebraska Center for Justice Research, University of Nebraska, Omaha, 6001 Dodge Street, Omaha, NE 68182-0310. Phone: 402-554-3794; e-mail:

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## **Introduction**

The Nebraska Coalition for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) was established in 1982, as required by the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act and acts as an advisory group to the Nebraska Crime Commission. In 2013, NCJJ submitted a technical assistance request for strategic planning to the State Relations and Assistance Division of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) seeking assistance in the development of an action oriented, strategic plan to guide its future activities. The OJJDP technical assistance meeting occurred on May 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013.

One of the recommendations resulting from this technical assistance meeting was that NCJJ conduct a strength-based assessment of its members around its five key focus areas. The two primary areas of data collection were to be 1) the area of system represented by each member, and 2) the area of system of most interest to each member. The proposed goals of the assessment were twofold. First, the assessment would allow NCJJ to determine their current representation throughout the juvenile justice system and determine potential areas that would benefit from the recruitment of new members. Second, the assessment would provide an opportunity to assist individual members in setting realistic goals for themselves and the group as a whole. Dr. Ryan Spohn, Director of the Nebraska Center for Justice Research (NCJR) at the University of Nebraska – Omaha was contracted to conduct the strength-based assessment and summarize his findings in a report for NCJJ.

## **Data Collection Activities**

**Online survey.** Dr. Spohn developed an online survey using Survey Monkey to assess strengths and areas of interest of NCJJ members. This survey went live on June 9, 2014 and was last completed on July 14, 2014. In total, twenty-four NCJJ members completed the online survey.

**Member interviews.** NCJJ members were also asked if they would like to participate in personal interviews that would inform the strength-based analysis. Six members agreed to be interviewed and Dr. Spohn conducted these interviews from December 16<sup>th</sup> and December 23<sup>rd</sup>. The identities of those interviewed will not be disclosed and interview responses were included in this report in a manner intended to maintain the confidentiality of respondents.

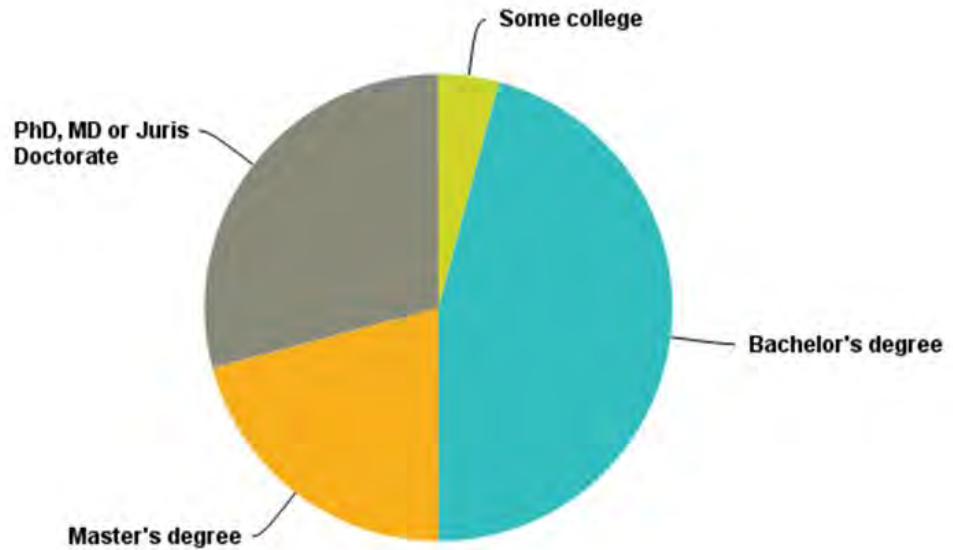
## **Findings of the Strength-Based Assessment**

### **SECTION I: Education, Training, and Work Experience**

**Education of NCJJ members.** Education appears to be a strength of NCJJ members. All members reported having at least some college education. Eleven of the 24 survey respondents (45.8%) reported having a bachelor's degree. In addition, five respondents (20.8%) reported having a master's degree and six respondents (25.0%) reported having a JD. In summary, of those members responding to the survey, more than 50% had an advanced degree of some sort.

# Q1: What is your highest level of formal education?

Answered: 24 Skipped: 0



There exists a fair amount of variety in the substantive areas in which members' degrees were conferred. Along with the six members with law degrees, there are also nine respondents who reported having criminal justice/criminology degrees. In addition to these core areas, respondents reported having bachelor's degrees in areas such as business management, mental health and substance abuse, education, sociology, and psychology, and master's degrees in areas such as public administration, counseling, and family science. Moreover, many members reported having degrees in multiple fields or having majors and minors that covered a number of substantive areas. In conclusion, NCJJ members in general display a breadth of education in addition to high levels of education.

**Formal training/job training.** Members responding to the survey also reported having received a wide variety of formal training or job training. As a group, the training background of NCJJ members reflects fairly comprehensive coverage of the systems and issues that are most central to the juvenile justice system in Nebraska. Some examples are as follows:

Grant writing	Trauma-informed care
Law enforcement training	Substance abuse training
Curriculum training for youth services	Public safety training
Mental health training	DMC training
Behavior management training	De-escalation training
Motivational interviewing training	Guardian ad Litem certification
Through the Eyes of a Child conferences	NJJA conferences
YLS training	Trained drug recognition expert

**Work experience.** Experience that occurs on-the-job is obviously another strength that NCJJ members bring to the group. Survey respondents were asked to list relevant work experience that assisted them in their work with NCJJ. Members’ work experience is also varied and reflective of all major aspects of Nebraska’s juvenile justice system. Some examples are as follows:

Law enforcement	Agency/association leadership
Working with youth/mentoring	Staffing of youth facilities
YRTC experience	Legal experience with youth
Juvenile court experience	Juvenile probation experience
Juvenile secure detention experience	Omaha 360
Working with Federal Advisory Committees	Behavioral health experience
Case management experience	Community service coordination
Youth leader	Serving on grant review teams
Working as trainer	Program coordination of youth services
Grant writing	Implementing youth programs
Publishing experience	Political/legislative experience
Administration of juvenile center	Counseling/coaching

**Suggestions from the interviews.** A repeated theme emerging from the interviews was that the right people are “at the table” with this group. Those members interviewed did not express concerns about the levels of experience or education of the membership.

## **SECTION II: System and Geographic Coverage**

One product of the OJJDP technical assistance meeting in May, 2013, was the identification of five focus areas that would guide the future work of NCJJ. These focus groups are the following:

1. Disproportionate minority contact
2. Systems improvement
3. Strategic community action planning
4. Diversion
5. Training and technical assistance

Two primary goals of this strength-based assessment are to determine 1) what focus areas are best represented by current NCJJ membership and, 2) what focus areas are of most interest to current NCJJ members. The online survey collected this information from the 24 respondents. Some respondents identified only one focus area for each question, whereas many respondents identified more than one (for example, at least one respondent identified all 5). In order to respect respondents’ multiple specialties, while preventing a minority of respondents from driving the findings, we tallied up to three responses from each member in the order in which they were listed in the survey response. In addition to these two issues, we also asked respondents to indicate the geographical areas that they represented.

**Focus areas best represented by NCJJ members.** First, we asked respondents which of the five focus areas they felt that they best represented. The following table reflects this representation:



Focus Area	Number of mentions
<b>Disproportionate minority contact</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Systems improvement</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Strategic community action planning</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Diversion</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Training and technical assistance</b>	<b>8</b>

Representation was not equally distributed across the five focus areas. System improvement is most represented with 13 mentions, whereas disproportionate minority contact is least represented with only four mentions. This data provides important information regarding the fashion in which NCJJ membership reflects the identified areas of focus. Moving forward, NCJJ leadership and members will need to decide if this data indicate a need to recruit members in the focus areas with less representation. Obviously, if all five focus areas are viewed as equally important, then some adjustment should occur. However, another alternative is that some focus areas are more central to the group than others, in which case, unequal representation might be warranted or even preferred.

**Focus areas invoking most passion by NCJJ members.** Although it is important to have information about members’ expertise, it is also important to know which areas of the juvenile justice system invoke the most passion by NCJJ members. In general, we can assume that members will be most invested and put forth the most effort in the areas they feel most passionate about, regardless of their areas of expertise.

In the online survey, we asked respondents to identify which of the five focus areas they felt most passionate about. In tallying the results, we used the same methodology as was used above for representation. Overall, respondents chose fewer “passions” than areas that they represented, which was expected. The overall pattern of passions is similar to that of representation with one exception: whereas *training and technical assistance* was ranked second in representation with eight mentions, it is tied with DMC for last as a passion, each receiving only two votes.

Focus Area	Number of mentions
<b>Disproportionate minority contact</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Systems improvement</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Strategic community action planning</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Diversion</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Training and technical assistance</b>	<b>2</b>

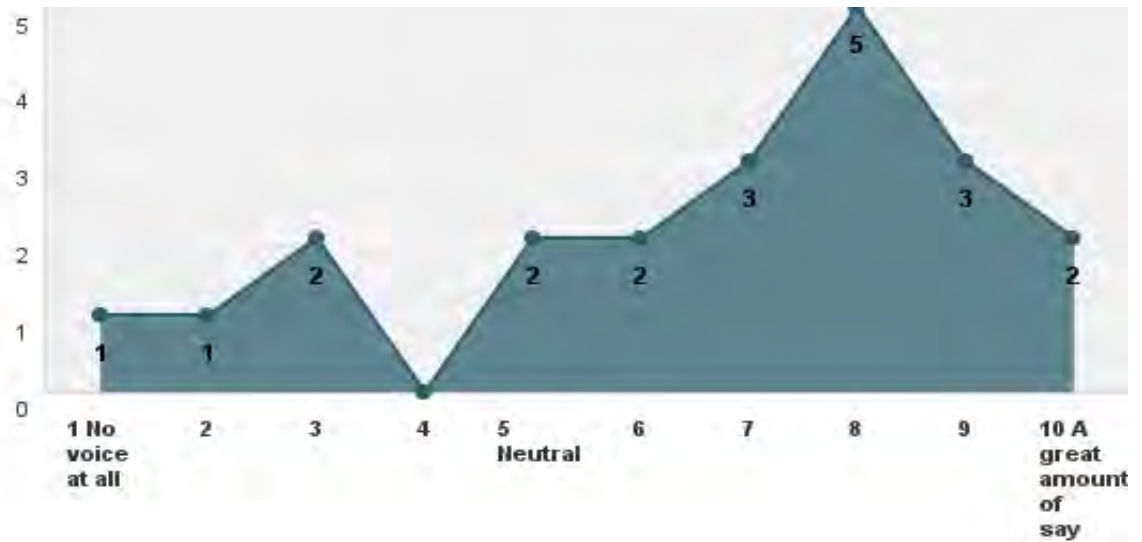
Similar to representation, members’ passions are not evenly distributed across the five focus areas. As mentioned in the previous section, this data provide important information as to where members’ passions lie. If more even representation is desirable, then NCJJ leadership and members will need to consider altering the membership of the group to more equally represent all five passions. Alternately, the pattern displayed by the data might appropriately reflect the overall focus and work of NCJJ.

**Geographical representation.** Because this is a statewide committee, geographical representation should be considered as well. Survey respondents were asked what geographical area they represented. Responses are tallied in the table below. The largest number of members (5) reported a statewide jurisdiction. The second largest representation was for “rural Nebraska”, with three responses. Although no one responded with NW Nebraska or “western” Nebraska, it is safe to assume that at least some of the representation for rural Nebraska covers these areas. Given the urban/rural makeup of the population of the state, I was surprised that only one member listed “Omaha”, no members listed Douglas County, and only two members listed Lancaster County/Lincoln. NCJJ leadership and members should examine this geographical representation closely to determine if the geographical distribution matches the mission and goals of the group.

	Number of mentions
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>XXXXX</b>
<b>Omaha</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Lancaster County/Lincoln</b>	<b>XX</b>
<b>NE Nebraska</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>SW Nebraska</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>SE Nebraska</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Central Nebraska</b>	<b>XX</b>
<b>Eastern Nebraska</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Rural Nebraska</b>	<b>XXX</b>
<b>Panhandle</b>	<b>X</b>
<b>Burt County</b>	<b>X</b>

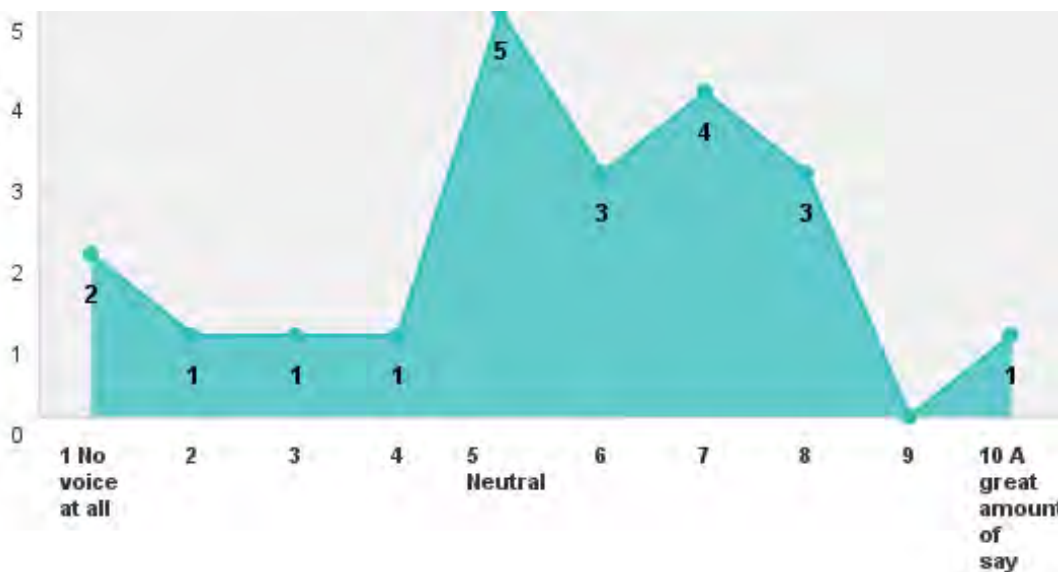
### **SECTION III: Member Empowerment and Agency**

**Having a voice in juvenile justice policy.** The online survey included questions targeted at capturing members’ feelings of empowerment and agency in their work in juvenile justice. The first question asked members, “to what extent do you feel like you have a voice in juvenile justice policy *in your work?*” The response scale ranged from 1 to 10, with 1 representing “no voice at all” and 10 representing “A great amount of say”. Of the 24 respondents, the mean response score was 6.63 and five respondents chose 8, making it the most common response. The overall distribution of responses is included in the following figure.



The distribution of responses suggests that the majority of members felt like they had at least some say to a great amount of say in juvenile justice policy in their work. However, a minority of respondents felt that they had little or no voice at all.

The second question asked members, “to what extent do you feel like you have a voice in juvenile justice policy *outside your work*?” To the extent that members view their role with NCJJ as falling outside of their normal realm of work, this latter question may be most pertinent for this assessment. The response scale was similar to the previous question. However, the mean score was more than one point lower (5.52). Also, the most common response for this latter question was “5”, which represented a neutral response. Again, a minority of respondents suggested that they had little or no voice in juvenile justice policy outside of their work. The overall distribution of responses is included in the following figure.



Given the level of education, experience, training, and leadership of the juvenile justice professionals represented by NCJJ, there was an expectation that these numbers would be higher. Future actions by the group to build on the group’s strengths should address feeling of

empowerment and agency, with a particular emphasis on understanding why some members reported such low scores.

#### **SECTION IV: Member-Identified Challenges**

Identification of challenges for NCJJ was collected via open-ended questions from the online survey and open-ended interview questions. The individual suggestions include:

- NCJJ doesn't review 3-year plans in the manner expected by counties, therefore, members do not get the connection to programs in the local communities to empower work across the state.
- Incomplete understanding of the systems that are funded through the grant process.
- Mission, vision, and strategic plan are not sufficiently defined to guide NCJJ's work.
- Distance and the difficulty of representing rural areas in the state.
- Insufficient knowledge of the availability of evidence-based programs and practices.
- Funding recommendations by the group can be "vetoed".
- Funding recommendations by the group can become political.
- NCJJ has struggled with attendance and with achieving a quorum, partially because the group does not feel empowered, but also due to scheduling conflicts.
- Insufficient data and data-informed systems.
- Getting youth involvement is difficult due to timing of meetings and other logistical issues.
- Few members have knowledge of the entire juvenile justice system, but rather are experts in their field of specialization and employment.
- Focus should be on communities, but members representing state-interests "tell" communities how it will be rather than "listening" to communities.
- Do not have a direct channel to the Legislature.

#### **SECTION V: Member Suggestions for Building on Strengths**

Suggestions for building on the strengths of NCJJ were collected via open-ended questions from the online survey and open-ended interview questions. The individual suggestions include:

- More discussion and review of the 3-year plan.
- A larger role for advocating for legislation and policy that is consistent with the group's goals.
- Developing a clearly defined mission and vision along with a strategic plan that would guide the grant process and the prioritization of issues.
- Increasing focus on families and victims and representation by families and victims.
- The addition of an education component, maybe a 15-minute training session, at each meeting about local programs, a promising practice, cutting-edge information, or trends from the state level or national level.
- New members should receive orientation or training that defines the role of NCJJ, the expectations of membership, and an overview of the juvenile justice system in Nebraska.

- Develop a more direct connection to the legislature and knowledge of the legislative process in Nebraska in order to promote policies recommended by the group.
- Members should consult with other juvenile justice professionals that are not members of the committee and serve as a representative for these other justice professionals.
- Increase the voice of the communities in relation to the interests of statewide agency professionals.
- Increase the depth of knowledge and involvement in the major issues facing the juvenile justice system.
- Increase the number of site visits to learn about grantee programs or invite grantees to present at the meetings on a regular basis.
- Continue to enhance the sub-committee structure and their charters.
- Address attendance issues. Suggestions include:
  - Altering meeting dates/times so they do not coincide with members' other mandatory meetings.
  - Increasing the frequency to six meetings per year so that if a member misses one meeting, they are not absent from the group for a full six months.
  - Increase incentives for attendance such as receiving training, learning about national and locally successful practices, and feeling part of an empowered group.

## **SECTION VI: Concluding Observations and Suggestions for Strength-Building**

Concluding observations. Examining the results of the survey and interviews in their totality, an obvious strength of NCJJ is its members' education, training, and experience in the field of juvenile justice and working with youth. As one interviewee stated, "the right people are at the table". Other strengths include the level of geographic coverage of the group, level of coverage across NCJJ's focus areas, and a substantial level of empowerment described by most group members.

The primary challenge of the group is to harness the assets of its members in a way that effectively promotes the achievement of NCJJ's mission and the goals of NCJJ's strategic plan. To this end, the remainder of this report provides some suggestions for strength-building that are classified according to six major categories.

1. Coverage. The online survey provided information on the geographic coverage of the 24 respondents. The current geographic coverage may or may not reflect the optimum coverage desired by the group. I suggest that optimum geographic coverage be determined as part of a strategic planning process and that membership is adjusted accordingly (if necessary). The survey also provided information on the distribution of members across NCJJ's five focus areas according to members' expertise and passions. The data suggest that neither expertise nor passion is evenly distributed across the focus areas, which may or may not be desirable. I suggest that the desired distribution of members across the focus areas be determined as part of a strategic planning process and that membership is adjusted accordingly (if necessary)
2. Attendance. Attendance and achieving a quorum was a specific issue that members mentioned in both survey responses and interviews. My suggestions for addressing attendance fall into the categories of: 1) specific and straightforward, and 2) broad-based but

indirect. Regarding the former, some members suggested that simply logistics interfered with meeting attendance. For instance, some members stated that they had other professional obligations that regularly coincided with NCJJ meetings, regarding them to choose between these competing obligations. I would suggest that meeting dates and time be revisited in an attempt to increase attendance. Another suggestion was that the frequency of meetings be increased to six meetings per year, so that one absence did not result in a six-month gap in attendance. Whereas this might increase the number and percentage of meetings members are able to attend each year (for example, missing 2 out of 4 meetings is a 50% rate of absence, whereas missing 2 out of 6 meetings is only a 33% rate of absence), it would not increase the likelihood of a quorum for any given meeting and might actually reduce the likelihood of a quorum given the additional obligation. Finally, attendance should be a regular agenda item at each meeting, absences should be publicly discussed in an effort to increase attendance, and attendance policies should be strictly enforced.

Regarding the latter category of suggestions, members must have a general feeling that their attendance is meaningful and a good use of their time. For example, if members do not feel empowered by their NCJJ work and activities, attendance will suffer. If members do not fully understand their role as a member of NCJJ, membership will suffer. A final possibility is that if members do not feel like they are benefitting from their membership in NCJJ, attendance will suffer. The remaining four categories of suggestions (numbers 3-6) for strength-building address issues that might make attendance more useful and satisfactory to NCJJ members, improving attendance and the likelihood of achieving a quorum.

3. Having a voice in juvenile justice policy and a channel to Legislature. Overall, group attendance and member satisfaction will benefit if members feel like they have a voice in juvenile justice issues in Nebraska. Although survey findings suggest a fairly healthy mean level of “having a say” by group members, some respondents indicated that they had little or no voice in juvenile justice policy. I suggest that NCJJ leadership and members further examine the specific reasons why a number of members express little or no feelings of empowerment in the area of juvenile justice policy. Addressing this issue is highly likely to enhance the overall effectiveness of the work of the group.

A number of members mentioned that they desired a more organized and more effective method for NCJJ interests to be channeled to the Nebraska Legislature. I am not fully informed on limitations that the group is under regarding lobbying and political involvement, but my specific suggestions include: 1) meeting with relevant Senators if possible to discuss relevant policy, 2) inviting relevant Senators to NCJJ meetings, 3) producing policy briefs for dissemination to all Senators or specific Senators, 4) utilizing the expertise of the legislative experience of members, and 5) keeping members’ abreast of proposed legislation during legislative sessions. Obviously this last suggestion would require communication outside of regularly scheduled quarterly meetings.

4. New member training. Numerous group members suggested that they had not received enough training or orientation to order to feel fully confident of their roles and responsibilities as a member of NCJJ. Some members indicated that a substantial membership folder had existed in the past and could likely be updated to fill this role. I

suggest a combination of written materials and an in-person orientation for new members that would provide a thorough training on Nebraska's juvenile justice system, the role of NCJJ, and an up-to-date mission, vision, and strategic plan for NCJJ.

5. Meeting content. Many survey respondents and interviewees indicated that they would be highly interested in enhancing the content of NCJJ meetings. One suggestion was that each meeting include an educational component about issues such as successful local programs, promising practices, evidence-based practices and programs, and cutting-edge information such as recent trends in juvenile justice. Another suggestion was to increase the number of site visits to grantee programs or increase the opportunity for grantees to present information about their programs at NCJJ meetings.
  
6. Authority of NCJJ recommendations. This final issue might very likely be the most difficult to address, but it is related to the empowerment and attendance of NCJJ members. A number of survey respondents and interviewees indicated frustration that NCJJ only had the power to make recommendations in areas such as grant funding and that NCJJ's recommendations could be "vetoed" by the Crime Commission. Obviously, members are less likely to fully participate in a group that they feel has little or no authority or real power. A clear solution to this issue is beyond the scope of this report, but four suggestions might be helpful. First, this appears to be an "elephant in the room" issue that should be openly discussed by group members. Although such a discussion is unlikely to result directly in a solution, it would acknowledge the issue and provide a forum for suggestions for a remedy or for making the most out of a less than optimum organizational mandate. Second, I would suggest that NCJJ initiate a process such as a meeting or hearing in which Crime Commission members must communicate directly their justifications for overriding NCJJ recommendations. This would hold the Crime Commission accountable in at least an indirect fashion when they veto or override the recommendations of juvenile justice experts making up the membership of NCJJ. Third, when applicants for funding appeal the decisions of the Crime Commission, members of NCJJ should be involved in the appeal process. Finally, NCJJ should revisit the issue of participating in grant review to ensure their involvement throughout the process.