

CONNECTIONS

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College and Orange-Osceola State Attorney's Office Form Partnership to Study Juvenile Crime

Troubled by what appears to be an increase in the severity of juvenile crimes, Orange-Osceola State Attorney Lawson Lamar has turned to researchers at the University of Central Florida's College of Health and Public Affairs to better understand the problem.

"What I want is a better definition of what's going wrong so we can do a better job with offenders — and keep people from offending in the first place," Lamar said.

In response to Lamar's call for help, the college formed an interdisciplinary team of researchers

to study juvenile crime in the region, said Joyce Dornier, former interim dean of the college. With joint funding from the State Attorney's Office and college, the team designed and launched a three-phase research project in 2007.

Phase I – Trend Analysis

"Our first goal was to conduct a trend analysis," said research team leader John Ronnau, director of the college's School of Social Work. Lamar's staff provided the team with official records of serious and violent crimes processed through the Orange and Osceola counties'

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Members of the research team met this spring with State Attorney Lawson Lamar and former Interim Dean Joyce Dornier (second and third from left, respectively) in Lamar's conference room.



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Juvenile Crime *(continued from page 1)*

juvenile justice system over a 12-year period, from 1995 through 2006. All of the crimes were committed by children less than 18 years of age.

Ray Surette, professor of criminal justice, contributed his considerable expertise in working with administrative crime records. He led the team through the exhaustive process of extracting information to create a valid data set for analyzing changes in criminal activity over time. And in keeping with his role as an educator, he engaged students in the study, among them public affairs doctoral student Rebekah Hazlett, social work major Diana Jones and criminal justice graduate student Erick Chalfin.

“I felt honored to be able to work at the State Attorney’s Office,” Jones said. “The case files are confidential and not everyone is granted such a great opportunity.”

The resulting data set includes 23,350 cases in Orange County and 6,160 in Osceola County, for a total of 29,510 cases. Surette used sophisticated statistical techniques to analyze the data, enabling the team to draw conclusions based on statistically significant trends.

Trend Analysis Results

The team’s analysis revealed that in Orange County there has been a slight decrease in the number of juvenile crime cases from 1995 to 2006, but the proportion of cases that are serious or violent crimes, such as homicide, robbery and car jacking, has increased. Moreover, there has been a “dramatic increase” in recent years in the proportion of cases in which a juvenile has been charged with either a first-degree felony or an offense that carries the potential sentence of capital punishment or life imprisonment.

In Osceola County, there has been a wide fluctuation in the number of juvenile crime cases over time, with a general upward trend for all juvenile crimes; serious and violent cases have remained relatively stable.

These findings and others, such as trends in the age and race of offenders and frequencies of specific offenses, are described in 72-page report prepared by the research team and presented to Lamar in February 2008.



Thomas Alan Smilie

(Left to right) Criminal justice Professor Ray Surette, public affairs doctoral student Rebekah Hazlett, Lawson Lamar, Joyce Dornier, social work Director John Ronnau, Center for Community Partnerships Director Nancy Ellis and State Attorney’s Office spokesperson Randy Means

Phases II – Quantitative Study

During the project’s second phase, the team examined the case records for 406 juvenile violent crimes to learn more about the offender, victim and major characteristics of the crime. The cases were randomly selected and in the same proportions from the counties as the Phase I data set: 67 percent from Orange County and 33 percent from Osceola County. They were taken from two years within the 12-year span: 200 from 2000 and 206 from 2006.

“The State Attorney’s Office personnel think there has been a substantive change in the nature of juvenile offending since 2000, so we used 2000 as a benchmark year,” Surette said. The team recently completed phase II of the study.

Phases III – Qualitative Study

During the project’s third phase, the team plans to interview a small sample of the 406 cases studied in phase II to learn more about the life experiences of the juveniles. The team also plans to survey educators, community youth agencies, law enforcement officials, parents and a larger sample of juveniles to learn more specifics about the dynamic of juvenile crime in Orange and Osceola counties. With the results from phases II and III, the team will formulate

recommendations for public policy and programs designed to help the State Attorney’s Office address juvenile crime problems in the region.

An Ongoing Partnership

In helping to facilitate the research project, Center for Community Partnerships Director Nancy Ellis has met with Lamar on several occasions. She said he envisions an ongoing partnership between his office and the college to develop interventions, such as social services and educational programs, geared toward keeping juveniles out of the criminal court system.

“Lawson has a great affinity for UCF and the college,” Ellis said, noting that he has been an adjunct faculty member for the college and is a current member of its Dean’s Advisory Council. “He clearly sees the value of partnering with us.”

The college places a high value on the relationship as well. “This partnership truly exemplifies the college’s commitment to community partnerships that improve the quality of life for the citizens of Central Florida,” said Joyce Dornier, now an associate dean in the college. “We look forward to a long and productive partnership.”