

1999 - 2000 Ventura County Grand Jury Report

Performance of Ventura County Programs

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Background

Californians are dependent on county agencies for many important services. Counties prosecute, jail, and supervise most criminals; operate libraries; work to protect children from abuse; help residents with health, mental health and substance abuse problems; fix potholes; and serve their residents in many other ways. For many programs, counties serve as local agents to implement the state's priorities. Counties frequently administer their programs under guidelines of state law.

Methodology

The Ventura County Grand Jury reviewed a document published by the State Legislative Analyst's Office entitled *California Counties, a Look at Program Performance*. This document, published in 1998, contains data on all California counties and provided one measure of evaluation for Ventura County compared to the performance of other counties in the state.

The report contained information on some key issues (such as staffing levels or treatment slots) that were associated with a program's success and provided valuable information as to the relative effectiveness of Ventura County's programs when measured against other counties in California. However, as stated in the document, "The report's size reflects the small amount of information currently available on county performance."

Findings

Children's Programs

In the area of county administered children's services and foster care programs, Ventura County ranks above average. Finding a permanent home within four years for a foster child is one measure of

how effectively a placement program is operating. In Ventura, 76% of the children were placed in a permanent home with four years of entering foster care. The statewide average was 75%. How often do children re-enter foster care? In Ventura County, 14% of the children re-entered foster care within three years, while the statewide average was 16%.

Measuring differences in child wellbeing due to a county's intervention is a challenge. The performance measures in the report reflect the actions of a county *after* the child was removed from the parents' home. There was no information on the quality of county front-end decisions such as the number of cases where the county *did not* remove a child from the home after a report of abuse or neglect.

Social and Health Services

Counties administer many social services and health programs for low-income families and individuals such as the California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program. Welfare reforms have focused on moving families from welfare to self-sufficiency. Data was provided in the report on the decline in welfare dependency from 1995 to 1997. For Ventura County, the percent of reduction of CalWORKs cases per 1,000 population was approximately 24%. The statewide reduction was 20%, but there was wide variation among counties, with one county approaching a 40% reduction in CalWORKs cases.

When a noncustodial parent fails to pay court-ordered child support, the custodial parent may turn to the county district attorney for assistance. Such child support collections services are available to welfare families and non-welfare families. At 92%, Ventura County ranked second in the state in collecting child support payments. (Responsibility for collection has recently been transferred from the District Attorney's Office to the State.)

Ventura County had relatively few drug and alcohol treatment slots compared to other counties in California during the 1997 year, with less than 20 slots for every 10,000 county population (the average was twice that). The report notes that while the number of treatment slots does not measure the effectiveness of program performance, it is an important variable that may be related to program outcomes. The waiting time to receive substance abuse services was relatively short in Ventura County, with the average number of days being approximately 30. This ranks Ventura County in the median of the counties.

Criminal Justice

Much of California's system of criminal justice is a county responsibility. While city police arrested most offenders, counties:

- Book people into county jails.
- Prosecute and often defend or finance the defense of people charged with crimes.
- Share with the state responsibility for funding and operating the trial courts.
- Incarcerate in their county jails most offenders, and supervise offenders released to their community on probation.
- Provide police protection to the public living outside city boundaries or in contract cities.

There is relative little crime in Ventura County. Among the "less urban" counties, Ventura ranked as the lowest in the number of violent crimes and crimes against property. In addition, from 1986 through 1996, Ventura County showed a decline in major crimes of more than 10%, while the statewide decline was only 7.9%, with some counties showing an increase.

Sheriffs are elected county officials with responsibility for several law enforcement functions such as police services, operating county jails, and providing bailiffs for local trial courts. In 1996 Ventura County ranked second highest in the state in the number of sheriff's deputies per 10,000 population.

In supervising offenders, probation officers had an average caseload of approximately 100, ranking Ventura County in the exact center of the probation officers' caseloads in the state.

Conclusion

Based on the statistical analysis of counties, Ventura County ranked well above average in nearly every category of the report and in the top 10% in many.

Response Required

None.

