

Journey Mapping: How Case Visualization Reveals Gaps and Opportunities in Children's Behavioral Health

By Sarah Sparks, Kacie Schlegel, and Kristen Gore

Children and youth with behavioral health needs who are involved in child welfare, juvenile justice, schools, and other human service systems often face complex, multi agency service journeys. These youth may experience frequent transitions, fragmented support, and significant unmet needs as they move among social workers, courts, treatment providers, educators, and caregivers. For some, involvement across multiple systems can create a confusing maze of interventions that delay or prohibit treatment progress. The result may include unnecessary removals from home, delays in accessing services, placement disruptions, or placement in detention, emergency rooms, or other restrictive settings.

This brief explores the use of journey mapping in children's behavioral health, highlighting how these methods have been applied to reveal service gaps and complexities and to generate creative solutions for improving youth and family experiences and outcomes.

Journey mapping is the process of visually representing an individual's experience as they interact with a service or system. For example, a journey map would illustrate a child's path through the behavioral health system, beginning with first system contact and assessment, moving through levels of care and placement changes, and continuing through transition planning and post-discharge supports. The journey map charts key events, decisions, services, and the experiences of the individual at each stage of the journey. By consolidating a case into one visual narrative, **a journey map allows participants to literally "see" how an individual moved through the system, what services they received, and where critical gaps or turning points occurred.**

Journey mapping helps agencies see where systems succeed and break down, enabling targeted strategies to address waitlists, improve crisis response, support behavior stabilization, improve care transitions, and reduce restrictive placements and placement disruptions. While still emerging, early evidence suggests it can drive concrete, measurable improvements in child and family outcomes,^{i,ii}. Ultimately, the value of journey mapping lies in enabling agencies to design more responsive, compassionate, and effective services for children, youth, and families.

Understanding Journey Mapping and Case Visualization

Traditional community partner engagement methods, such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews, often capture qualitative feedback that only pieces of an experience with a service or system. Journey mapping, by contrast, is a client-centered, holistic approach that centers the voices and experiences of those most affected. This method helps agencies and organizations to:

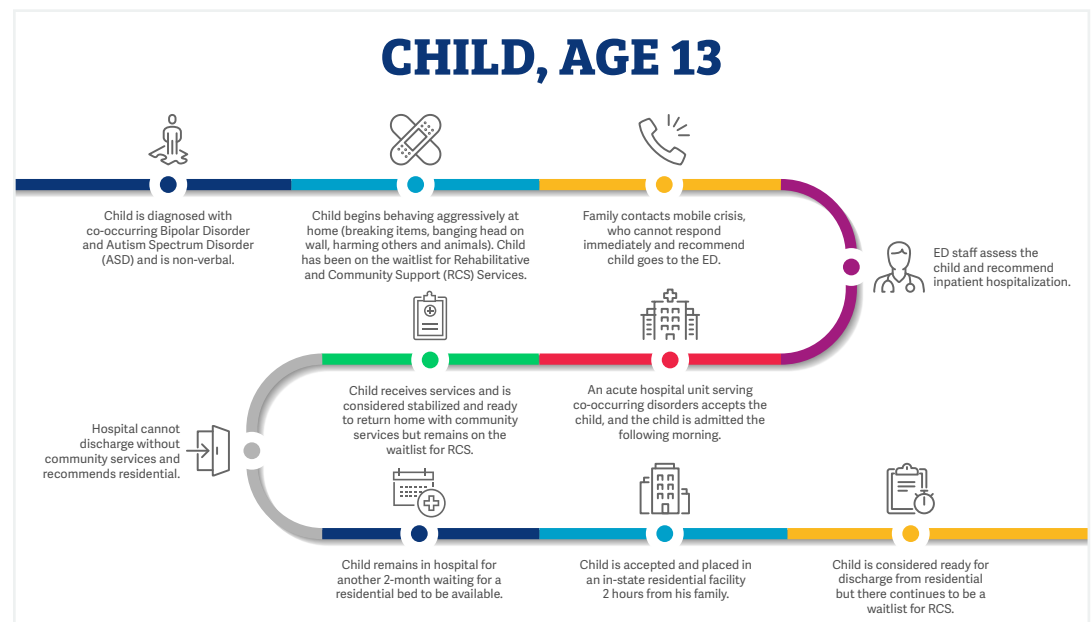
- **Better understand child and family experiences** as they interact with state systems.
- **Identify gaps, hurdles, and system breakdowns** that impede progress or cause frustration.

- **Engage in collaborative problem-solving** with community partners, including frontline staff, partner agencies, families, and youth themselves.
- **Guide resource allocation and service re-design** by illuminating which stages of the process are most in need of support or innovation.
- **Bring a human-centered lens to system improvement** by capturing an individual's step-by-step experience through a system.

Steps in Visualizing a Case through Journey Mapping

Journey mapping is an effective tool to deepen understanding of the children's behavioral health system and family needs. Steps include:

- 1. Case Selection and Data Gathering:** Select real cases that exemplify common scenarios or particularly challenging situations. The case mix should include a mix of ages, backgrounds, and experiences (with all personal identifiers removed). When the cases are selected, all relevant case records are gathered, such as intake assessments, case plans, court reports, placement and service histories, and clinician notes.
- 2. Case Analysis and Visualization:** Case documentation is thoroughly reviewed and documented into a chronological narrative, often in a table format that outlines key events and touchpoints, which are then visualized into a journey map. A journey map may include stages such as service intake, exits, and entries to out-of-home settings (foster care, juvenile justice, residential settings, hospitalizations), service interventions, and notable life events for the child. The map often highlights pain points, for instance, periods of unmet service needs, transitions between systems, or moments where the youth's needs escalated. An example of this case visualization is shown below.



- 3. Community Partner Engagement Sessions:** The case visualization is then used as a centerpiece for focus groups, workshops, or other facilitated sessions with community partners. Participants may include agency leadership, frontline staff from child welfare or juvenile justice, service providers, educators, advocates, and sometimes youth or family representatives, depending on the context. While walking through the draft journey map, participants discuss what the youth and family experienced, identify what went well or

poorly, and consider “what if” scenarios for system response. This structured walkthrough helps participants directly observe where service gaps, delays, or barriers occurred. For example, participants might note that before a child’s visit to the emergency department, there was a lapse in behavioral health services, a gap that could contribute to a subsequent crisis.

- 4. Collaborative Problem-Solving:** With the whole journey laid out visually, participants are prompted to brainstorm solutions or alternative approaches at each critical point. The facilitator might ask questions such as: “What additional supports could have prevented this out-of-home treatment?” or “How might we have supported the family and child earlier to avoid this outcome?” This process encourages creative thinking without the usual constraints. Participants are asked to imagine the ideal supports that could have made a difference, even if those supports don’t currently exist or weren’t accessible in the real case. The collective insight of diverse participants often leads to innovative ideas, ranging from policy changes (e.g., adjusting medical necessity criteria) to practice improvements (better cross-agency communication, new intervention programs, enhanced training for caregivers, etc.).
- 5. Documentation of Insights and Actions:** The output of journey mapping sessions is typically a set of identified pain points and proposed solutions. These might be documented as written recommendations, action steps, or even tracked in a matrix for planning purposes. For example, in a youth-led journey mapping exercise, young people generated recommendations such as introducing earlier trauma-informed therapy, maintaining continuity with at least one supportive adult, and improving communication during transitions. In another project supporting a state health department, journey mapping sessions led to a list of prioritized actions for the state to reduce residential stays and expedite community transitions. In other cases, the journey maps inform a “service array” redesign, identifying what new or expanded services are needed to fill gaps for high-needs youth.

Outcomes and Benefits of Journey Mapping

Real-world applications suggest that journey mapping and case visualization can be catalysts for meaningful system change in child welfare, juvenile justice, and children’s behavioral health:

- **Revealing System Gaps and Barriers:** In the examples above, journey maps uncovered numerous breakdowns, for instance, service disruptions when youth changed placements, long delays for critical services, lack of coordination between agencies, and moments when youth or family voices went unheard. These concrete illustrations help participants move beyond abstract performance measures to see how and why vulnerable children “fall through the cracks.”
- **Centering Lived Experience in Decision-Making:** A hallmark of journey mapping is its emphasis on the perspectives of those directly affected. The method provides a person-centered evaluation of programs. This approach can uncover not only problems but also instances of success and resilience, highlighting what helped a young person at various points. By including participants with lived experience, such as youth and families, in the journey map discussion, agencies create a space for co-learning and empowerment.
- **Informing Policy and Practice Changes:** The goal of journey mapping in these settings is to drive improvements that lead to better outcomes for children and youth. Examples of recommendations we’ve seen through our work include:
 - o **Expanding community- and home-based services to prevent unnecessary removals or placements.** Participants frequently identify that many youth could be maintained safely at home or in family-based care if effective, individualized community services were available.

- o **Strengthening cross-system coordination and information-sharing.** Journey maps illustrate how poor coordination between agencies and systems can create delays or inconsistencies in care. As a result, many initiatives emphasize creating multi-agency teams or better data sharing so that when a child moves from one system to another, services continue seamlessly without interruption.
- o **Accelerating access to services and support.** Journey mapping often highlights critical periods where timely intervention could change a trajectory, for instance, getting mental health services sooner to a youth showing signs of trauma, or providing educational support before a child disengages from school. In mapping sessions, participants have discussed the need for prevention and early intervention by identifying what could have prevented a crisis, a removal, or a prolonged stay.
- o **Reducing reliance on congregate care and institutional responses.** By examining cases of youth who entered residential treatment or juvenile detention, participants can see how often those placements might have been avoided with better upstream supports.

Journey mapping helps agencies develop targeted strategies to improve outcomes for children with complex needs and their families.

How PCG Can Support Journey Mapping Initiatives

Public Consulting Group (PCG) brings hands-on experience using journey mapping and case visualization to strengthen child- and youth-serving systems. Our Child and Family Services experts have partnered with states, counties, and providers to redesign services, reduce out-of-home care, and improve outcomes for children and families. PCG can support agencies to:

- Design and facilitate journey mapping efforts, including case selection, data synthesis, visual development, and structured community partner sessions
- Translate insights into action, connecting journey mapping findings to best practices and evidence-based strategies
- Implement and sustain solutions, from piloting service changes and refining policies to training staff and evaluating impact

By embedding journey mapping into continuous improvement efforts, agencies can stay grounded in the youth's lived experience while driving meaningful, measurable system change. Let PCG help you turn insight into action so children, youth, and families experience more responsive, coordinated, and effective care.

About PCG/the Authors

About Public Consulting Group

Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) is a leading public sector solutions implementation and operations improvement firm that partners with health, education, and human services agencies to improve lives. Founded in 1986, PCG employs approximately 2,000 professionals throughout the U.S.—all committed to delivering solutions that change lives for the better. The firm is a member of a family of companies with experience in all 50 states, in Canada, and in Europe. PCG offers clients a multidisciplinary approach to meet challenges, pursue opportunities, and serve constituents across the public sector. To learn more, visit www.publicconsultinggroup.com.

Sarah Sparks, MBA, is a Senior Advisor and Child and Family Services Subject Matter Expert at Public Consulting Group with over 20 years of experience across children's behavioral health, juvenile justice, and child welfare systems, with a strong focus on improving access to community based and mental health services for children and families. At PCG, Sarah provides consulting, technical assistance, and subject matter expertise on projects supporting service system assessments and the planning and implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), with particular attention to behavioral health and prevention focused services. Previously, as Assistant Deputy Director of Child Welfare Services at the Indiana Department of Child Services, Sarah oversaw community based and community mental health center contracts and managed service coordination for children involved in foster care, adoption, and juvenile justice systems. Sarah brings deep experience in provider and stakeholder collaboration, program development and implementation, and policy and procedure design, grounded in career beginnings as a frontline Family Case Manager working directly with families.

Kacie Schlegel, MPA, is a Senior Consultant in Child and Family Services at Public Consulting Group. Kacie leads high impact, statewide initiatives that strengthen child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health systems. With more than a decade of public sector experience, Kacie has directed complex, multi million dollar projects and delivered comprehensive human services assessments and evaluations across the country. Kacie is recognized for expertise in project and process management, qualitative and quantitative analysis, and large scale stakeholder engagement. Kacie's work has supported transformative system improvements for state agencies and communities nationwide. Before joining PCG, Kacie served in key leadership roles within Marion County's Mental Health Alternative Court and Community Corrections, overseeing teams and advancing innovative approaches to community supervision.

Kristen Gore, MSW, is a Senior Consultant at PCG and specializes in bridging policy and fiscal analysis to support sustainable and equitable system change for human service agencies. Kristen brings over ten years of experience working with child welfare agencies and nonprofit organizations, with expertise in evidence based program implementation, rate setting, continuous quality improvement, and business process analysis. At PCG, Kristen has expanded the scope of work to include reimbursement rate setting and financial inventories across a wide range of human service systems, including child welfare, vocational rehabilitation, early intervention, and substance use programs. Previously, as an Associate Policy Analyst at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, Kristen provided technical assistance to child welfare agencies, led development of Family First-compliant CQI frameworks, analyzed referral and claiming pathways for evidence based programs, and supported implementation of a kinship navigator program. Kristen also developed the nation's first evidence based exploration and cost tool for Title IV E Clearinghouse-rated programs, now widely used by agencies to understand the full costs of EBP implementation.

To learn how to get started with journey mapping, contact us today.



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