

Early Intervention and Preventing Juvenile Delinquency

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Can society prevent juveniles from becoming involved in delinquency and criminal behavior? The juvenile justice system is normally involved in a juvenile's life once the juvenile has committed an act of delinquency or a crime. The juvenile justice system has made progress over the last decade with the quality and quantity of services it provides to juveniles, parents, and society (Elrod & Ryder, 2014). The juvenile justice system is experiencing the lowest youth crime rates in 20 years (Holman & Ziedenberg, 2011). A common perception in the last few years was that the rate and proportion of young juveniles (under age 13) entering the juvenile justice system had increased. (Law Enforcement and Juvenile Crime, 2014). This statement is not true. In 1980, there were an estimated 1,259 arrests of persons ages 10-12 for every 100,000 persons in this age group in the U.S. population. By 2010, this arrest rate had fallen to 784, a decline of 38%. In 1980, 9.4% of all juvenile arrests were of persons under age 13; in 2010, this percentage had decreased to 6.6%. While there has been progress made in the juvenile justice system, this progress does not mean that the system has reached its goal or potential. One of the goals of the juvenile justice system should be to develop a way to prevent juveniles from becoming a part of the system. This paper will address different programs with a goal to reach juveniles at an early age to prevent delinquency.

Early Age

The minimum age the juvenile justice system can become involved in a juvenile's life varies from 6 to 10 years of age depending on the state's laws (Elrod & Ryder, 2014). Most of the time the juvenile justice system involvement with juveniles under the age of 14 is very limited or restricted by law. For example, in Arkansas the juvenile justice system does not get directly involved in the case if the youth is under 10 or hasn't committed a serious crime. For

delinquency type problems in Arkansas a youth 10 to 13 years of age is referred to a program called Families in Need of Services. Youths under the state's minimum age are protected by *doli incapax*, which basically states the youth does not know right from wrong (Elrod & Ryder, 2014).

Child development experts Dr. James Farrow, associate professor of medicine and paediatrics at University of Washington School of Medicine, Dr. William Womack, child psychiatrist at Seattle Children's Hospital and Dr. Jim Owens, medical director for the Washington Department of Juvenile Rehabilitation were asked how a normal child develops. (Farrow, Wommack and Owens, 1994). They said that in general, toddlers and preschoolers learn by being told what to do and being reminded each time. By age 3 or 4, the parent is still their "external conscience". They will start to do something they should not do, see if you are watching, and if you are not, they will do it. Children by age 6 are developing an internal conscience. They have a sense inside of themselves of what they should not do. By age 8 or 9 they grasp the idea that we have to have rules so people can get along. They may be preoccupied with rules of a game and get upset if someone does not follow the rules. At age 12-13 they are transitioning from childhood to added responsibility. There is a shift in early adolescence in the way a child thinks. They begin to understand the consequences of their behavior or actions.

Indicators

According to the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, Institute of Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado Boulder (Behaviors, 2015), there are several factors which, when multiple signs are present and taken in context, may be an indication that help is needed.

These include:

- Social withdrawal

- Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone, feelings of rejection, being picked on or persecuted
- Being a victim of violence
- Low school interest and poor academic performance
- Expression of violence in writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting, intimidating and bullying behaviours
- History of discipline problems
- Past history of violent and aggressive behaviour
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Drug use and alcohol use
- Affiliation with gangs
- Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms
- Serious threats of violence

Consequences

Consequences of such delinquent behaviors may include:

- Bullying-risks for depression and suicide are higher among bullies and victims. Other problems may include loneliness, trouble making friends, lack of success in school and problem behavior such as smoking and drinking.
- Truancy-truant youth are more likely to perform poorly in school and drop out of school as well as use of illegal drugs, commit crimes and become pregnant as a teenager.
- Underage drinking-Youth who drink alcohol are more likely to have school, social, legal and physical problems, and are at higher risk for suicide and homicide.

- Drug abuse-Young people who persistently abuse substances often experience an array of problems, including academic difficulties, health-related problems, poor peer relationships, and arrests.
- Gun violence- More than 3 in 5 youth suicides involve firearms, and more teenage boys in America die from gunfire than from car accidents.

A program that can reach children at an early age will provide a foundation that may prevent delinquent behavior in teenage years through adulthood. It has been proven through the process of developmental criminology that children having behavior problems at a young age are likely to continue on the wrong path unless there is some type of intervention in the child's life (Elrod & Ryder, 2014). Most children express some type of bad behavior at some point but have a mechanism in place to correct this bad behavior. These mechanisms may be parents, family members, teachers, or even members of the community. Usually you can pinpoint someone in the life of a child that has been a caring, stimulating role model for them: good foster parents, a pastor or youth leader, often a teacher or coach. Bad behavior becomes an issue, though, when children do not have some form of corrective mechanism in their lives (Farrow, Womack, and Owens, 1994). This is when those children and their parents need some type of intervention program.

Programs

Intervention programs that show the most promising results in reducing delinquency are ones that focus on early preventive measures. Consistent with public health and child development approaches, many prevention programs target risk and protective factors to

intervene early and prevent (rather than respond to or treat) later problem behavior (Using Prevention That Works, 2015). A program that will work at the earliest possible point with children that have been identified with having behavior problems will have more success in preventing future delinquency problems than when waiting for the child to be corrected by the juvenile justice system in later years. While schools have developed some successful programs for assisting children with problems (such as the Head Start program and DARE), these programs mainly deal with the child and not the whole family. Some of the more promising intervention programs include after school recreation programs and school organization programs (Loeber, Farrington, & Petechuk, 2003). Having the child involved in these activities keeps the child off the streets, gives structure to the child, and provides a positive role model to him or her. Such activities also provide the parents an opportunity to be a part of these same events along with the child.

An effective approach in preventing delinquency would be one that involves the whole family. Wisconsin has a child welfare system that is designed to protect children who are at risk of harm because of their family situation or because of their own behavior or condition. The focus of the child welfare system is on the family, often with an emphasis on the conduct and condition of the parents (Children's Code Chapter 48, 2015). Placer County California has early intervention programs such as Children's System of Care which provides services to help children at risk and their families, and Re-direct, which provides educational services, prevention and intervention programs, and recreational activities that support healthy and positive lifestyles (Early Intervention Programs, 2014). The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency has made a long term investment in evidence-based and model programs with demonstrated success (Using Prevention That Works, 2015). Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development is a

major approach supported by PCCD for assessing which programs are likely to succeed. The Blueprint Programs are the result of studies conducted by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, Boulder (Behaviors, 2015). PCCD has invested millions to support evidence-based Blueprint and Model Programs in Pennsylvania, with impressive results and solid returns on investments. Supported programs address a wide range of risk-related factors, from family conflict to bullying, and from life skills to aggression replacement. PCCD partners include government agencies involved in child welfare and mental health, judges, probation officers, educators and health professionals. Some of the programs include:

- The Incredible Years – a group training program for parents and children ages 3-12 that focuses on emotional problems and parental coaching.
- Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies – The objective of this program is to raise emotional and social skills in order to lower aggression in elementary school children (ages 4-11), while expanding learning.
- Big Brothers Big Sisters – This organization matches mentors with at-risk youth.
- Life Skills Training-Middle school – This program reduced the use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use within the study group of middle school aged children.

Concerns

The cost of a program in relationship to the benefit of the program is always a concern. While few studies have been done on the cost benefit of early intervention programs, studies suggest there is a significant cost saving benefit to the public (Loeber, Farrington, & Petechuk,

2003). Also, evaluating the effects of intervention programs takes years to determine if the program has been successful (Greenwood, 2008). The true benefit of early prevention programs is difficult to measure because it is difficult to determine what path the child would have taken without the intervention. The prevention programs supported by PCCD mentioned earlier have proven results and solid return for their investment. The Incredible Years has reduced anti-social behavior in youth by an estimated 54 percent. In the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies program, sixty percent of children show increased emotional competence, 48 percent show decreased anti-social behavior, and 57 percent show improved concentration and attention. Big Brothers Big Sisters has decreased anti-social behavior 30 percent, the youth earned higher grades, skipped fewer classes and had better relationships with their parents. The Life Skills Training program has resulted in a 50-70 percent reduction in use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana use within the study group. For every \$1 spent on prevention programs, there is a future \$4 in savings. These programs are proven to reduce youth violence, substance abuse, and delinquency. They are proven to improve school attendance and achievement as well as family functioning (Using Prevention That Works, 2015). A 2001 Washington State Institute for Public Policy study found that the total benefits of effective prevention programs were greater than their costs. Sound delinquency-prevention programs can save taxpayers seven to ten dollars for every dollar invested, primarily due to reductions in the amount spent on incarceration (Research Brief, 2012).

Conclusion

The juvenile justice system has made vast improvements in recent years in developing programs to prevent juvenile delinquency and criminal acts. Early age intervention programs may prevent juveniles from becoming a part of the juvenile justice system in later years and

enhance the juvenile chances of success in adulthood. This paper is not stating that all juvenile delinquency can be prevented, but the number of juveniles entering the juvenile justice system can be effectively reduced. The 2013 Uniform Crime Report (Uniform Crime Report, 2013) indicates a 15.3 percent drop from 2012 to 2013, in total arrests for juveniles under 15 years of age. The goal of early age intervention in a child's life is to give families, communities, and the systems the opportunity to intervene and prevent the onset of antisocial behavior and justice system involvement. In essence, intervening early "not only saves young lives from being wasted," but also prevents the onset of adult criminal careers and reduces the likelihood of youth becoming serious and violent offenders. This in turn reduces the burden of crime on society, and saves taxpayers billions of dollars. (Prevention and Early Intervention, 2015)

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