Successful Youth Crime Prevention Programs

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Abstract

This paper will outline and identify strategies for communities to be successful in deterring juvenile delinquency. A comprehensive strategy is explained based on research of programs that address education, prevention and intervention. Some of these programs appear to be promising, although accurate evaluations of these programs can be difficult to review, do to different variables involved within each program.

Introduction/Literature Review

Juvenile delinquency has been a major topic of concern within our society for many years. Our country has been riddled with juvenile crime and there seems no answer in sight. In 2008, one in eight violent crimes were attributed to juveniles (Puzzanchera, 2008). Over the years, and throughout our world, research has consistently found that antisocial and deviant behavior, when emerged early in life, tends to continue into childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (Cohen and Piquero, 2007). Communities throughout America have been faced with the overwhelming question of how to reduce juvenile crime. Trends of solving these problems have scaled across social and political lines from decade to decade, with little or no effect of changing the youth crime rate. Over the last fifty years, the juvenile justice system has waivered back and forth between a therapeutic approach in attempting to rehabilitate youthful offenders to a punitive approach with an emphasis on incarceration to deter juvenile delinquency.

In the 1960s, the national crime rate dramatically increased, and at the same time rehabilitative interventions were interpreted as not working (Lipton, Martison, and Wilks, 1975, as cited in Georgetown, 2010). By the 1990s, the pendulum had swung from treatment to punishment (Howell, 2003, as cited in Georgetown, 2010). There were two compelling images that shaped legislation to enhance punishment for juvenile offenders. First, John Dilulio, a Princeton University professor created and popularized the concept of the juvenile super predator (Bennett, Dilulio, and Walters, 1996 as cited in Georgetown, 2010). Additionally, Dilulio predicted a new wave of juvenile violence would occur in the mid to late 1990s (Bennett et al., 1996 as cited in Georgetown, 2010). The super predator term was coined to raise public attention to a new breed of juvenile offender (Bennett et al., 1996 as cited in Georgetown, 2010). These new breeds of juvenile offenders were described as "kids that have absolutely no respect for human life and no sense of the future….. These are stone-cold predators!" (Bennett et al., 1996, p. 23 as cited in Georgetown, 2010). Dilulio also describes them as

"fatherless, Godless, and jobless" and as "radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including even more teenage boys who murder, assault, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious disorders" (Bennett et al., 1996, p. 27 as cited in Georgetown, 2010). However, researchers have disputed the super predator myth and doomsday predictions (Georgetown, 2010). These researchers proclaim the new wave super predator did not materialize nor did juvenile violent crimes rise, despite the fact there was a sharp increase in adolescent and young adult homicide in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Cook and Laub, 1998 as cited in Georgetown, 2010).

Recently, over the last decade, strategies have waivered from pro-active juvenile programs to reactive get-tough legislation. Some legislators are still taking a get-tough approach leading more and more youths to be charged and sentenced as adults. The big dilemma we face today is whether to be proactive and address the issues of juvenile crime before it happens, or to be solely reactive and use harsh and severe punishment to deter it. There are two primary questions relating to juvenile delinquency we have to answer as a society. First, are we able to prevent our youth from turning to and embracing a life of crime? If so, what programs are successful and which ones are not.

America cannot simply think we can build our way out of this problem. To solely embrace a theory of getting tough on juvenile crime by enacting tough sanctions and incarcerating juvenile offenders has proven not to work. Clearly, the United States has realized treating juveniles the same as adults has very little benefit in promoting their social behavior and does little in deterring them from committing future crimes (Wilson, 1999). We as a society have to develop viable crime prevention and intervention programs that curb the upward trend of juvenile crime before it happens. Nationally, we are investing far more resources in building and maintaining prisons than we are in primary prevention programs (Elliot, 1998). The typical "high risk" youth with six or more police contacts over their lifetime (who collectively commit about 50% of all crimes) imposes between $4.2 and $7.2 million in costs. Discounted to present value as of age 14, costs total $3.2 to $5.8 million. The bulk of these costs ($2.7 million to $4.8 million) are imposed by crimes committed by offenders, while an additional $390,000 to $580,000 is estimated to be the value of lost productivity due to dropping out of high school. The cost of a heavy drug abuser is estimated to range between $840,000 and $1.1 million, although $700,000 of that amount is the cost of crime committed by heavy drug abusers (Vanderbilt University, 2007). We have put more emphasis on reacting to violent offenders after the fact and investing in prisons to remove them from our communities than preventing our children from becoming violent offenders in the first place and retaining them in our communities as responsible, productive citizens (Elliot, 1998). America has both the knowledge and the money needed to substantially reduce adolescent crimes and youth violence (Mendel, 2002). Better yet we can likely achieve this goal at a cost no greater than what we will spend if current juvenile justice policies and programs remain in place (Mendel, 2002). In fact, according to the Rose Institute, for every dollar invested in after school programs, we will actually save the taxpayers approximately three dollars (Rose, 2002). Another study, conducted by Washington State Institute for Public Policy, showed that the typical effective program yields more than eight dollars for every dollar spent (Greenwood, 2010 as cited in Georgetown, 2010). So, then we do have a choice, but we have to

thoroughly evaluate the effectiveness of each program and ensure they are implemented correctly.

The consistency and success of current programs needs to be fairly evaluated. Most single component programs, whether school based (e.g., DARE program), community based (e.g., neighborhood watch, mentoring programs) or institutional based (e.g., diversion, boot camps, shock/scare programs), have had, at best, mixed results, or, in some cases, even harmful results on our youth (Elliot, 1998). Therefore, it is important and essential that the programs in place do not cause more harm to our youths. Many youth programs are treating the symptoms of the disease as opposed to finding a cure. It is essential to establish best practices in evaluating youth violence and delinquency prevention programs to ensure they are effective (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

Some experts believe youth crime and violence can be substantially reduced by eliminating programs that are not effective and reallocating those funds to successful programs (Mendel 2002, Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). In order to do this, all youth programs will have to be fairly evaluated. However, this can be problematic as inconsistencies are prevalent in utilizing uniform applied scientific studies to evaluate each program (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Experts suggest using meta-analysis, the synthesis of credible evidence about the effects of a type of program, and review evaluation research to identify general strategies that characterize effective programs (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999, Georgetown 2010). As with any review process, meta-analysis and review evaluation research have their limitations as well. The success of one program over another can be influenced by a number of outside variables, thus this report suggests categorizing youth programs into three categories: Model, Promising, or Does Not Work (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

Successful youth crime prevention programs should do exactly what they say, prevent youth crime. Identifying specific programs that work requires a clear set of standards for judging effectiveness (Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). A multi-prong approach should be used in dealing with juvenile crime. This approach should entail educational programs, mentoring programs and enforcement, as well as parental coaching. School aftercare programs, such as the Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, Head Start, R-Club and PAL have shown promising results. These programs coupled with counseling and coaching within the youth's home, tend to have more successful outcomes.

Methods

The population of interest for this study consisted of different stakeholders who are actively involved in the juvenile justice system as either a law enforcement agency, governmental agency dealing with juvenile welfare and interventions to delinquency, as well as private providers who implement and promote prevention programs for juveniles. The individuals contacted from these agencies and providers are considered to be practitioners in the prevention and intervention for at risk children.

Law enforcement agencies throughout the state were surveyed, to include state, county and municipal agencies. The following law enforcement agencies were contacted to complete the study:

1. Altamonte Springs Police Department
2. Brevard County Sheriff's Office
3. Escambia County Sheriff's Office
4. Florida Department of Law Enforcement
5. FSU Police Department
6. Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office
7. Pinellas County Sheriff's Office
8. Sumter County State Attorney's Office
9. Lakeland Police Department
10. Martin County Sheriff's Office
11. Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office
12. Orange County Sheriff's Office
13. Panama City Police Department
14. Pasco County Sheriff's Office
15. Pinellas Park Police Department
16. Polk County Sheriff's Office
17. Santa Rosa County Sheriff's Office
18. Tallahassee Police Department
19. Pinellas County School's Police

Several governmental entities within Pinellas County were part of the study. One of the governmental agencies, the Pinellas County Juvenile Welfare Board, is a taxing authority which helps fund Pinellas County not-for-profit organizations, such as community Family Neighborhood Centers, as well as governmental agencies. These organizations and agencies deal with juvenile issues. Another governmental agency contacted was the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. Although this is a statewide agency, the sample was limited to those employees who work within Pinellas County.

Private providers were also sampled and surveys were sent out to them. Currently, there are eight (8) Family Neighborhood Centers throughout Pinellas County, who provide resources and programs to communities. Another private organization included in the study is, Live Free, a substance abuse coalition concerning Pinellas County youths.

The measuring tool for this study was a survey consisting of seven (7) questions emailed to the aforementioned study groups. The department heads and representatives were asked to forward the email to personnel who were either subject matter experts or practitioners. This study surveyed different organizational cultures found within our society from law enforcement, government agencies, and private providers. This study was limited in capturing the number of people who received the survey, as emails were sent to organizational heads or representatives who forwarded the survey to personnel and colleagues. Therefore, an exact count of those who received a survey is impossible to obtain. However, the measuring tool was able to capture the number of those who participated in the study. Another limitation of the study was the survey did not identify the different organizations sampled, and thus the study was unable to capture the response from those different organizations.

Results

There were 165 surveys completed and the results of those surveys are found in Appendix 1. The seven (7) questions asked in the survey ranged from yes and no type of questions to rating scales. All questions were answered by the individuals taking the survey, with the exception of questions one (1) with one person skipping the question, question two (2) with one person skipping the question, and question four (4) with two people skipping the question.

The results of the study affirmed that seventy-one percent (71%) of the individuals surveyed indicated their agencies have some type of youth crime prevention programs, and sixty percent (60%) of them felt those programs were efficient in reducing juvenile crime. Ninety percent (90%) describe juvenile crime as being either very important (65%) or important (25%) to their agency. When asked what they felt is more effective in reducing juvenile crime, thirty-five percent (35%) answered youth crime prevention programs, nine percent (9%) supported more enforcement of juvenile laws, while fifty-six percent (56%) felt they were equally effective.

Participants were asked to rate different strategies on a scale of one (1) to five (5), with five (5) being the highest, on their value of crime prevention programs or practices. Eighty-nine percent (89%) rated after school programs as either a four (4) or five (5) on their value as an effective crime prevention tool. The number was the same for parent coaching for high risk families, with eighty-nine percent (89%) giving a value rating of a four (4) or five (5). However, forty percent (40%) of these same participants gave a value rating one (1) or two (2) when asked if prosecuting juveniles as adults was more effective. Fifty-six percent (56%) of this same sample also gave a value rating of either a one (1) or two (2) if building more juvenile detention centers was an effective crime prevention tool.

Another question asked of participants was if and where they thought more resources should be dedicated. Eighty-four percent (84%) indicated youth crime prevention, ten percent (10%) for more law enforcement, and six percent (6%) for more juvenile detention facilities.

Finally, when asked what strategies are most effective in reducing juvenile crime, eighty-one percent (81%) felt providing more after-school care and educational child care programming are more effective in reducing juvenile crime, while seven percent (7%) believed prosecuting juveniles as adults, and nine percent (9%) indicating more police officers investigating juvenile crime were more effective.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate the importance of prevention programs to deter juvenile delinquency. Prevention and intervention programs are essential in fighting crime and careful consideration should be given for more funding. The survey results and research closely paralleled each other and showed both criminologists and practitioners agree on the importance of prevention and intervention programs. A common-sense approach is needed in dealing with and deterring juvenile delinquency. The research has shown it is fiscally advantageous to fund front end programs. The

outcomes of these front end or prevention programs are often more positive than reacting to deviant behavior that has already occurred.

Various problem behaviors are caused by common risk factors. These risk factors include delinquency, substance abuse, and mental health problems (Howell, 2003). Some domains for risk factors include the youth's school, family, peer group, individual, and community (Howell, 2003). Another factor to be considered is the average age for an individual's logical reasoning and psychosocial maturity to connect is around twenty-five years of age (Howell, 2003). Since there are so many variables that contribute to delinquency, it is essential that interception points are established, and that is where prevention and intervention programs are essential. Studies have shown there are indicators, or windows of opportunities, which occur throughout an at-risk child's life. The typical cycle for a high-risk child will start when he/she is between three- and five-years of age with behavior problems. When the child reaches six to nine years old, they will have had a school failure. By the time they reach twelve years old, an act of delinquency has occurred. As the youth continues to age, usually by fifteen years old, they have joined a gang. Serious and violent delinquency will have occurred by eighteen years of age (Howell, 2003).

Therefore, a comprehensive strategy should be utilized in combating juvenile delinquency. A multi-prong approach of education, prevention, intervention, parental coaching and family counseling, as well as enforcement are essential elements needed if communities are going to be successful. Communities need to optimize the windows of opportunities by effectively intercepting a child at certain crisis points. A crisis can be as simple as poor behavior in school or as serious as a physical arrest by a law enforcement officer. We need to capitalize on these crises when they occur, by implementing evidence-based practices in systems of care and proven programs.

There has been debate about the effectiveness of several nationally known educational programs such as DARE. The research is convincing that single component educational programs have at best minimal success in deterring juvenile delinquency. In fact, some studies suggest they have no impact at all (Elliot, 1998). These programs may have limited success in deterring crime, but they do educate children on specific social issues that involve public safety. However, educational programs coupled with prevention programs have shown promising results. Therefore, it is essential to include educational programs as part of a multi-component strategy that continues to compliment prevention programs.

Prevention programs or community-based programs tend to address potential at risk youths before they commit crimes. Research has been unable to consistently evaluate most prevention programs. However, prevention programs that offer longer duration within the program and frequent dosages are far more successful than programs that offer less. Prevention programs that address child welfare, delinquency, and education have had the best results. Mentoring programs like the Police Athletic League (PAL), Boy and Girls Club, as well as Big Brothers and Big Sisters have shown promising results in deterring juvenile delinquency. Programs that engage a child for at least eighteen months have had tremendous results. Since most prevention programs are voluntary, it is essential to continually keep children engaged. After school care programs are another example of having promising results. Again, PAL and other like

programs begin when schools are out of secession and when juvenile crime is likely to occur.

Intervention programs and family counseling are another key ingredient in deterring juvenile delinquency. Many intervention programs are designed after the child has been arrested. Although diversion programs have had mixed results, they are essential in being an interception point for deterring deviant behavior. Diversion programs are typically defined as an intervention program that allows first time offenders the opportunity not to be adjudicated and have no record of a criminal charge. The vast majority of juveniles in a diversion program will not re-offend and will self correct with or without intervention. However, for the percent that will re-offend it is essential to get them involved in systems of care that can address not only the individual issues of the child, but also the dynamics of the family. This is when therapeutic measures are essential for both child and family. Parental coaching is also necessary in supporting the therapeutic approach and aiding families in dealing with delinquency. Graduated sanctions are becoming more and more popular. Graduated sanctions tend to deal with moderate to high risk kids and placing them in the appropriate program to try and ensure success (Georgetown, 2010). These programs range from long term residential placements to day treatment programs within the community. Again, family counseling is essential for success, coupled with re-entry programs for juveniles leaving residential placements.

Enforcement can be used as both a tool to intercept youth and place them in diversion and intervention programs or as means to protect other citizens from becoming victimized. Enforcement is a vital component in combating juvenile delinquency; however, for success to occur it needs to be used judicially. Another important component to enforcement is ensuring the safety of the public. It is the government's duty and responsibility to protect its citizens from danger. There comes a point where it is necessary to charge youthful offenders as adults. This should solely be used on the most heinous of offenders who pose a risk to our citizens.

In order for communities to be successful they must learn to embrace core principles of the comprehensive strategies. These principles consist of strengthening the family in its primary responsibility, continue to support schools, religious institutions, and community organizations, promote delinquency prevention as the most cost-effective approach, intervene immediately and effectively when delinquent behavior occurs, and identify and control the small group of serious, violent and chronic juvenile offenders (Georgetown, 2010). The question is not if America has the knowledge, resources and ability to effectively reduce delinquent behavior in our youth before it becomes a pattern of life and a difficult cycle to break. The real question is if we have the wisdom to put these strategies into practice.

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Appendix A – Survey Questions and Results

1. Does your agency have youth crime prevention programs?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Yes		117	71%
No		43	26%
Unknown		4	2%
	Total Respondents	164	
	(skipped this question)	1	
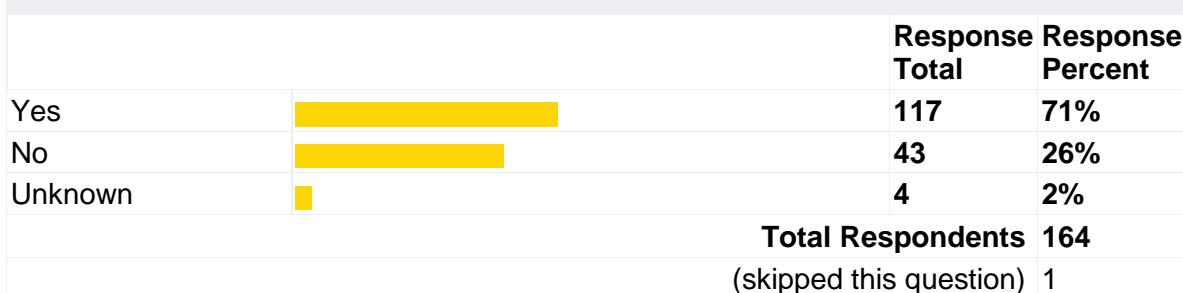
2. Do you think these programs are efficient in reducing juvenile crime?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Yes		99	60%
No		25	15%
Unknown		40	24%
	Total Respondents	164	
	(skipped this question)	1	
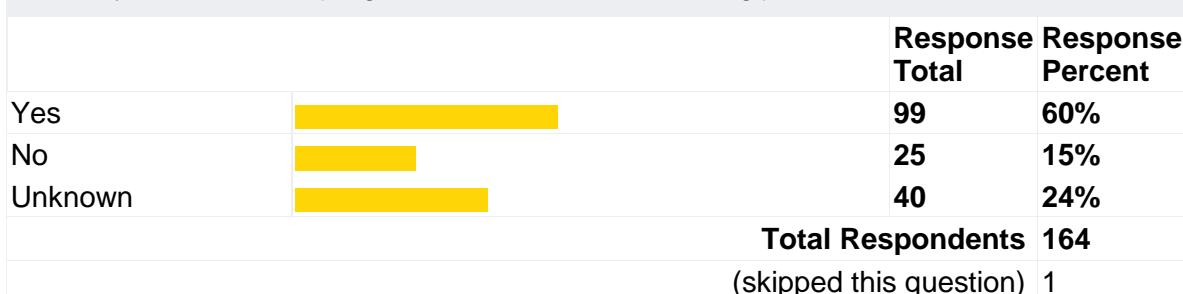
3. What level of importance is juvenile crime to your agency?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Very Important		108	65%
Important		41	25%
Unknown		13	8%
Unimportant		2	1%
Very Unimportant		1	1%
	Total Respondents	165	
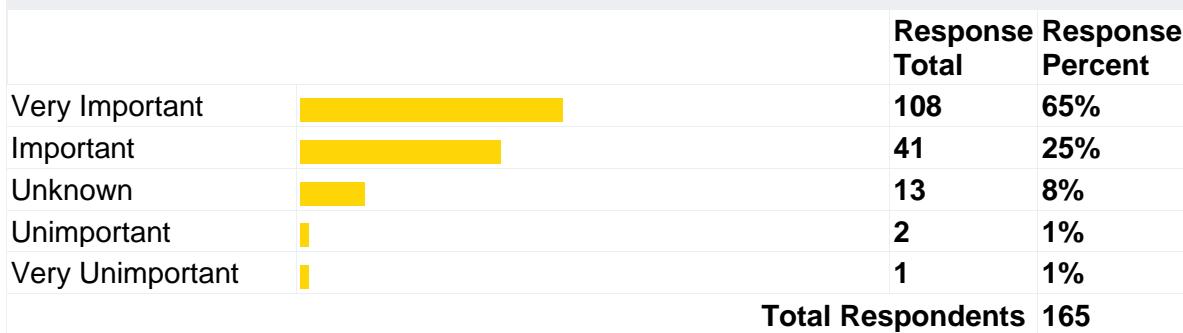
4. What do you feel is more effective in reducing juvenile crime?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Youth crime prevention programs		57	35%
More enforcement of juvenile laws		15	9%
They are equally effective		91	56%
	Total Respondents	163	
	(skipped this question)	2	

5. Please rate the following strategies on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest) on their value as a crime prevention tool.

	1	2	3	4	5	Response Total
After school and summer youth programs	1% (1)	2% (3)	8% (14)	22% (36)	67% (111)	165
Parent coaching for high risk families	1% (1)	4% (7)	7% (11)	22% (36)	67% (110)	165
Head Start or similar early childhood education	6% (10)	7% (12)	25% (41)	24% (40)	38% (62)	165
Prosecuting more juveniles as adults	18% (29)	22% (36)	30% (49)	17% (28)	14% (23)	165
Building more juvenile detention centers	27% (44)	29% (48)	25% (41)	13% (21)	7% (11)	165
Metal detectors in schools	15% (24)	20% (33)	30% (50)	19% (31)	16% (27)	165
				Total Respondents	990	

6. Where do you think more resources should be dedicated in reducing juvenile crime?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Youth crime prevention programs		**138**	**84%**
More law enforcement officers		**17**	**10%**
More juvenile detention facilities		**10**	**6%**
		Total Respondents	**165**

7. Which of these strategies do you believe are the most effective for reducing juvenile crime?

		Response Total	Response Percent
Providing more after-school and educational child care programming		**133**	**81%**
Prosecute more juveniles as adults		**12**	**7%**
Hire more police officers to investigate juvenile crime		**15**	**9%**
Install more metal detectors and surveillance cameras in schools		**5**	**3%**
		Total Respondents	**165**