

Best Practices  
in  
Juvenile Justice Reform

The Case for Evidence-Based Reform

Over the past decade, researchers have identified intervention strategies and program models that reduce delinquency and promote pro-social development. However, while we have more than ten years of solid research about evidence-based programs, only about 5 *percent* of eligible youth participate in these programs.

The result is a waste of human capital and money. First, delinquency increases the risk of drug use and dependency, school drop-out, incarceration, injury, early pregnancy, and adult criminality. Second, since most adult criminals begin their criminal careers as juveniles, preventing delinquency prevents the onset of adult criminal careers and thus reduces the financial and emotional burden of crime on victims and on society.

Put bluntly—it is penny-wise and pound-foolish not to implement evidence-based programs. While it costs states billions of dollars a year to arrest, prosecute, incarcerate, and treat offenders, investing in successful delinquency-prevention programs can save taxpayers seven to ten dollars for every dollar invested, primarily in the form of reduced spending on prisons.

Why Don't States Implement Evidence-Based Treatment Programs?

First, agencies rarely invest in developing data systems that permit them to monitor which programs are working and which are not; therefore, most states' juvenile justice systems have no idea if they are spending their money wisely. Second, many policymakers are often unaware of research evidence on programs and policies that are not only effective in reducing juvenile delinquency but also cost-effective. Third, often what works is at odds with “get tough on crime” public sentiment, and some policy makers are unwilling to choose evidence over politics. The purpose of this brief is to educate policymakers about model programs that deserve consideration.

A few states such as Florida, Pennsylvania, and Washington have begun to challenge the status quo and implement evidence-based programs. The challenge is to make these reforms the rule and not the exception.

Model Programs

In the past ten years, researchers have identified a dozen “proven” delinquency-prevention programs. Another twenty to thirty “promising” programs are still being tested. The most successful programs are those that prevent youth from engaging in delinquent behaviors in the first place, divert first-time offenders from further encounters

with the justice system, and emphasize family interactions.<sup>1</sup> The programs discussed below are drawn from a longer article on this topic, “Prevention and Intervention Programs for Juvenile Offenders,” by Peter Greenwood in *The Future of Children* volume Juvenile Justice.

Before we look at what works, it is important to note what does *not*: DARE, Scared Straight, Boot Camps, and transferring juveniles to adult courts are all strategies that have been proven ineffective at best, increasing the risks of future delinquency at worst. Unfortunately, these have been the darlings of policymakers and were the programs of choice when delinquency rates soared in the 1990s.

### Prevention Programs

Primary prevention programs target the general population of youth and include efforts to prevent smoking, drug use, and teen pregnancy—and can be as far removed from juvenile delinquency as home visiting programs or quality preschool. Secondary prevention programs target youth at elevated risk for a particular outcome, such as delinquency or violence.

Programs to pay attention to are:

- The David Olds Nurse Home Visitation Program: Trains and supervises nurses who pay approximately 20 home visits to young, poor, first-time mothers.
  - Significant reduction of child abuse and neglect
  - Lower arrest rates for children and mothers
  - Decrease in welfare receipt
  - Decrease in subsequent births
  
- High-quality preschool, modeled after the Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan: Emphasizes collaborative planning and problem solving among teachers, parents, students, community members, and administrators; small class sizes; continuing education for teachers; integrated curriculum; and student involvement in rule-setting and enforcement.
  - Prevention of later drug use, delinquency, anti-social behavior, and early school drop-out
  
- Bullying Prevention Program, Bergen, Norway: Designed for elementary and middle school students, the program revolves around parents and teachers setting and enforcing clear anti-bullying rules.
  - Decline in bullying by 50 percent two years after implementation
  - Decrease in other forms of delinquency

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<sup>1</sup> For a full list of programs that have been evaluated for delinquency prevention and intervention, go to [http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr\\_doc/18\\_2\\_09-Greenwood.pdf](http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/18_2_09-Greenwood.pdf), Table 2.

- Life Skills Training: Classroom program to prevent substance abuse.
  - Reduction in the use of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana
- Project STATUS: School-based program aimed at junior and senior high school students to reduce delinquency and drop-out.
  - Less delinquency
  - Less drug use
  - Less negative peer pressure
  - Better student to student bonding
  - Greater academic success
- The School Transitional Environmental Program (STEP): STEP groups students who are at greatest risk for behavioral problems in homerooms where the teachers take on the additional role of guidance counselor.
  - Decreased absenteeism and drop-out
  - Increased academic success
  - More positive feelings about school

### Community-Based Interventions

Juvenile justice community-based programs vary widely, from one-hour monthly meetings to intensive family therapy and services. Programs range from diverting youth out of the juvenile justice system to serving youth on probation to working with youth on parole after a residential placement.

The most effective community-based interventions are those that emphasize family interactions and build the skills of a juvenile's parents or other caretaker. The least effective are those that focus on the individual and/or punish and try to "scare straight" youth.

Programs to pay attention to include:

- Functional Family Therapy (FFT): Aimed at 11- to 18-year-olds who are having problems with delinquency, substance abuse, or violence, this program focuses on improving family dynamics. Specifically, individual therapists work with a family in the home to improve problem solving, increase emotional connections, and strengthen parents' abilities to provide structure, guidance, and limits for their children.
  - Effectiveness proven and well-documented over 25 years
  - Works for a wide range of problem youth

- Effective therapists range from social work and counseling professionals to paraprofessionals and trainees
- Easily transportable program
- Multisystemic Therapy (MST): A family-based program designed to help parents deal effectively with the behavioral problems of their adolescents, MST provides 50 hours of counseling with master-level professionals and round-the-clock crisis intervention over a four-month period.
  - Reduces re-arrests
  - Reduces out of home placements for problem youth in the juvenile justice and social services systems
- Intensive Protective Supervision (IPS): IPS is an alternative to the traditional parole officer model. Targeted at non-serious status offenders, this program provides case managers who interact with the teen and his or her family by making frequent home visits, offering support for parents, developing individual service plans, and arranging for services as needed.
  - Youth less likely to be referred to juvenile court during supervision and during the one year following
  - More likely to have completed treatment

### Institutional Settings

Institutions for juvenile offenders range from group homes to camps to residential or correction facilities. Research shows that there are three general strategies that improve effectiveness of out-of-home placements: 1) focusing on risk factors that can be changed, such as low skills, substance abuse, defiant behavior, and friendships with delinquent peers; 2) tailoring each program to the clients' needs; and 3) focusing interventions on higher-risk youth.

Successful programs share common characteristics: 1) they are implemented with integrity; 2) they offer longer periods of intervention; 3) they are older, more well-established programs; and 4) they focus on treatment of mental health issues versus punishment.

Specific programs that have been noted by researchers include:

- Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT): Focuses mainly on identifying life goals and developing skills to help them achieve them.
- Aggressive Replacement Training: Identifies risk factors that can be changed, focusing on anger control, behavioral/pro-social skills, and moral reasoning.

- Family Integrated Transitions (FIT): Designed for youth with mental health or substance abuse problems, this program uses behavioral and other therapies to help institutionalized youth reintegrate in the community.
- Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC): MTFC is modeled after the foster care system, except that the MTFC foster parents are paid higher rates and expected to do more—be at home when the teen is at home, complete training that teaches behavior management, attend weekly group meetings, and engage in daily supportive telephone calls with MTFC staff. Aimed at delinquent youth who would otherwise qualify for group home placement, evaluations show that while MTFC costs more than traditional group homes, it is more effective in reducing arrest rates so produces savings to the criminal justice system and to potential victims.

### Where Do We Start?

A state that is committed to reforming its juvenile justice system and putting in place evidence-based programming needs to take the following steps:

First, the state needs to complete an audit of existing programming to see if there are any gaps in the service and quality of its existing programs. A service gap indicates a lack of suitable treatment options for a particular type of youth; a quality gap indicates a lack of sufficient evidence-based programming.

Second, the state needs to identify successful programs to implement—either by following “Blueprints” recommendations and replacing existing programs with the Blueprints proven models, or by using meta-analysis findings as a guide to improve existing programs.<sup>2</sup>

If a jurisdiction opts to replace existing programs with proven models, it needs to:

- Select the program model that best fits the clients to be served and the capabilities of the agency and staff that will provide the service
- Arrange for training
- Hire or designate appropriate staff
- “Sell” the program to potential customers and agency personnel

If a jurisdiction opts to improve the effectiveness of its existing programs, it needs to:

- Identify the programs to be assessed
- Identify key elements of each program and compare them with the “best practice” standards identified by meta-analysis

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete discussion of ways to evaluate programs such as “Blueprints” and meta-analysis, see [http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr\\_doc/18\\_2\\_09-Greenwood.pdf](http://www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/18_2_09-Greenwood.pdf), pages 188–192.

- Determine how effective the program is, using established social science measurements and adding needed elements to transform it into an evidence-based program
- Adopt and implement a validated risk assessment instrument (available from a number of vendors) that can provide a basis for assigning youth to specific programs, for comparing the effectiveness of alternative programs in treating similar youth, and for measuring the progress of individual youth
- Develop a way to assign youths to the most appropriate program, taking into account all the relative costs and differences in effectiveness of each program
- Monitor the programs once they have been implemented to ensure that they follow the program model as intended

### Conclusion

Reform of the juvenile justice system makes sense from all perspectives. Many states are poised to begin this work today, if for no other reason than to save taxpayer money being spent on building prisons. We need to create a system that decreases the number of youth becoming delinquent in the first place and prevents those youth who do stray from becoming adult criminals.