

Prevention Programs That Work For Youth: Violence Prevention

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Introduction

The demand for effective violence and crime prevention programs has never been greater. As our communities struggle to deal with the violence epidemic of the 1990s in which the juvenile homicide rate doubled and juvenile arrests for serious violent crime increased 50 percent in less than a decade, the search for some effective way to prevent this scourge on our children has become a national priority. This is evidenced by the dramatic shift in the public's perception about the seriousness of violence. In 1982, only three percent of adults identified crime and violence as the most important problem facing this country; by August of 1994, over half thought crime and violence was the nation's most important problem. Throughout the 90s violence has been viewed as a more serious problem than the high cost of living, unemployment, poverty and homelessness, and health care. Again, in 1994, violence (together with a lack of discipline) was identified as the "biggest problem" facing the nation's public schools. While we have seen a slight decline in the juvenile homicide rate and arrests for violent offenses in last few years, these rates remain far above those of earlier decades. Dealing with youth violence remains a national priority.

The critical question is *how will we as a society deal with this violence problem?* At both the national and state levels, there have been five major policy and program initiatives introduced as violence prevention or control strategies in the 1990s: (1) the use of judicial waivers, transferring violent juvenile offenders as young as age 10 into the adult justice system for trial, sentencing and adult prison terms; (2) legislating new gun control policies (e.g., the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, 1993); (3) the creation of "boot camps" or shock incarceration programs for young offenders, to instill discipline and respect for authority; (4) longer sentences for serious violent crimes, exemplified by "three strikes" legislation; and 5) community policing initiatives to create police-community partnerships aimed at more efficient community problem solving in dealing with crime, violence and drug abuse.

Three of these initiatives are purely reactive—they involve ways of responding to violent acts after they occur; a control strategy rather than a prevention strategy. Two are more preventive, attempting to avoid the initial occurrence of violent behavior. The primary justification for judicial waivers, increased sanctions and boot camps is a "just desserts" philosophy, that youthful offenders deserve to be punished more severely for serious violent offenses; or a deterrence/rational choice rationale which asserts that increasing the cost of violence will reduce the likelihood of its use. But there is no research evidence to suggest any of these strategies will have any increased deterrent effect over processing these juveniles in the juvenile justice system and traditional correctional settings for juveniles. In fact, the available evidence suggests that the use of waivers and adult prisons results in longer processing time and longer pre-trial detention, racial bias in the decision about which youth to transfer into the adult system, a lower probability of treatment or remediation while in custody, and *an increased risk of repeated offending when released*. Three-strike laws are very expensive to implement, appear to increase the risk of serious violence on the third arrest, and are less cost effective than primary prevention programs. The research evidence on the effectiveness of community policing and gun control legislation is very limited and inconclusive. We have yet to determine if these strategies work.

There are some genuine prevention efforts sponsored by federal and state governments, by private foundations, and by private business. At the federal level, the major initiative involves the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (1994). This act provided \$630 million in federal grants during 1995 to the states to implement violence (and drug) prevention programs in and around schools. State Departments of Education and local school districts are currently developing guidelines and searching for violence prevention programs that have been demonstrated to be effective. But there is no readily available compendium of effective programs described in sufficient detail to allow for an informed judgement about their relevance and cost for a specific local application. Under pressure to do something, schools have implemented whatever programs were readily available. As a result, most of the violence prevention programs currently being employed in the schools, e.g., conflict resolution curriculum, peer mediation, metal detectors, locker searches and sweeps have either not been evaluated or evaluations have failed to establish any significant, sustained deterrent effects. In sum, we are employing a set of programs and policies that have no documented effects on violence.

Nationally, we are investing far more resources in building and maintaining prisons than we are in primary prevention programs. 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. At a practical level, if we have no effective prevention strategies or programs—there *is* no choice.

This is the central issue facing the nation in 1998; *can we prevent the onset of serious violent behavior?* If we cannot, then we have no choice but to build, fill and maintain more prisons. If we know how to prevent the onset of violence, can we mount an efficient and effective prevention initiative? There is, in fact, considerable public support for violence prevention programming for our children and adolescents. *How can we develop, promote, and sustain a comprehensive violence prevention initiative in this country?*

Violence Prevention Programs—What Works?

We do have an option. We have achieved a major breakthrough in our understanding of the causes of youth violence and the development of effective programs and strategies to prevent violence. There is now a general consensus within the research community about the specific individual dispositions, contextual (family, school, neighborhood and peer group) conditions and interaction dynamics which lead youth into and out of involvement in violent behavior. A new generation of violence and crime prevention programs has emerged, based upon this new body of research. While careful, scientific evaluations of these (and earlier) programs are still quite limited, our research has succeeded in demonstrating the effectiveness of selected programs in preventing or deterring crime and violence. Our evaluations have also demonstrated that some very popular programs are *ineffective* and that a few are actually *harmful*, putting youth at an even greater risk of involvement in serious violent behavior. Still, most programs remain unevaluated and we simply do not know if they are effective or not. Given that some programs have proved to be harmful, even when well intentioned, there is some risk in continuing to fund unproven programs. Evaluation is often the only

practical mechanism for insuring that our interventions are actually serving the best interests of our children.

An Overview of Types of Prevention Programs that Work

During the past five years over a dozen scholarly reviews of delinquency, drug and violence prevention programs have been published, each recommending programs the authors claim have been demonstrated to work. In most cases these recommendations were based on evidence of some statistically significant prevention or deterrent effect in an experimental or quasi-experimental study, which is, by itself, a rather low threshold of scientific evidence. The recommended approaches to violence prevention range from a focus on individuals, to families, schools and neighborhoods or communities. They include both primary prevention programs and interventions with youth who have already been involved in violent behavior; they include programs and policies that are designed to change individuals, social environments, or both.

In general, individual-level approaches that modify or enhance personal and social competencies like problem-solving skills, moral reasoning, decision making skills, self-control and academic or job-related skills are effective. While individual counseling is not a particularly effective intervention for delinquent offenders generally, there is some evidence that it may work with more serious offenders. In contrast, supportive or insight-oriented programs like psychotherapy and intensive casework approaches are generally ineffective.

The evidence for programs that focus on family relationships and functioning, particularly on family management and parenting practices, is quite strong and consistent. The most successful family interventions involve programs with multiple components that address not only the individual at risk but the internal dynamics of the family and the family's involvement in the neighborhood, school and with their children's peer groups. These are both individual and context change programs. In addition, pre-school programs that involve long-term frequent home visitation, have also proved effective; head-start type programs that do not include home visitation have achieved mixed results. Some nurse home visitation programs with at-risk mothers have demonstrated deterrent effects on violence, but others have not.

There are mixed findings for most school-based programs, both those involving individual change programs and those involving attempts to change the social climate or organization. As noted above, programs designed to enhance individual competencies have generally demonstrated positive effects and these are often school-based programs. Peer mediation, peer counseling and conflict resolution training programs have only limited evaluations, but none appears to be effective, particularly when they are implemented as single-component programs. They appear more promising when implemented as part of a more comprehensive, multi-contextual intervention. Law Related Education, midnight basketball and other recreational programs have mixed or inconclusive findings—we don't know if these programs work or not. There are some school-based alcohol and drug prevention programs that have demonstrated effectiveness in preventing the use of these substances, and some that have been extensively evaluated and found to be ineffective (e.g., DARE). The drug prevention programs typically focus on problem solving, competence building and

resistance training, and these programs have also proved to be effective for violence and crime prevention. Finally, prevention programs that focus on building the school's capacity to initiate and sustain innovations and programs aiming to clarify, establish and enforce school rules and general social norms have some demonstrated effectiveness.

Few community-based interventions have been evaluated. Some that appear to have deterrent effects include the use of directed police patrols in community "hot spots," mentoring programs, and gang violence prevention programs. Neighborhood watch programs have been evaluated and are ineffective. Work programs have generated mixed results. Short-term or summer work programs are not effective violence or crime prevention programs, whereas there is some preliminary evidence that job corp may be an effective violence prevention program.

There is little evidence that traditional institutional programs such as diversion, boot camps, wilderness/stress programs, shock/scare programs, positive peer culture or guided group interaction programs are effective. In some cases, e.g., diversion and boot camps, these programs are less expensive than alternatives and may have a favorable cost-benefit effect compared to alternatives. There is also some evidence that positive peer culture has a positive effect on institutional adjustment, but this effect does not carry over to other settings once youth leave the institution, and in some cases has had negative effects. Shock/scare type programs have also demonstrated harmful effects, increasing the risk of violent or delinquent behavior.

There are four important observations that must be made about the above findings. First, for the most part, community programs that proved effective were equally effective when located in a correctional institutional setting. The location of these programs did not appear to be a critical factor. Second, the most effective programs were those that were comprehensive, e.g., multi-component, multi-context interventions. Third, relatively few of these studies involved a long-term follow-up of participants after leaving the program or intervention. When this was done, it was often found that these effects were not sustained once youth left the program or intervention and returned to their families, old friends and neighborhoods. This was particularly true for residential and institutional programs. These programs worked while they were being implemented and the program could manipulate the environmental conditions and reward appropriate behavior and punish inappropriate behavior. In general, however, the sustainability of these deterrent effects is problematic. Fourth, the deterrent effects were generally modest, involving reductions in the onset or repeated offending in the 10-20 percent range, e.g., reducing the risk of recidivism from 50 percent to 30 or 40 percent.

Model Violence Prevention Programs

In light of the above, there is some danger of *overstating* the claim that we have developed effective violence prevention programs and interventions. The scientific evidence in support of particular programs recommended in most scholarly reviews involves a relatively low threshold of scientific evidence, and in many cases is insufficient to justify promoting these programs as successful prevention programs to be implemented on a national scale. The standard for selecting model programs for a national violence prevention initiative must be very high, one that guarantees a low risk of failure and will generate a high level of public confidence. I propose a minimum set of three

scientific standards for selecting model programs: 1) demonstrated deterrent effects in a strong, scientifically sound, experimental study, 2) replication of this deterrent effect on multiple sites, and 3) evidence that the effects achieved during the program are sustained after leaving the program or intervention site.

This set of selection criteria establishes a very high standard; one that will be difficult to meet. But it reflects the level of confidence that is necessary if we are going to recommend that communities replicate these programs with reasonable assurances that they will prevent violence. Demonstrating some initial success in deterring delinquency, drug use and violence during the program or intervention is not enough. Designation as a model program requires that the deterrent effects be long-term or permanent effects, effects which are sustained beyond treatment or participation in the designed intervention. Replication is also an important element in establishing program effectiveness. It demonstrates the robustness of the program and its prevention effects and its exportability to new sites with continued deterrent effects. This criteria is particularly relevant for selecting model programs for a national prevention initiative where it is no longer possible for a single program developer or designer to maintain personal control over the implementation of his or her program. Adequate procedures for monitoring the quality of implementation must be in place and this can be established only through actual experience with replications. While the selection of model prevention programs will clearly involve other factors, these three are essential.

An Overview of Ten Model Programs

The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence has examined the published evaluations of violence and crime prevention programs in an attempt to identify programs that meet the above standards for a model program. We began by examining the set of programs recommended in the scholarly reviews noted earlier. We have since expanded our search to a much broader set of programs and continue to look for programs that meet these standards. To date, we have reviewed over 450 delinquency, drug and violence prevention programs and have identified ten programs that meet or come close to meeting these standards. The names of these programs and their designers or developers include the following:

- ∞ The Nurse Home Visitation Program—Dr. David Olds
- ∞ The Bullying Prevention Program—Dr. Dan Olweus
- ∞ Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)—Dr. Mark Greenberg
- ∞ Big Brothers Big Sisters Mentoring Program—Ms. Dagmar McGill
- ∞ Life Skills Training—Dr. Gil Botvin
- ∞ Midwestern Prevention Project—Dr. Mary Ann Pentz
- ∞ Quantum Opportunities—Mr. Ben Lattimore
- ∞ Multisystemic Therapy (MST)—Dr. Scott Henggeler
- ∞ Functional Family Therapy (FFT)—Dr. James Alexander
- ∞ Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care—Dr. Patricia Chamberlain

The timing or point of intervention varies considerably across this set of programs. The Nurse Home Visitation program is a prenatal intervention with at-risk single mothers; the bullying and PATHS

programs are typically introduced in elementary school; Life Skill Training and the Midwestern Prevention Project are both school-based drug prevention programs that are introduced in middle or junior high school; the Quantum Opportunities program is a high school-level program for high poverty, minority youth promoting graduation and entry into college or advanced job training; MST and FFT are both multi-component and multi-context interventions with the family as the primary point of intervention for youth typically aged 12-17; and the Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care Program is a residential program for serious and chronic offenders, typically aged 9-18. Most of these programs involve activities designed to build personal skills and competencies. The Bullying, MST, FFT, Midwestern Prevention Project and Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care programs are also designed to change the social contexts in which youth live, i.e., the ways families function, the monitoring and supervision of youth, the creation and enforcement of rules at home and school and the creation of new opportunities at school and in the community.

The standard we have set for program selection is very high. Not all of the ten programs selected meet all three standards equally well, but as a group they come the closest to meeting these standards that we could find. With one exception they all have demonstrated significant deterrent effects with experimental designs using random assignment to experimental and control groups (the original Bullying Program involved a quasi-experimental design). All involve multiple sites and thus have information on replications and implementation quality, but not all replication sites have been evaluated as independent sites, e.g., the Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring program evaluation involved eight sites in a single aggregated analysis. Again, with one exception all selected programs have demonstrated sustained effects for at least one year post-treatment and several involve evidence effects for 15 years or more.

Additional Considerations for Funding Prevention Programs

There are important political and economic considerations, in addition to knowledge about what works, when making legislative and policy decisions. The public is looking for quick, cheap and fail-safe solutions to the violence problem. There are none. Most of the successful programs, those that produce long-term sustained effects, involve long-term, intense interventions. The time required to overcome the negative influences of disadvantaged neighborhoods, dysfunctional families, poor school performance and delinquent gangs or peer groups, is measured in years not days or hours. The notion that we can address these long-established influences with 10 hours of passive conflict resolution training in the classroom is naive. Even a gun control policy may take a year or more before it is clear to potential users that this law is being enforced and there is some elevated risk in carrying a gun.

Successful interventions are not cheap. The model programs involving residential treatment cost between \$4,000 and \$20,000 per youth per year; classroom interventions cost \$600-\$1,000 per class for a multi-year intervention; the Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring program costs about \$1,000 per youth per year; and the nurse visitation program costs approximately \$7,000 per family for the two and one-half year program.

Are these programs cost effective? An analysis by the Rand Corporation compared Quantum Opportunities, Multi-Systemic Therapy, and the Nurse Visitation Program to the California Three-Strikes sentencing policy and concluded that all three were more cost effective than this option. A second cost analysis by the Washington State Institute of Public Policy examined the cost savings of 16 prevention programs, comparing the cost of the program with the criminal justice system costs avoided by the program's demonstrated reduction in crime. Five of the model programs were included in this analysis. Four programs (Multi-Systemic Therapy, Functional Family Therapy, Treatment Foster Care, and Big Brothers Big Sisters Mentoring Program) saved more money than they cost within a three year period. The Quantum Opportunity Program cost more than it saved in justice system costs, but the benefits of this program, with higher graduation rates and higher employment rates, has other taxpayer benefits in reduced welfare and increased tax benefits that should be considered. In any case, not all prevention programs are cost effective, and this is an appropriate consideration in selecting programs to fund.

It is critical that the general public have some realistic notion of how much crime and violence is averted or prevented by these programs. Our most effective prevention programs achieve a 30-40 percent reduction in onset or offending rates compared to control groups or average rates. Even the best programs will have some failures; we should expect this and not abandon a good program when the media hypes a "sensational" failure and generalizes from a single case or two to the entire program.

It is important to note that doing something is *not* always better than doing nothing. We know some interventions have harmful effects. Agencies thus have a moral obligation to determine what effects a treatment, intervention or policy has on participants, particularly when participation is not voluntary. The frequently encountered resistance to spending money on evaluation because it limits the agency's service capacity always assumes the program effects are positive. In the interest of protecting our children and youth, programs must be evaluated and demonstrated to have no harmful effects. One way to deal with this potential problem is to include a 10 percent evaluation set-aside in all program and policy funding initiatives and to require some formal legislative oversight to insure that agencies implement programs and policies as they were designed. It is not necessary that every program funded be subjected to a rigorous outcome evaluation. For programs that have already been demonstrated effective, the critical issue is to insure that the replications are being implemented well. For types of programs not yet demonstrated to be effective, an independent outcome evaluation is essential and should be funded by the evaluation set-aside.

Finally, we are not recommending that communities invest all of their available resources in model programs. We need to develop and evaluate new programs to expand our knowledge of what works and to build an extensive repertoire of programs that work, if we are ever to mount a *comprehensive* prevention initiative in this country. At the same time, given the costs of evaluating programs, it makes sense for communities to build their portfolio of programs around interventions that have been demonstrated to work, and limit their investment in new programs to those they can evaluate carefully.

Summary

As we approach the 21st Century, the nation is at a critical crossroad: will we continue to react to youth violence after the fact, become increasingly punitive and lock more and more of our children in adult prisons?; or will we bring a more healthy balance to our justice system by designing and implementing an effective violence prevention initiative as a part of our overall approach to the violence problem? We do have a choice.

A core set of model programs that meet very high scientific standards for being effective prevention programs has been identified. These programs are our “blue chip” programs with demonstrated success in reducing violence. The number of model programs identified to date is small and we must continue to put a high priority on evaluating other programs and policies so as to add to their number. But these programs could constitute a core set of model programs in a national violence prevention initiative that could be implemented *now*. While a balanced portfolio of prevention programs may well include some more speculative or high-risk programs, we should include such programs only when we are willing to evaluate them carefully. What remains is to insure that communities know about these programs and should they desire to replicate them, have assistance in implementing them as designed.

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