

# ED400473 1995-00-00 Counseling Young Offenders for Rehabilitation and Employment: The Problem and Promise. ERIC Digest.

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## Counseling Young Offenders for Rehabilitation and Employment: The Problem and Promise. ERIC Digest.

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THE PROBLEM

Canadian counselors working with young offenders confront at least two problems that interfere with effective intervention: a trend toward increased incarceration and public confusion and mistrust over approaches to reducing crime.

## TRENDS

Although crime in Canada is on the decline, changes in police practices have resulted in increased reporting of crime among the young, giving the perception of an upward trend. The tendencies are now to report offending activities which were once considered minor and were dealt with outside the justice system, to put more youth in custody, and to favor punishment and deterrence rather than leniency and rehabilitation (John Howard Society of Ontario, 1994).

Two forces direct the trend toward punishment and away from rehabilitation: the public's increasing fear of youth crimes and the program evaluation research published in the 1970s which fostered the belief that "nothing works" to change criminal behavior. The trend is unfortunate because it is short sighted, largely fear-induced, and it ignores a growing body of research confirming different observations (Henggeler, 1989; John Howard Society of Ontario, 1994; Leschied, Jaffe, & Willis, 1991).



The majority of non-incarcerated, first-time young offenders do not re-offend.



Once incarcerated, the likelihood of re-offending increases.



The most promising rehabilitation takes place in the community and in the home.



There are few rehabilitation programs available for youth once they are incarcerated. Fewer still appear to work.



No one program will be appropriate for all delinquent youth, but some do show promise. Generally, such programs teach concrete skills, address psychological and learning

deficiencies, are built on sound instructional principles, are of significant duration, and are multi-faceted.

### Confusion of Purposes

Counselors and educators of young offenders and other at-risk youth need to be aware of how various orientations carry different, and sometimes opposing, beliefs and assumptions which create confusion over prevention and intervention practices in community and school. Four primary models are evident (Reid-MacNevin, 1991):



1. Societal change model. Youth crime is a product of society and its institutions (family, community, school) and is beyond the control of the individual. Intervention in this model addresses issues of poverty and inequity in the community rather than "correcting" the individual.



2. Welfare model. The young offender is assumed to have psycho/social deficiencies that cause offending behavior. Intervention provides appropriate therapy to rehabilitate the individual.



3. Justice model. Society must be protected from offenders. Individuals commit crime of their own free will, must be held responsible, and might pay the penalty set by society under due process.



4. Crime-control model. Societal order is maintained through laws that punish wrong doing, achieve retribution through punishment, and deter criminality by threat of punishment. Youth are no exception.

## THE PROMISE: AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Research over the past decade offers renewed promise for counseling interventions that prepare young offenders to be productive members of society. Programs typically stress the prevention of behaviors that lead to re-offending. Most behaviors and attitudes don't directly lead to successful employment, however, they can be thought of as preparatory. Research is demonstrating what works and also what leads to failure

(Henggeler, 1989; Quay, 1987):



"Quick fix" programs do not work. Programs must be offered over months, not weeks, and of sufficient intensity to change entrenched behaviors and attitudes. Follow-up "booster" sessions contribute to program effectiveness.



Programs that employ single aims or strategies do not work. Youth offending has no single cause and the young offender population is far from homogeneous.



Successful programs are multi-faceted. They use multiple strategies (e.g., skills, problem-solving, self-monitoring, aggression control), have multiple targets (e.g., individual, peers and home), and have multiple specific goals that typically generalize over time and across settings.



Program effects can be missed; programs may be labeled as "failures" if evaluation is faulty. Simplistic evaluation designs and unreliable criteria (e.g., recidivism) cannot address the complexity of short-term and long-range outcomes.



Programs do not work when those who offer them do not believe in their efficacy. Successful programs can fail because of cynicism among those who implement and administer them.



Lack of program fidelity is a common cause of failure. Successful programs are often complex, a reflection of the complex causes of youth offending. If they are not delivered as designed and those implementing them are not well trained, successful programs can fail.

Sample programs.

Effective programs for young offenders and other at-risk youth typically take place in the community (e.g., schools, open-custody residences, group homes, social agencies). The following examples represent the types of promising programs being applied in Canada. All are multi-faceted, intensive, relatively long-term, and systematically

evaluated. They do not have a specific career focus, but go beyond simply finding jobs for at-risk or offending youth. These programs address skill training both in preparation for work and in job maintenance.



The BreakAway Company (Campbell, Pharand, Serff, & Williams, 1994) is a highly structured, 12-week program for residential or school use, based on cognitive-behavioral instruction principles. It simulates a work place in which students are treated as "employees" and group identity is fostered. The teacher/counselor is their "supervisor." they receive a token salary and bonuses, negotiate contracts, work cooperatively, receive information through Company memos, attend staff meetings, and do job shadowing and short-term placements. The Company "products" are reflected in its objectives: discovering one's own abilities and job-related skills, and learning cognitive-behavioral strategies that address problem-solving, interpersonal relations, and aggression control. Evaluation of the program over 2 years indicates that most students learn the strategies and apply them in various settings. In 6 to 8 month follow-up interviews, participants reported such observations as: "You just stop and think before you do everything now. It's just natural now..."; "Now I think out problems in slow motion."; "I learned how to control my anger...[I] think about it, sit down, and say, 'Look what you're doing wrong'."



Multisystemic treatment (Henggeler & Borduin, 1989) is a 2-4 month community-based program that addresses the causes of delinquency. The focus is on the family system as the center of a network that includes siblings, peers, and school. Emphasis is on preserving the family and developing effective social-cognitive skills.



Aggression Replacement Training (Goldstein, Glick, Irwin, Pask-McCartney, & Rubama, 1989) is a 10-week program emphasizing aggression control, moral reasoning, and pro-social behavior among young offenders (both in custody and on release) and their families.

## CONCLUSIONS

Research during the past decade is beginning to show clearly that programs for young offenders and other at-risk youth can work if they are built on principles that lead to effective behavior and attitude change. The task is not easy. There are no short-term solutions, nor will any single program likely address all aspects of the problem. Counselors and educators must have available a repertoire of programs that meet individual and group needs.

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